

HO-THANH NGUYEN
Immigration and Refugee Domestic Violence
YWCA of GREATER HARRISBURG
1101 Market St., Harrisburg, PA 17103

It is my pleasure to take this opportunity to talk to you about a unique program that serves battered immigrants and refugees in the Greater Harrisburg Area. My name is Ho-Thanh Nguyen and I am a Domestic Violence Counselor and Advocate for the Immigrant and Refugee Project of the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg.

My project provides culturally competent and bilingual services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. These services include a shelter for victims of domestic violence and their children, a 24 hour hotline, victim counseling and support groups, medical accompaniments, legal advocacy, and individual and group counseling for victims, children and non-offending significant others. The language and cultural barriers are significant factors to address as the immigrant and refugee populations in Pennsylvania continue to rise. This project is the first of its kind in Pennsylvania and has won recognition by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

During the course of the development of the Domestic Violence Immigrant and Refugee Project and experience with the court system, I have determined that my clients have specific needs and issues that can differ from other English-speaking clients. With your permission, I believe it is important to bring the concerns of translation and interpretation in the court system to your attention.

In the majority of cases, non English-speaking clients need to bring their own interpreter to the court for any kind of hearing. During a court accompaniment, I am with my clients for emotional support. Since my clients lack the ability to communicate using the English language, it is necessary for me to be present in order to interpret between the judge and my client.

From my experiences, I have found that most interpreters brought into court by the clients do not have enough training for interpretation. This can be damaging to the outcome of court decisions as well as portraying false statements.

For example, a woman with minimal English speaking ability requested a public defender to represent her. The public defender did not offer any certified interpretation assistance but asked for the acquaintances that she might know who could translate for her. The woman found someone to be her translator. The translator was not certified or completely competent in the English language, which caused a barrier in the investigation of the case and the outcome of the court decision.

I feel most non-English speaking people do not know their legal rights to an interpreter. According to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, programs and activities normally provided in English are accessible to people with limited English speaking ability including Pennsylvania state agencies and the Court of Common Pleas. This would mean that non-English speaking people would have the right to an interpreter for court cases.

It is my hope to eliminate the chance of inaccurate interpretations by making certification mandatory for all interpreters representing in court. I ask the Pennsylvania State Senate to pass Bill SB 669, which concerns interpreter certification.

On behalf of the immigrant and refugee communities and myself, I greatly appreciate your time and support. Please contact me at the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg at (717) 238-7273 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Ho-Thanh Nguyen
Immigration and Refugee Domestic Violence
YWCA of Greater Harrisburg