



# Breaking Silence: What Interpreters Need to Know About Victim Services Interpreting

When interpreting for victims of trauma, the greatest gift you can give to the survivor is letting his or her voice be heard.

First, the good news. This past July marked the release of an innovative, in-depth training program to prepare interpreters to work with survivors of violent crime, with a strong focus on domestic violence and sexual assault. A set of training materials—*Breaking Silence: Interpreting for Victim Services*—that includes a manual, workbook, and glossary, has also just been published on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Together, these *free* resources show you how to perform victim services interpreting with a “trauma-informed” perspective.

The *Breaking Silence* program was developed through a partnership between the District of Columbia’s Office of Victim

Services and Justice Grants and Ayuda, a nonprofit agency serving immigrants and refugees in the DC metro area. (You can download the *Breaking Silence* training manual, workbook, and glossary for free at: <http://ayuda.com/wp/get-help/language-services/resources>.)

## AN EMERGING SPECIALIZATION: VICTIM SERVICES INTERPRETING

Victim services interpreting is part of the larger field of trauma-informed interpreting. Anyone who performs legal or community (including medical) interpreting can benefit by learning about this area because almost any interview

in these fields can entail exposure to trauma—often without warning.

When a survivor cries, goes silent, or shares horrific details about a crime, it can create difficulties for the interpreter. The temptation to comfort the victim and overstep professional boundaries is huge. However, such “helpful” behaviors from the interpreter can damage or delay the survivor’s recovery. The information contained here shows interpreters how to be successful in this field while supporting survivor autonomy and avoiding re-traumatization of the crime victim.

## CHALLENGES OF VICTIM SERVICES INTERPRETING

You arrive at the hospital in the middle of the night to interpret for a 16-year-old rape victim. The assignment lasts five hours.

In that time, you end up interpreting for a police officer, two detectives, a sexual assault nurse examiner, a doctor, a rape survivor advocate, a medical assistant, and others. The victim is asked to describe her rape several times, in chilling detail. She weeps and shrieks. You start to feel nauseated and light-headed. You can’t get the images of the brutal assault out of your mind. At one point as the survivor tells her story you think you might throw up, but you’re afraid to interrupt her. What do you do?

Welcome to victim services interpreting. It’s tough. It can be painful. Yet for many interpreters, it provides some of the most meaningful and fulfilling work they’ll ever do. Since victim services interpreting is a new specialization, interpreters need training to perform it well. The following highlights many of the lessons to be learned from the *Breaking Silence* program, including the specific challenges facing interpreters who work with victims of crime and trauma survivors.

## WHAT ARE VICTIM SERVICES?

The provision of “victim services” began in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> They are defined within U.S. law as services (public or private):

... with a documented history of effective work concerning domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

—42 USCS § 13925<sup>3</sup>

In most cities and counties across the U.S., there is a victim assistance network where government, health care, legal, law enforcement, and nonprofit services collaborate to support crime victims in a complex interplay of services with their own professional cultures.

## WHAT ARE TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES?

A relatively new field called trauma-informed services encompasses an array of government and private programs that put the victim front and center stage. Trauma-informed services are concerned with the survivor's healing, recovery, and access to justice. According to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma-informed programs address trauma in depth and integrate that knowledge into their policies, procedures, practices, and settings.<sup>4</sup>

Trauma-informed providers receive specialized training to help survivors feel respected, safe, and empowered. In trauma-informed services, we stop asking "What is wrong with this person?" and begin asking "What has happened to this person?"<sup>5</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF VICTIM SERVICES INTERPRETING

From the time victim services became available in the 1960s until today, almost no one thought about interpreters or trained them in victim services interpreting. By 2013, the DC Office of Victim Services (OVS)—which is now the DC Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants—and its Victim Assistance Network (VAN) recognized this as a problem. VAN providers who request interpreters most often appear to work in the areas of domestic violence cases, sexual assault, and child abuse. Yet interpreters can also be needed for:

- Survivors of torture and war trauma
- Trauma therapy
- Police officers
- Homicide survivors (family members and loved ones of a homicide victim)
- Fire and rescue
- Victim compensation services



*When a survivor cries, goes silent, or shares horrific details about a crime, it can create difficulties for the interpreter.*

The District of Columbia lacked interpreters trained to provide this kind of service. As a result, OVS funded a program in 2014 that established the nation's first Emergency and Victim Services Bank, a unique interpreter service administered by Ayuda, a nonprofit agency providing legal, social, and language services. However, Ayuda could find no training manual or curriculum anywhere in the country to train victim services interpreters.

## HISTORY OF THE BREAKING SILENCE PROGRAM

Ayuda commissioned my agency, Cross-Cultural Communications (CCC), to create a four-day program for victim services interpreting.

First, a needs assessment and a literature review were conducted. Ayuda set up a focus group and 20 in-depth interviews with service providers, including therapists, lawyers, social workers, advocates, a forensic nurse, a deputy fire chief, a hotline counselor, law enforcement, a disaster response behavioral therapist, and a grief counselor for homicide survivors.

I then recruited three other national specialists to create a curriculum and

the training materials with input from VAN and OVS. The four authors of these training materials were national trainers with curriculum development expertise. An American Sign Language interpreter trainer and trauma-informed therapist for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing was engaged to review and revise the training materials.

The intent was to make this four-day program freely accessible across the country. The four-day program, entitled *Breaking Silence: Interpreting for Victim Services*, was piloted three times between 2014 and 2016.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM BREAKING SILENCE

The needs assessment for the creation of this program highlighted a simple fact: almost every community and legal interpreter confronts trauma in their work. Some of that trauma is extreme and affects interpreters in profound ways. As a result, interpreters are eager, even hungry, for specialized training about interpreting for victims of trauma.

Another lesson learned is that interpreters need guidance to manage their emotions. For example, imagine that you interpret for a domestic violence victim who, against the advice of her advocate, is about to return to the partner who almost killed her. You might want to shout, "Don't go back!" However, you can't do that.

Providers interviewed for the *Breaking Silence* program reported that many interpreters lost control and interjected comments, or told providers such things as, "Is that all you can do?" After hearing traumatic stories, some interpreters broke down and cried. Some couldn't interpret the grisly details, or softened or edited them. One interpreter spent more than 30 minutes lecturing a victim about domestic violence. Others have advised victims to leave—or stay with—their abusers.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERPRETING: STAKES AND BENEFITS

Interpreters for victim services need to understand:

- The impact of crime on victims
- What trauma is and its impact



- Vicarious trauma (discussed below)
- Domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse
- How basic interpreter skills (such as mode switching, note-taking, sight translation, and simultaneous interpreting) are used in this field
- Where community (including medical) interpreting crosses the line into legal interpreting

In addition, the interpreter needs to be keenly alert to the potential impact of his or her unconscious bias. For example, providers noted that some interpreters made facial expressions conveying dismay or disgust when interpreting for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender victims.

Finally, interpreters need to be emotionally prepared for whatever faces them. Some victims giggle, fall silent, or seem calm. Every situation is unpredictable.

## PREPARING TO INTERPRET FOR SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA

Here are some examples of how to prepare for tough assignments.

- Inform yourself as much as possible beforehand.
- Have boundary rituals (e.g., put on a special bracelet or scarf for assignments that means something to you and offers mental reassurance).
- Prepare to interpret body parts and terms for violence.
- Practice interpreting coarse and obscene language in a mirror (to be sure you don't display discomfort).
- Establish a "distress" signal with the provider (who can call for a break).
- Plan for visualization of peaceful imagery.
- Rehearse deep breathing.
- Prepare for possible interpreter distress.

Above all, make a conscious decision to display warmth and compassion. According to clinicians, survivors have keen feelers—they sense if you care. Make a conscious decision to care. However, suppress the desire to say kind things. Don't be the interpreter who touches the victim, hands out tissues, gives legal advice, or says, "It's okay, you're safe, speak up!" "You need to share your story

with your therapist/lawyer." "Don't cry, dear, everything will be all right."

Finally, try to avoid eye contact while you interpret. Let the survivor build a relationship with the *provider*—not you—because that relationship is critical for the survivor's journey to recovery and justice. Remember, your job is to interpret. It's the greatest gift you can give the survivor: his or her voice.

## VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Here's a little quiz. What three things are taken away from a survivor of major trauma? (You'll find the answer at the end of this article.) In fact, what is trauma? SAMHSA provides this definition:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.<sup>6</sup>

Although we know that many survivors experience trauma, most people don't realize how often interpreters experience vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma (VT) means experiencing or internalizing someone else's trauma. VT builds up over time through exposure to hearing traumatic stories. It's a dirty secret that many interpreters are affected by VT, yet few are trained to manage it.<sup>7</sup>

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Interpreters with VT can experience symptoms of trauma, so they should be especially careful to protect themselves. Be careful if you start to notice:

- Intrusive thoughts
- Anxiety or depression
- Insomnia
- Fear for your safety or your loved ones



If you have experienced any of the above, download the free training manual, workbook, and glossary from the Ayuda website mentioned at the beginning of this article and try to get specialized training.

### *Almost every community and legal interpreter confronts trauma in their work.*

## HOW TO PREVENT OR REDUCE VT

Here are just a few examples of how you can reduce the impact of VT.

### Before the Session:

#### Objects

- Bring or wear a special object (e.g., a stone or necklace). Touch it during the encounter for comfort.
- Put an elastic band on your wrist. When a survivor speaks of trauma, discreetly snap the elastic.

#### Visualization

- Practice creating imagery in your mind of a “safe place”—a peaceful mountain, beach, or meadow, a beloved person’s face, or even music. During the encounter, distract yourself from traumatic content by visualizing your “safe place.”

#### Rituals

- Engage in a boundary ritual before and after a tough encounter. It could be a phrase, a prayer, a mantra, a song, or a suite of movements.

You should also practice regular relaxation exercises. Do them before and after tough assignments. Many relaxation exercises are available online. Do a search, try some, and find which ones work for you.

**During the Session:** Here are techniques that can soothe you:

- Ground yourself: focus on the “here and now” (e.g., the ticking of a clock, air swirling on your cheeks, your feet on the floor).
- Breathe deeply from the diaphragm.
- Take a break.

- Try self-calming strategies:

- Switch briefly from first to third person (many interpreters do this instinctively).
- Focus on note-taking.
- Observe yourself interpreting: monitor your performance.

**After the Session:** If possible, debrief with the provider. Use any of the “before” practices that help you. Also:

- Have a written self-care plan in place and consult it.
- Seek out social supports like family, friends, and colleagues.
- Utter a prayer or a comforting phrase.
- Seek out those who share your faith.
- Engage in a social activity.
- Exercise.
- Journal (but protect confidentiality).
- Share your feelings with someone safe.
- For intense sessions, perhaps avoid being alone afterwards.

*The interpreter needs to be keenly alert to the potential impact of his or her unconscious bias.*

## TRAINING IS KEY

The preceding was a short journey into the new specialization of victim services interpreting. As mentioned previously, the training materials available from Ayuda can be downloaded for free (see Note 1). They will provide you with in-depth information to increase your knowledge, enhance your performance, and offer a new degree of self-confidence when you interpret for crime victims.

Good luck. Enjoy the journey! ○

### Mini-quiz Answer:

**Question:** What three big things are taken away from a survivor of major trauma?

**Answer:** Trust, safety, and the ability to impact the world. (There are other answers, but many therapists emphasize these three.)

## NOTES

1. Bancroft, Marjory A., Katharine Allen, Carola Green, and Lois Feuerle. *Breaking Silence: Interpreting for Victim Services* (Ayuda, 2016), <http://ayuda.com/wp/get-help/language-services/resources/>.
2. “The History of the Crime Victims’ Movement in the United States” (U.S. Office for Victims of Crime), <http://bit.ly/OVC-victim-movements>.
3. 42 U.S. Code § 13925—Definitions and Grant Provisions, [www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/13925](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/13925).
4. SAMHSA’s working definition of trauma and principles and guidance for a trauma-informed approach [Draft] (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012), 4.
5. See PowerPoint of “Trauma-Informed Care,” a workshop presented by Amy Fleischauer (director of Victim Services International, Institute of Buffalo) and Kristin Heffernan (associate professor of social work at The College at Brockport, State University of New York), <http://bit.ly/trauma-informed-care>.
6. Bambarén-Call, AnaMaria, et al. *Interpreting Compassion: A Needs Assessment Report on Interpreting for Survivors of Torture, War Trauma, and Sexual Violence* (The Voice of Love, 2012).
7. SAMHSA’s working definition of trauma and principles and guidance for a trauma-informed approach [Draft] (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012).



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