

Unison's Views for the Regional Support Service Centres

Stated in the 2008-09 Budget, the Government will allocate \$16 million to set up four support services centres in different districts. These centres aim at providing interpretation service and language courses for members of ethnic minorities.

Hong Kong Unison welcomes this proposal as it is a critical step in assisting the language needs of the ethnic minorities. However, having good interpretation services does not mean just giving financial resources, it also requires suitable measures from the Government to ensure its quality, such as providing sufficient interpreters, setting up accredited qualification system, and formulating monitoring systems.

For this pioneering project, we have the following suggestions:

1) Although the interpretation services would be contracted out, the Government should bear the final responsibility for the service quality

The Government plans to let other organizations run the four regional centres. However, the Government should only contract out the service, but not the responsibility, especially on the planning of the service and to ensure the collaboration among the centres, so as to ensure the quality of services.

Recommendations

- The Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau should set up a steering committee which includes members from Home Affairs Department, service users, service providers, professionals and academics. The committee should give comments on service planning, professional training and conduct research on service improvement.
- In order to facilitate ethnic minorities' usage, the Government should set up a central hotline, so that when service users call the hotline, the hotline staff could refer them to appropriate centres according to their needs.

2) Ensure those ethnic minorities in need could receive appropriate interpretation service

Even though the Government is willing to provide interpretation service, it is not sure how many qualified interpreters are in Hong Kong. Also, many of the ethnic minorities belong to the grassroots. If the cost of service is high, they will be reluctant to use the service.

Recommendations

- The Government should assess the actual needs of ethnic minorities on interpretation

service, and whether the present resources would be able to cater.

- If there are insufficient interpreters in Hong Kong, the Government should consider employing interpreters from the overseas for short-term adjustment. In the long run, the Government should help train up local interpreters by launching training courses.
- The government should consider the financial ability of service users when fixing the service fee.
- The Government should provide assistance for those ethnic minorities who could not afford the payment, so that nobody will be denied service due to financial problem.

3) Ensure the service quality of the interpreters

At present, the quality of interpreters varies, and many malpractices could be found (please refer to appendix 2), such as deceived people for money. The Government has the responsibility to ensure service quality, so as to guarantee the service users proper assistance.

Recommendations

- Interpreters need to pass an attainment test before being qualified to provide service.
- A central registration board should be established; qualified interpreters should register with the board to provide service.
- Set up independent monitoring system to assess the service quality.
- Set up independent complaint system to handle complaints from service users.

4) Promotion on professionalizing interpretation service

Interpretation service for ethnic minorities should be professionalized, so as to enhance the service quality.

Recommendations

- Formulate a code of conduct which states clearly the duty, role and principles for the interpreters to follow.
- Set up a monitoring mechanism to guarantee the interpreters to follow the code, and deal with any misconduct.
- Collaborate with academics and training bodies to provide professional training opportunities to enhance the interpreters' skills.

Besides, both the service provider and service user should take up their own responsibilities (please refer to appendix 1), in order to ensure the service could go smoothly. The agency could list out the responsibilities in the contract.

5) Provide different levels of interpretation services according to the needs of the service users and the qualification of the interpreters

We can demand interpreters with different degrees of qualifications based on the nature of request. For example, a basic training and assessment is needed if the service only involves simple conversations and tasks, such as job seeking. A more advanced training is necessary in medical or legal settings, which a minor mistake could result in great damage.

Recommendations

- Make reference to overseas experiences (e.g. Canada), classify interpretation services according to their levels of proficiency.

6. Other suggestions

At present, the Hospital Authority is collaborating with a non-governmental organization in employing interpreters for ethnic minorities to provide on-site or telephone interpretation services in public hospitals. Besides, the law enforcing authorities and judiciary are providing interpretation services as well. The Government should clarify, after the establishment of the four regional service centres, whether the above existing services would be independent of the centres.

No matter how the arrangement would be, the Government should consider grouping the interpretation service of the above three areas of public service (law enforcement, judiciary and medical service under the Hospital Authority) under the same set of monitoring and assessment system, so as to achieve quality service.

Conclusion

Ethnic minorities have long been regarding Hong Kong as their home, and some have even been living in Hong Kong for generations. Therefore, they have a long-term need for interpretation service. A merely one-year pioneering project could not be able to help them in the long run. We demand the Government to extend this project to a long-term service, and professionalize the interpretation service for ethnic minorities. In this way, ethnic minorities would be able to integrate with the society and contribute to the society.

Appendix 1

The responsibilities of the service providers

- 1) Coordinate interpretation service in the agency
- 2) Ensure the qualification of the interpreters
- 3) Explain to the service users the interpreters' background, such as identity, qualification, as well as the service charge and rules.
- 4) Provide training to the interpreters, and have periodical examination
- 5) Introduce the job nature and the needs of the service users to the interpreters

The responsibilities of the service users

- 1) State clearly about their needs.
- 2) Avoid clumsy and complicated statements.
- 3) Never ask interpreters for opinions. Interpreters must be neutral.

Appendix 2

Case 1: Insufficient supply of interpreters

Mr. Gurung was found to suffer from serious illness. He made an appointment with the hospital. The hospital also booked for an interpreter. When the date came, the interpreter did not show up because he was having another interpretation service. The doctor could not wait for a long time due to a long queue of patients. As a result, Mr. Gurung had to make another appointment, which was several months later.

This case revealed that there were insufficient interpreters. Because of this, they could choose jobs (and this is disrespect to both the hospital and service user). They are more familiar in court and police settings, and the reward is clearer, therefore they set hospital and social service in a lower priority.

Case 2: Quality of interpreters – Failure to being Impartial

Interpreters should be impartial; they should not have any bias towards the clients and service providers. However, Mr. Mohammad's experience proves such claim is ungrounded.

When he was under interrogation by the police, the interpreter demanded him to admit crime and tell him it was "minor offence". The interpreter believed that because he was employed by police, therefore, he should stand on the side of police. However, this seriously jeopardize the suspect's interest, whether or not he was really guilty.

Case 3: Quality of interpreters – Failure to complete interpretation and swindle

The hospital could not make an appointment with an interpreter for Mr. Adil, and asked him to bring along his interpreter. The interpreter did not give full interpretation to him. For example, *the doctor told him the whole process of exercise to relieve pain, but the interpreter only told him the first and last steps*. Worse still, when the doctor reminded Mr. Adil to take a rest, the interpreter distorted the message and demanded him to pay \$1,500. Fortunately, Mr. Adil understand that public hospitals would not charge patients in such high amount, and suspected the interpreter was fraudulent.

This example once again illustrates the adverse result of insufficient supply of interpreters. Also, the quality of interpreters was not assured.

Case 4: Quality of interpreters – Incorrect interpretation causing delay in diagnosis

Ms. Bibi found her lower left part of belly in pain. Since she did not know English and Cantonese, she only relied on the interpreter when she attended medical consultation. However, the interpreter misinterpreted the message and told the doctor she had problem with her left thigh. As nothing wrong was found with her thigh, Ms. Bibi was told to leave the hospital. It was after almost a month that she have the accurate diagnosis, where a serious illness was found with her uterus, which could cause her death.

Needless to say, accuracy of interpretation services is vital in life and death issue. Proper qualification of interpreters, independent monitoring and complaint system is indispensable to protect our Ethnic Minorities.

Case 5: Misconduct of Interpreter - False claim of identity and swindle

It is not uncommon that Ethnic Minorities are exposed to false claim of identity and swindle in legal issues. In one case, a Pakistani woman wanted to get divorce from her husband. She contacted a man who claimed to be a lawyer. Each time when she met him, “the lawyer” charged her. He misled her that the length required for the whole divorce process was two years, during which she had spent more than \$50,000, before realizing him was just an interpreter. Of course, she could not get divorce in the end.

Case 6: Misconduct of Interpreter - False claim of identity and threat

Another case happens when a Pakistani “legal consultant” approached a father. The father wanted to accuse his son of elopement with his girlfriend. The “legal consultant” threatened the son to return home, and threatened our social worker, who received the son’s help, not to intervene. Our social worker discovered the “legal consultant” was fake, he was only an interpreter.

The above two cases show that when Ethnic Minorities need legal assistance, they tend to trust their fellows. However, they do not have enough knowledge to prove whether people have relevant qualifications. Bad fellows could easily make use of such trust to blackmail them. The Government needs to help Ethnic Minorities to find proof of interpreters’ qualifications

Case 7: Misconduct of Interpreters - Misleading clients

Mr. Thapa got an industrial injury. A fellow approached him, in the name of his friend, to carry out interpretation. The friend taught him labour law (but his knowledge was not completely correct) and asked for a return of \$400 to \$600 each time. In addition, this friend misled him by telling him to exaggerate the injury for greater compensation awarded in Labour Tribunal. Although the injury

was true, the reward was much less than usual because the Tribunal Officer found out that Mr. Thapa was dishonest.

Case 8: Misconduct of interpreters - Instigation of clients for personal interest

When Ms. Salma and her ex-employer nearly achieved settlement for compensation in relation to her industrial injury in Labour Tribunal, her interpreter instigated her to proceed with the case and appealed to the District Court. As the legal procedure last longer, he could earn more reward from Ms. Salma.

Case 9: Lack of a clear standard of service charge

A task as simple as obtaining an Identity Card could be difficult for Ethnic Minorities immigrants. We met an Indian woman who told us that an interpreter charged her \$450 for accompanying her to the Immigration Department to complete the procedures. In fact, we heard from our members that interpreters charged from \$400 to \$600 for such task.

It seems that there is a lack of clear and reasonable service charge make known to ethnic minority communities, to ensure that they could afford the services and to avoid them being deceived.

Case 10: Quality of Interpreter – Misinterpretation shorten length of stay

Ms. Asif wanted to extend her visa. She found an interpreter because she thought the interpreter knew all the procedures and could help her to apply for longer stay in Hong Kong. However, her expectation went wrong. The interpreter misunderstood what the immigration officer said. Even though Ms. Asif submitted all the documents, such mistakes affected her application. In the end, her length of extension was shorter than before.

Case 11: Bad attitude of public authority staff

Sometimes it is not the quality of the interpreter, but the attitude of public authority staff that results in improper interpretation service. Mr. Khan reported a case to the police, but he could only speak very few Cantonese. However, he could still hear the police officer grumble the interpreter, saying “be quick”, “need not say too much”. The police officer was impatient, did not respect the interpreter, and did not realize that incomplete information could hinder progress of investigation. In fact, public authorities should ensure that all their front-line staff being aware of their policy, to ensure provision of quality interpretation services to Ethnic Minorities users.

Summary

All the above cases point to the need for professional interpretation service, which includes knowledge of the relevant specialty, proper registration and accreditation, independent monitoring and complaint mechanism. Also, the public authorities should acknowledge the need of service and respect interpreters. Otherwise, our Ethnic Minorities cannot really access public services, even to the extent that undermines their rights to live and life.



Case summary and associated problems

	Insufficient interpreters	Conduct of Interpreters	Relevant knowledge	Accreditation system	Complaint mechanism	Clear charging system	Attitude of public authority staff
Case 1	✓	✓				✓	
Case 2		✓					
Case 3	✓	✓					
Case 4			✓				
Case 5		✓		✓	✓		
Case 6		✓		✓	✓		
Case 7		✓		✓	✓		
Case 8		✓		✓	✓		
Case 9						✓	
Case 10			✓				
Case 11							✓