

# Guidelines for IRIS Interpreters

Adapted from U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration guidelines

## Standards:

1. **“Introductions:”** Ask the IRIS staff for information before you begin to interpret. Ask what the goal is for the meeting, and what your role will be. (“Am I a cultural bridge, or an interpreter?”)
2. **Greet** the refugee, introduce yourself and explain that you are a volunteer interpreter and will not share their information with anyone outside of the meeting.
  - a. Ask the refugee “Are you comfortable with me serving as your interpreter for this meeting?” If they are uncomfortable or do not want you to be their interpreter for any reason, do not act annoyed or upset. Calmly tell them that is okay, and let the IRIS staff member the refugee does not want you to interpret for them and the staff person should find another interpreter.
3. **Dialect:** Confirm to the IRIS rep. what language, including the specific dialect, you and the refugee are speaking, and that the refugee is comfortable with that language. If the refugee is not fluent or comfortable in that dialect or language, stop the meeting.
4. **Body Language:** It is important for the staff person and the refugee to face each other because a lot of communication happens through facial expression and body language. You (and your voice) should be in the background. The refugee's attention should not be on you.
5. **Pauses:** If necessary, remind everyone to pause after each sentence or every few sentences. If you let someone speak for several minutes, you can really give only a summary of what was said and useful information will be missed.
6. **First Person:** Use the first person tense (“I need help to go on the bus,” not “she said she needs help going on the bus”).
7. **Exact interpretation:** Translate what each speaker says, “word-for-word.” Do not give a summary or take any information out, even if it is very long or rude.
8. **Cultural expertise:** If it is clear that something the IRIS rep. or refugee says will not be understood by the other person for cultural reasons, tell the speaker that you need to give background information and then ask the other person's permission to give a culturally appropriate explanation. English and other languages can be filled with “idioms” (figurative expressions). We understand you may need to translate the meaning of those expressions, not translate word-for-word.
9. **Clarification:** If you do not understand a question, ask for an explanation and do not guess at the meaning. We use special vocabulary that may be unclear to other people, and we can explain or ask the question a different way.
  - a. If the refugee or staff does not understand something the other person said, tell the other person to please explain or ask in a different way. Please do not answer their questions yourself.
10. **Personal input:** when you are an interpreter, you are not a cultural bridge. Please do not give the refugee personal advice or any information aside from what the staff person

says. If you have some advice or knowledge you want to share, please wait until after the meeting is over.

11. **“Conflict of interest”**: It is always your right to say you do not want to interpret for someone if you feel it will be difficult for you to be an “impartial” interpreter (you’re able to set aside your personal feelings during interpretation). If you are very good friends with a refugee or a refugee is not respecting you, you are welcome to say you do not want to interpret for them.
12. **Absence**: If you cannot come to an interpretation appointment, please tell 24 hours ahead of time. If you are afraid you might not be able to come on time to an interpretation appointment, tell the staff member to try to find someone else and call you back if they cannot find anyone.

## Values

As an IRIS volunteer interpreter, you uphold these values in your volunteer work:

1. **Respect Diversity**: Interpreters will not show disrespect or unkindness or judgement towards anyone. They will set a good example and try to make every client feel they are a part of the community, no matter if they are:
  - a. from a different ethnic or religious group
  - b. more conservative or more liberal than me
  - c. a different gender than me
  - d. living in a way I do not agree with
  - e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender
2. **Confidentiality**: Interpreters will respect the right of refugees to keep their personal details strictly confidential. Interpreters will not share names, addresses, phone numbers, or enough biographical information to identify the person to ANYONE other than an IRIS staff member who needs to know the information to do their job. This includes sharing information by speaking, writing, texting, Facebook, or any other way.

## Boundaries

Interpreters are NOT:

- **Case Managers**: We are not responsible for the lives of new refugees or for their success in the USA. Each interpreter will decide what they will do and what they will not do to help new refugees.
- **24-hour interpreters**: Each interpreter will decide if they want to give their personal phone number to new refugees. There is an IRIS staff emergency phone number for all newcomers to call, 24/7: this is the number newcomers should call in case of trouble on the nights or weekends.
- **Boyfriends or girlfriends**: We do not allow IRIS volunteers or staff to be in a romantic relationship with refugees. If you receive a comment, phone call, or text that makes you uncomfortable, please tell the Interpretation Coordinator immediately.
- **Taxi service**: Interpreters can refuse to give a ride, especially if we think it is better for the newcomer to learn to go on the bus or by walking.

- IRIS go-betweens: Newcomer refugees are responsible for contacting the correct IRIS staff member for their requests. Interpreters do not have to give messages for them unless they feel the refugee cannot communicate the message on their own.
- Santa Claus: Interpreters will not give money or significant gifts to newcomers.
- Proselytizers: Interpreters will not spread religion, political views, or cultural norms to newcomers.
- Therapists: Interpreters will not ask newcomers about why they were persecuted, why they came to the USA, or about traumatic things in their past. They will wait for the newcomer to bring up that information and respond carefully.
- Parents: Interpreters will not do things for newcomers that they need to learn to do on their own; they will teach and empower them to do things for themselves.
- Exhibits: Interpreters are not required to tell their own stories or answer questions they do not want to answer, whether it is from newcomers or IRIS staff. Interpreters can decide to say, "I don't want to talk about that question, but thank you for asking."

### What happens next?

- Your name, contact information, and schedule will be added to the Master Interpretation Spreadsheets. The IRIS staff check this list and call or email when they need help.
- Different IRIS staff members will contact you for their needs. You can say yes or no each time.
- The Interpretation Coordinator will call you after 1 month and after 3 months to ask how you are doing. Please call or email the Coordinator if you have any problems or questions in between these times. The staff will also be giving feedback about how you perform as an interpreter.
- Please tell the Interpretation Coordinator (Alexine Casanova) if you cannot interpret anymore so we can remove you from our list.
- Thank you so much!

SIGN: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interpreter

SIGN: \_\_\_\_\_  
IRIS staff