

**SEEKING PROTECTION FROM  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN  
NEW YORK'S FAMILY COURT:**

Information for Immigrant Victims with  
Limited English Proficiency



**Empire Justice Center**

Making the law work for all New Yorkers

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## **What is domestic violence?**

If your current or former intimate partner does things that make you feel threatened or afraid, follows you, harasses you at work, threatens to report you to immigration or other authorities, controls family money, destroys your property (such as your passport or immigration papers), forces you to have sex, hurts or injures you, calls you names, or threatens to kidnap your children, you may be abused. In the United States, domestic violence is very common and it is against the law. You are not alone and you have the right to be safe. If you think you may be abused, help is available - even if you are not a citizen or if you are living in this country without papers or permission.

## **Are there places to get information and help?**

Every county has at least one organization that helps victims of domestic violence. Local domestic violence programs can provide you and your children with information about your rights, an emergency hotline, shelter, food, and counseling. Usually, these services are free. Some communities may also have domestic violence programs that help people from specific international communities or cultures. You can get help from a domestic violence program even if you are not a citizen or are living in the U.S. without papers or permission. Programs cannot turn you away or treat you differently because of your immigration status or because you do not read or speak English well. They also cannot report clients to immigration authorities. These programs will help you even if you stay with friends or family or if you are still living with your abuser. If you do not know how to connect with your local domestic violence program, you can call a 24-hour hotline for more information:

*If you live anywhere in NY, call:*

1-800-942-6906 (assistance available in up to 120 different languages)

*If you are Deaf or hard-of-hearing, call:*

711 (Relay Service)

*If you live in NYC, call:*

1-800-621-HOPE (4673)

New York State also publishes a helpful guide for victims called “Domestic Violence: Finding Safety and

Support”. It is published in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Russian. This guide is only available online at:

<http://www.opdv.ny.gov/help/fss/contents.html>.

## **How can I get help from a domestic violence program if I do not read or speak English well?**

A domestic violence program must communicate with you in the language you are most comfortable with. If they do not have staff who speak your language, the program must provide you with free language assistance, such as translated forms or a qualified interpreter. A program may need to use a phone service, such as Language Line, to communicate with you if an in-person interpreter is not available. It is not appropriate for a program to use a phone service for long conversations, such as counseling or support groups. You should not use, or be asked to use, your children, family, or friends as your interpreter.

## **If I am a victim of domestic violence, can I get help with my immigration questions or concerns?**

If you have questions or concerns about your immigration rights, the Office for New Americans or any of their Opportunity Centers may be able to give you help or information. Help may be available for free or at a lower cost. You may contact the Office for New Americans at: 1-800-566-7636.

If you don't have legal status you should know that the United States has several laws that may allow you to live and work in this country legally if you are a victim of domestic violence or other crimes. You may be eligible for this relief if you are unmarried or married to a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident. To get help under some of these laws, you may need to cooperate with the police in prosecuting your abuser. You may also be helped under these laws if you go to family court for protection against your abuser. You must be sure to follow through with the court proceedings and go to all court dates that are scheduled. These immigration laws are complicated, so it is very important that you speak with an experienced lawyer or advocate who can explain your options. Depending upon your situation, getting an order of protection from family court or cooperating with the police can help your immigration application.

## **Should I call the police for help if I do not read or speak English well?**

Domestic violence is a crime and the police may arrest your abuser and charge them with a crime if they think the law was violated. If you need to go to a safe place, like a domestic violence shelter or a friend's house, the police may be able to transport you there.

Communicating with police can be difficult if they arrive at the scene but do not speak your language. If you or your children are hurt or scared, it may be even harder to talk with them. You should know that the police must provide you with free language assistance if they do not speak your language, such as a bilingual officer or official interpreter. You may need to wait for language help if the police don't have a bilingual officer or interpreter immediately available. At the very least, you should be given an interpreter through a phone service. Police officers should never use your abuser as an interpreter. They also shouldn't use a family member, friend, or your children unless there is an emergency and being able to communicate with you is necessary to ensure everyone's safety.

The police may talk to you about your options in criminal court or suggest you seek help from the family court. You have the right to both file criminal charges against your abuser and seek help in family court.

Even if your abuser is not arrested for abusing you, the police must give you a Victim's Rights Notice with information about your rights and options, as well as a copy of a Domestic Incident Report detailing what happened to you. You have the right to write your own statement of what happened in your own language on the Domestic Incident Report. Depending upon what language you speak, the police may also be required to translate your written statement so they can read and understand your written explanation of what happened in your own words.

The police may take your complaint or a statement from you. Do not sign official complaints or statements until they have been translated or interpreted for you by a qualified interpreter. These are legal documents that can be very important to your case later on, so their content must be as accurate as possible.

The Victim's Rights Notice is available in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Bengali, Traditional & Simplified

Chinese, Korean, and Russian. The translated notices can also be found online at: <http://www.nycourts.gov/forms/familycourt/domesticviolence.shtml>. Remember, cooperation with the police and family court will not only help you to be safer, it may help you with your immigration status later.

If the police denied you language help or you feel they violated your rights, tell your domestic violence advocate or your lawyer. You could also make a complaint to the city or town authorities in your community.

## **Will the police report me or my abuser to immigration authorities if I call for help?**

In some communities around New York, police do not ask about immigration status when responding to a call for help. In other places, the police may ask about this status. It is important that you are aware of your local police practices. However, when a person is arrested and fingerprinted, immigration authorities will be alerted. Unfortunately, victims of domestic violence are sometimes arrested if the police can't decide who is responsible for what has happened. This does not necessarily mean that immigration will become involved but, if they do, you should tell immigration right away that you are the victim of a crime. You should then plan to see an experienced immigration lawyer as soon as possible to discuss your legal options.

## **What is family court and how can it help me?**

One of the most common places to get protection from abuse in New York is the family court. Family courts are civil courts that decide cases involving family problems, such as domestic violence, child abuse, child custody or support. Every county has a family court and filing a case there is free. These courts are open during regular weekday business hours. You do not need to be a citizen or read or speak English to get help from the family court. This court can issue an "order of protection" and, depending upon the time you arrive at court, you may get a temporary order the same day you seek help.

## **What is an order of protection and how can it help me?**

An order of protection is a legal document issued by a judge that directs your abuser to abide by certain conditions. Only a judge can issue an order. Orders of protection are available in many types of proceedings in family court. They are also available as part of a divorce case or if you file criminal charges.

A family court order of protection can be tailored to specific safety needs and concerns. For example, it can order your abuser to stop contacting you or stay away from you and other places you frequent (school, job, or business). If you live together, the order can make your abuser leave the home you share. If your abuser is keeping your immigration papers, identification, or other documents, the court can order your abuser to return them to you. If you have children together, it can limit or stop your abuser's contact with them, temporarily decide custody or visitation, and give you child support. If your abuser has threatened to kidnap your children or take them out of the country, the court can intervene. If your abuser has guns, the court may take them away. An order of protection from family court can last as long as 2 or 5 years, depending upon your circumstances. You do not need to file criminal charges or have a police report to ask the family court for help. Asking a family court for an order of protection will not result in your abuser going to jail.

Family courts across the state have started issuing translated orders of protection in certain languages besides English, such as Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, and more. Some very limited parts of the order may still be in English, but most of the order will be in the language you read or speak. The court will give you copies of the order in your own language and the English version at the same time. The court interpreter will also interpret the language in the order for you while you are in court.

Although an order of protection cannot guarantee your safety, if your abuser obeys its terms, it can help keep you safer. If your abuser disobeys the court's order, you can call the police or ask the family court for more protection. Orders of protection may also help your immigration case.

In New York, information about all orders of protection is automatically entered into a national database that immigration authorities may have access to. If your abuser is not a U. S. citizen, you should be aware that getting a final order of protection may have a negative effect on your abuser's immigration status. *Before you file in a family court, you may wish to talk to an immigration lawyer so you can learn more about the potential impact of this relief on your abuser and how it could also impact you or your children.*

## **Do I need a lawyer to file for an order of protection?**

A lawyer is not necessary. However, having a lawyer will help you better understand all of your legal rights and options. The lawyer will be your advocate and negotiate with your abuser for you. If you cannot afford to hire a lawyer yourself, the family court may be able to appoint a lawyer to represent you for free after you file your petition. Your abuser may also qualify for a free lawyer. Your local domestic violence program can help you find legal assistance in your area. To prepare your case appropriately, your lawyer is obligated to effectively communicate with you and explain legal matters. In some cases, your lawyer is required by law to provide you with language assistance (interpreter or translated letters or documents) for free if they cannot communicate with you in your language.

## **How do I qualify for an order of protection through family court?**

You do not need to be living separate from your abuser to seek an order of protection. However, many victims seek an order when they decide that staying in the relationship is not safe for them or their children.

Only persons who have a family or an intimate relationship with their abuser can get an order of protection from a family court. To qualify, you and your abuser must be one of the following:

- Married to or divorced from each other, including same or different gender marriages, or;
- In a current or former dating or intimate

relationship (boyfriend or girlfriend, domestic partner), or;

- Related by blood (parent, grandparent, child, sibling, uncle, cousin), or;
- Related by marriage (in-laws, step-parent, step-sibling, step-child).

Your abuser also must have abused you in one or more ways, such as threatened or followed you, threatened you with a weapon, threatened you in person or over the phone/in writing, strangled you, hit or shoved you, yelled at you, damaged or destroyed your property, physically or sexually abused you, or did things that made you fear injury or death.

### **Do I need to be able to speak or write in English to seek an order of protection through family court?**

Although court business is conducted in English, you have the legal right to have an interpreter help you communicate with court staff, judges, and attorneys in the language in which you feel most comfortable. Court proceedings can be very confusing and stressful, even for those who understand English well. As these proceedings are very important to your safety, it is critical that you understand what is going on and the court understands you. Interpreters can assist you both in the court room, as well as during communications with court staff.

### **How can I alert the court that I need language assistance?**

Courthouses should have signs in different languages that advise people about the availability of free interpreters. The Family Court Clerk's Office may use an "I Speak" card that allows you to point to the language you speak so staff will know what assistance you need. If your language is not listed on the "I Speak" card, do not be alarmed. The cards do not list every available language and the court can provide interpreters in over 100 languages. Be sure to ask for language help if you need it.

Family court clerks receive special training on how to help people with language assistance. While many courts may quickly understand that you need an interpreter, others

may not realize this right away. If you are not immediately offered an interpreter and need one, you should request one on your own. If you do not make this request, the court may assume you do not need help. If you are afraid to ask for help, you can bring someone you trust to advocate for you, such as a domestic violence program advocate, friend or family member. Your lawyer can also make this request for you.

## **Should I request an interpreter from the court before I seek help there?**

The process for scheduling an interpreter is different across the state. If you know you will need an interpreter in advance, it is helpful to have your lawyer or domestic violence program advocate notify the court you are coming. This can help reduce delays and ensure an interpreter is available. You or your advocate should contact your local Family Court Clerk's Office and tell them you have an urgent, domestic violence situation. If needed, you or your advocate may contact the NYS Court System's Office of Language Access directly at: (646) 386-5670 or [courtinterpreter@nycourts.gov](mailto:courtinterpreter@nycourts.gov) to get help.

Unfortunately, some courts cannot arrange for an interpreter until you arrive. The first time you go to court, it may take as long as a few hours to find an interpreter for you, particularly if you speak a language that is not common in your community. While face-to-face interpretation is preferred, in some cases the interpreter may be provided over phone or video. You should ask the clerk's office to get an interpreter by phone or video for you if it is not possible to get a live interpreter within a few hours. Once the court is aware that you need an interpreter for future court appearances, they will make arrangements to have an official interpreter available when you return.

You may be given a different interpreter each time you go to court. You may need to share the same interpreter with your abuser at court if your abuser also needs language assistance. Remember, the interpreter is there to help you communicate, not to take sides or advocate for one person over the other. The interpreter is not permitted to tell your abuser anything you say when speaking privately at court with lawyers or others.

## **Will I have to pay for an interpreter in family court?**

Family court must provide you with a qualified, official interpreter for free. Interpreters hired by the court system in New York must take mandatory training and pass examinations both in English and the other language they speak. Official interpreters also have other professional obligations. They are not allowed to share the information they learn about you and your family while assisting you. They are also not permitted to have private conversations with you, give you legal advice, or tell you what to do with your case.

## **Can I bring a friend or a relative to be my interpreter at court?**

You should not have a friend, relative, or your child serve as your interpreter or translator. Although these people may be bilingual, there are many reasons why they should not interpret for you. First, interpreting and translation is very difficult and requires special skills and training. Unlike friends or family, official interpreters also have obligations to keep what you say private. Second, you will need to discuss personal experiences that are troubling or sensitive and this can be difficult to do in front of people who care about you. Court staff or judges should never ask you to use a friend, relative, or your child to serve as your interpreter for court business. You have the right to an appointed interpreter throughout your court case. If you want to bring a trusted friend or family member with you for support, you should still use an official interpreter.

## **What should I do if I have a problem with the interpreter assigned by the court?**

While many victims of abuse have positive experiences with interpreters in family court, problems may arise. You should immediately alert your attorney, advocate or the court if you have any concerns. Some common problems are:

***What if the interpreter assigned to me speaks my language but does not know my dialect or is not understandable for another reason?***

Advise the court or your lawyer that the interpreter is not communicating effectively in your language.

***What if my abuser or I personally know the interpreter?***

The personal relationship with the interpreter should be revealed to the court. The court will decide if this relationship is a conflict of interest. If you do not feel safe or comfortable using this interpreter, you should advise the court of your concerns.

***What if the interpreter is not adequately interpreting what I say or making mistakes in translation?***

Advise the court or your lawyer that the interpreter is not communicating accurately.

***What if the interpreter is giving their own opinion, trying to give me legal advice, or making personal comments about my case?***

Interpreters are not allowed to do this and you should notify the court or your lawyer. Do not seek or accept their advice.

***If I would feel more comfortable using an interpreter who shares my gender, can I make such a request?***

The court will try to be sensitive and accommodate your request, depending on the availability of interpreters in your language. You may need to explain why this is preferable for you and if it is based upon your culture or religion or because of the abuse you suffered.

## ***What if I cannot resolve an interpreter problem?***

If you or your lawyer are not able to resolve interpreter problems directly in court or at the Clerk's Office, you should report the problem to the Chief Clerk's office at the court. If you have a concern or complaint about the quality or availability of the court's interpreting assistance, you may also contact the NYS Office of Language Access. You may share your concerns with them in English or in the language you are most comfortable with.

*NYS Unified Court System  
Division of Professional and Court Services  
Office of Language Access  
25 Beaver Street, 8th Floor  
New York, NY 10004  
Phone: (646) 386-5670  
Fax: (212) 428-2548  
Email: [courtinterpreter@nycourts.gov](mailto:courtinterpreter@nycourts.gov)  
or [interpretercomplaints@nycourts.gov](mailto:interpretercomplaints@nycourts.gov)  
Website: [www.nycourts.gov/courtinterpreter](http://www.nycourts.gov/courtinterpreter)*



## **How can I complete the paperwork for an order of protection if English is not my primary language?**

You will need to fill out a petition asking the court for an order of protection and explaining your abuser's history of threats or abuse against you and/or your family members. Some family courts have people available on site to help you complete your petition, such as a clerk's office staffer, a probation officer, an attorney, or a domestic violence program advocate. In these cases, an official interpreter should be provided to help you communicate. Unfortunately, some courts do not offer on-site assistance filling out the petition. If this is the case, ask the clerk to give you an interpreter to help you understand what the petition requires. You will then need to complete the petition on your own.

Many domestic violence programs, Family Justice Centers, and legal services offices throughout the state can now help you complete your petition and send it electronically to the court for filing. Those providers should provide you with interpretation or translation if you need it so your papers are accurate. In a few communities, under a special new project, you can even talk to the judge by video when filing for your emergency order if going to court is dangerous or very difficult. As with other court proceedings, the official court interpreter may be provided in person, over the phone, or by video.

You will need to verify your identity when you sign your petition. Verification requires you to have personal identification that contains your photo, such as a driver's license, non-driver's identification card, passport, public assistance benefits card, immigration identity card, professional license, school identification card, or employee badge. If your identification is unavailable (abuser keeps or destroyed it, lost, unable to take it when you left), advise the person verifying your petition of this problem and discuss other ways you can verify your identity. If you want to keep your address a secret from your abuser, there is a form you should also fill out and include with your petition asking the court for this relief.

## **What will happen after I file the petition?**

After the court reviews your petition, it may issue you a temporary order of protection. The order of protection will be in English, so try to remember the terms as best as you can. (You can ask your lawyer or your domestic violence advocate if they will have it translated for you.) Your abuser will be served with a copy of the petition and the order and will have to come to court to answer your petition. There will likely be one or more court appearances to resolve your case. You are entitled to a qualified interpreter at all further proceedings and the court will make the arrangements.

## **If the family court involves other professionals in my case, how can I communicate with them?**

As part of your order of protection case, the family court may involve other service providers. If your children are appointed an Attorney for the Child, that attorney must arrange for a qualified interpreter to communicate with you - or them - for free. Other types of service providers, such as a supervised visitation center or mental health evaluator, may also need to provide you with language assistance at no charge, depending on their funding. Your lawyer should ensure that you are able to effectively communicate with these providers.

## **What if I need help paying for food, housing, or medical care?**

If you have children with your abuser, remember that you can ask the court to issue temporary child support as part of your order of protection. You can also consider filing a separate petition in Family Court for child support. If you are married to your abuser, you can also consider filing a petition for spousal support in Family Court. If you need medical care for injuries caused by the abuse, you can ask the court to order your abuser to pay those costs. These money awards can help you pay for some of your basic needs.

You or your children may qualify for public assistance benefits to help pay for rent, food, or medical care. Applications are available at your local welfare office or online at: <http://otda.ny.gov/programs/applications/>. Applications are available in English, Arabic, Chinese, Haitian/Creole, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. Benefits you or your children qualify for can vary based upon your immigration status. You are entitled

to a free interpreter to communicate with welfare office staff. The local welfare office should display a poster letting you know about language help. You can also make your request in writing or tell a worker you need language help.

## **What do I do if I have been denied access to an interpreter or want to file a complaint about the quality of the interpreter assigned to me?**

Language access is a civil rights issue and you are legally protected from discrimination. You have the right to make a complaint about poor treatment and can contact the New York State Office of the Attorney General, the U.S. Department of Justice or the New York State Division of Human Rights:

*New York State Office of the Attorney General, Civil Rights Bureau*

Phone: (212) 416-8250

Email: [Civil.Rights@ag.ny.gov](mailto:Civil.Rights@ag.ny.gov)

*New York State Division of Human Rights*

Phone: (718) 741-8400

Website: <http://www.dhr.ny.gov>

*United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Coordination & Federal Compliance Section*

Phone: (888) TITLE-06 (voice or TTY)

## **ALERT!**

Immigration enforcement policies are changing rapidly in the United States. It is critical that as immigrant victims of domestic violence, you know your current immigration status and learn more about potential paths that can make you eligible for legal status. You should also know your legal rights if you are stopped by police or immigration authorities. Keep your important documents safe and be sure to have a plan in places for your family if you are detained. **For more information:** <https://www.ilrc.org/know-your-rights-and-what-immigrant-families-should-do-now>

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