US Department of State - Office of Language Services

Interpreting and translating support to the Executive Office of the President of the United States of America, the Department of State, and other agencies of the United States Federal Government.

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Mission

The Mission of the Office of Language Services of the United States Department of State is to facilitate communication with non-English speaking governments and people by providing high-level interpreting and translating support to the Executive Office of the President, the Department of State, and other agencies of the United States Federal Government.

Structure

The Office of Language Services carries on a tradition of language support for the conduct of foreign policy that dates back to 1789, when it was founded by Thomas Jefferson, the first Secretary of State of the United States of America.

The office consists of an Interpreting Division and a Translation Division. An Assigning Unit is
responsible for providing interpreters for exchange programs run by the Department. Administratively, Language Services is an office within the Department of State, but has delegated authority to provide interpretation and translation services to the White House as the sole provider. Many other agencies of the U.S. Federal Government also rely upon Language Services for diplomatic/conference interpretation services, by special arrangement, where the services requested have a direct and substantial relationship to the conduct of foreign affairs. As the only federal entity with a Division specialising in diplomatic/conference interpretation, the Office of Language Services is uniquely positioned to fulfill this mandate.

**Interpretation Service**

The Interpreting Division staffs roughly 7,000 interpreting days in over 40 languages on a routine basis annually, and the volume of work handled by the office is expected to continue to grow exponentially in the coming years.

The Department of State has eight venues equipped with built-in simultaneous interpretation booths, ranging from two large auditoriums with 15 and 11 booths respectively, to smaller meetings rooms with three or four booths each. Mobile booths are used frequently in other meeting rooms at the Department and in the Washington DC area. The Office of Language Services has a dedicated classroom with eight booths that is used solely for training and testing purposes.

**Staffing**

The Office of Language Services employs roughly 60 diplomatic/conference interpreters, translators, and administrative officers on staff. The Interpreting Division has approximately 20 senior conference interpreters, diplomatic interpreters, and senior diplomatic interpreters representing a dozen languages in permanent positions. Staff must hold U.S. citizenship and be able to interpret bi-directionally in their primary language combination. Some, but not all, staff interpreters also translate, and some staff translators also work as interpreters.

The Office of Language Services also has standing contractual relationships with over 1,600 interpreters and translators who work for us in a freelance capacity on an intermittent basis. Roughly 750 of these contractors are interpreters representing a total of more than eighty languages. Both full time staff and contract linguists must undergo routine screening for a security clearance or public trust designation.

**Work**

Interpreted events range from bilateral and multilateral meetings and negotiations to appointments of traveling delegations and large international conferences. Staff interpreters and senior contractor interpreters travel with the President, First Lady, Secretary of State, and other Cabinet members, and routinely interpret meetings and phone calls held at the White House and Department of State. Staff and contractors also interpret at working-level meetings in the Washington area and throughout the United States on topics representing the full spectrum of business conducted by the United States government, ranging from agriculture, to arms control and security, commerce and business, defense, democracy and human rights, energy and the environment, finance, health, humanitarian assistance, narcotics and law enforcement, nonproliferation, public diplomacy, science and technology, and transportation, among others. In contrast to many other areas of conference interpreting, the consecutive mode is used frequently in meetings and conferences at all levels. Assignments can be remarkably varied, consisting for example of a phone call with very little lead
time between a member of the U.S. government and a foreign counterpart on one day and an
international summit that requires fifteen or more booths and months of planning the next.

In addition to interpreting at the master level, all staff interpreters serve as chefs d’équipe at
multilateral meetings and as linguistic and cultural consultants to U.S. delegations and
representatives. Senior staff interpreters also recruit, screen, test, and/or train interpreters for staff
and contract work and serve as consultant interpreters to offices, agencies, and other federal
government institutions that request interpretation services. The work of both staff and contractors
requires a thorough grasp of the issues, policies, and positions under discussion and consistent
personal initiative in adapting research and planning under rapidly changing circumstances and work
environments.

The Office of Language Services requires a range of skill levels among contract linguists. Seasoned
freelancers in language combinations not represented on staff may work for the most senior levels of
the United States government, while talented colleagues just beginning their careers may be offered
public diplomacy and working-level assignments on a regular basis if their language combination is
in demand.

Recruitment Conditions and Benefits

Staff positions are filled through an open and competitive process. Job announcements are posted at
the U.S. federal government’s portal for jobs and employment information, http://www.usajobs.gov,
and eligible candidates are interviewed and tested bi-directionally in diplomatic consecutive and
simultaneous interpretation. Staff diplomatic interpreters must be U.S. citizens and able to acquire
and maintain a Top Secret security clearance. They are hired as career-track civil servants, whose
positions become permanent after a probationary period and remain in place from one administration
to the next. Staff interpreters are remunerated at the 13, 14, or 15 levels of the General Schedule
(GS) and receive a comprehensive benefits package. Information on compensation and benefits can
be found at http://careers.state.gov.

Contract interpreters may be foreign nationals, but they must be able to work legally in the United
States and have a U.S. bank account. Applicants are normally screened first for basic consecutive
interpreting ability over the telephone and then may be formally tested for consecutive,
simultaneous and/or conference work at three different levels of skill. All tests are conducted in the
testing and training facility located in Washington DC. The best method of preparing for contractor
tests is to review videos and transcripts posted at the White House and State Department websites
(www.whitehouse.gov, www.state.gov) and general information about the United States posted at
www.america.gov. The Office of Language Services contracts only with individuals, not corporate
agencies or entities.

Interpreters interested in contract work should complete an application form and submit it with a
current resume following the instructions at the website: http://languageservices.state.gov.
Additional information on contract work for the Office of Language Services, to include information
for translators, is available at the website.

Location

The Office of Language Services is located across the street from the Main State Department
building in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, DC. The physical address and contact
information are:

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U.S. Department of State
SA-1, 14th Floor
2401 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20522, USA

Tel.: +202-261-8800
Fax: +202-261-8808
Email: interpreters@ykysj2d.state.gov

The office is within 15 minutes walking distance of the White House, Kennedy Center, Georgetown, and the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall. Public transportation is excellent, with numerous bus stops in the immediate vicinity and the Foggy Bottom metro stop only 10 minutes away (http://www.wmata.com). Vehicle access is facilitated from Virginia via Freeway 66 and the George Washington Parkway across the Roosevelt and Memorial Bridges and via Rock Creek Parkway from the northern part of the District of Columbia. The neighborhood’s character is defined by government agencies, the George Washington University campus, and international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, American Red Cross and Pan-American Health Organisation. The Corcoran and Renwick Museums as well as numerous shops and restaurants are within easy walking distance.

Living in Washington, D.C.

The United States Congress established the District of Columbia in 1792 on land ceded by the states of Maryland and Virginia. Located at the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac rivers, Washington is both the national capital and an international center. Planned for a specific purpose, this ‘city of heroes and monuments’ was designed by Major Pierre-Charles L’Enfant, a French-American architect and volunteer during the War of Independence. L’Enfant’s simple plan for a concentric city pierced by wide avenues imparted to the city an ordered charm that is at once graceful and austere.

In 1800, the city became the seat of the federal government. An attractive dynamic city, Washington serves as the federal capital for the fifty states that comprise the United States. It is the home of the nation’s three branches of government: the Executive Branch directed by the President, the Legislative Branch consisting of the U.S. Congress, and the Judicial Branch headed by the Supreme Court. Numerous government agencies, departments, commissions, and services are headquartered in the District of Columbia. The operation of the government attracts a variety of organisations, institutions, businesses, and public interest groups that closely follow the daily operations of all three branches of government.

Due to the importance of the United States in world affairs, Washington has become a center for diplomacy and international activities. The presence of diplomatic representatives from all over the world and agencies concerned with international economic development and global issues helps make Washington a cosmopolitan place to live, work, and visit. Indeed more than 150 embassies are located in the city, and more than 20,000 diplomats call Washington home.

The nearly 600,000 District of Columbia residents also elect one non-voting member to the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress. About four million people live in the greater metropolitan area. In the center of this city of monuments and museums is the popular National Mall, a splendid green park area extending approximately two miles from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. Lining either side of the park are many museums of the Smithsonian Institution, the largest museum complex in the world, as well as the National Gallery of Art, the National Archives, the U.S. Botanic Gardens, the Museum of the American Indian, and the World War II Memorial. The Washington
Monument, Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are also popular sites to visit on the Mall.

The historic Georgetown district of Washington contains many specialty shops, nightclubs, and restaurants, while the Adams Morgan area is hailed as the city’s most ethnically diverse neighborhood. The H Street Corridor, Logan Circle/U Street, and the area around the Verizon Center are fast becoming popular destinations for gastronomic and cultural activities. Popular destinations for day trips and overnight excursions include Old Town Alexandria, Mount Vernon, Monticello, Shenandoah National Park, Gettysburg, Annapolis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, the eastern and western shores of Chesapeake Bay, and beaches along the Atlantic coast.

Additional information on Washington DC and the National Capital Area can be found at the official tourism website [http://washington.org](http://washington.org).

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**Recommended citation format:**