



# Utilizing WhatsApp for Real-Time Language Interpretation on Agricultural Worksites

## Introduction

Presenting health information in a farmworker's first language is the best way to ensure they understand the information and are able to make informed decisions about their health. Yet language barriers and scarce resources restrict many farmworkers from obtaining health care and understanding health education information. Multilingual health workers or professional interpreters are not always available in rural agricultural areas in the United States. Sixty five percent of respondents in the [National Agricultural Workers Survey](#) reported Spanish as their preferred spoken language, and there is a growing presence of workers whose first language is a Mesoamerican Indigenous language (as high as [40% in some agricultural communities](#) in the United States).

To overcome these obstacles in presenting and understanding health information in languages other than English, agricultural employers and health outreach workers can utilize WhatsApp for real-time, remote language interpretation. WhatsApp is a messaging application for smartphones that is commonly used among farmworkers, with as many as [78% of farmworkers in some U.S. agricultural communities](#) reporting WhatsApp as an application they use. For the health education event described below, WhatsApp was selected as the interpretation delivery method because it is widely used by farmworkers, and it did not require the purchase of external interpretation equipment. These two features mean that interpretation through WhatsApp could be feasible on certain farms and worksites. Using WhatsApp as a tool for interpretation will not only help farmworkers obtain the information they need even if interpreters are not able to be physically present, but it will also build trust and confidence among them by honoring their cultural and linguistic dignity and diversity.

Interpreting health information for farmworkers in real-time is applicable in two common contexts:

1. When a health outreach worker only speaks English, but the farmworkers don't speak English.
2. When a health outreach worker is bilingual in English and Spanish, but some workers' first language is not English or Spanish.



This promising practice explains the details and lessons learned by National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) staff in using WhatsApp group calls to interpret three health education talks. The profile also shares details and provides practical suggestions on the following:

- How health outreach staff and agricultural employers can best work together to execute events;
- Working with different types of language interpreters; and
- Determining language needs of farmworkers in an appropriate way.

## Summary of Events

In July of 2022, NCFH coordinated with a large agricultural employer to deliver health education trainings about various vaccines to their employees. The trainings were adapted for an informal “tailgate talk” style, which are short, participatory, and delivered on the worksite. NCFH hosted three separate, large talks because the 200+ employees were spread out between three different worksites. The trainings provided information about COVID-19 vaccines and the Tdap vaccine. NCFH had two goals: 1) Offer Spanish-language health education talks to farm employees in three large groups and 2) Pilot the use of WhatsApp group calls to interpret health education information in smaller groups.

The WhatsApp interpretation happened after the larger talks so that NCFH staff could receive more intimate feedback from workers who participated in the pilot. After each of the first two large talks, a group of six workers was recruited to stay longer and listen to another session about Flu vaccines that was interpreted from English into Spanish. NCFH also delivered one interpreted talk in a field to a group of 6 workers, who spoke Tsotsil, an Indigenous language native to the Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Veracruz. The three interpreted talks each involved the presenter, the interpreter, and the audience members being on a group phone call on WhatsApp.

## KEY FINDINGS

*Using WhatsApp is a feasible method to conduct remote interpretation in agricultural settings.*

*It does require planning beforehand, and will work better in smaller groups.*

*Trained professional interpreters are recommended.*



## Methods

### 1

#### Step 1: Coordination between the Employer and the Health Outreach Staff

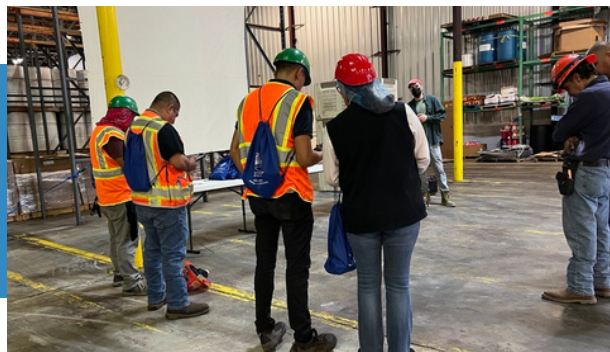
For this event, NCFH partnered with an employer with whom we had an established collaborative relationship. A formal introduction from NCFH was unnecessary, but there was still a need to clearly explain the goal of the event. Three virtual meetings over the span of a month, as well as site visits the day before the events, were needed to plan and finalize logistics. Determining whether any workers spoke Indigenous languages also required time and effort on both sides.

#### Tips For Health Outreach Workers

- Clearly introduce your organization, your mission, and the purpose of the event. (Is it just education? Will you be providing services as well?)
- Offer to send a copy of the presentation/script ahead of time. Agricultural employers are often open to health outreach, and most would appreciate knowing the content before the event.
- Reach out to the employer at least a month in advance of when you want to do the event. Emphasize that you can be flexible depending on work schedules (be prepared to do early morning talks)!
- Ask the employer if they know what languages their workers speak (see below for more about determining language needs).
- Offer to bring food and refreshments: This is important in getting workers' interest and showing the employer that you are committed to making the event engaging.
- Offer to coordinate directly with crew supervisors: sometimes employers who use Farm Labor Contractors don't know specific crews' schedules.
- Once dates are finalized, offer to send the employer an invitation flyer that they can use to promote the event among their workers.

#### Tips For Agricultural Employers

- Reach out to request the health event as far in advance as possible, preferably at least one month in advance. If your workers are seasonal, soon after they arrive is best.
- Familiarize yourself ahead of time with the preferred languages spoken by the workers.
  - Identify a person trusted within the workforce who is aware of languages other than English or Spanish spoken.
  - Asking workers directly if they speak an Indigenous language is a sensitive issue since many Indigenous workers have faced discrimination or violence in their countries of origin based on their ethnicity.
  - If you have an existing health and safety committee, they may be a good team to help you identify which languages are spoken by workers.
- Know what parts of the property have cell service and Wi-Fi and try to host an event where there is cell service.
- Consider giving workers incentives for participating in the event, or allowing them to attend the event on the clock.



**2**

**Step 2: Securing an Interpreter**

For this event, NCFH utilized trained non-professional interpreters who were able to review the material and prepare ahead of time. It is recommended that employers and health outreach staff utilize trained professional interpreters if time and budget allow.

- Interpretation between English and Spanish
  - If the interpretation needs are only between Spanish and English, using a professional interpretation service will cost about \$80 per hour.
  - While a trained interpreter or Spanish-speaking health educator is preferred, if you encounter challenges in scheduling one, a staff member who is fluent in English and Spanish from your organization can interpret. Prior to the event, explain the purpose of the presentation and share the presentation material with the interpreter so that they are able to familiarize themselves with the content.
- Interpretation between English or Spanish and an Indigenous language
  - A trained professional interpreter is also recommended when conducting a health education presentation for Mesoamerican Indigenous language speakers. Because some words and concepts either do not exist or have to be explained differently in many Indigenous languages, it is very important that the presentation content is shared with the interpreter ahead of time so that they have time to think of ways of interpreting the information.
  - It is also crucial to know the languages and language variants that your workforce speaks. Languages like Mixteco, Nahuatl, and Zapoteco are spoken in many variants that are not mutually intelligible. Language variants can be determined by the town(s) your workers are from so it is important to do this research before requesting an interpreter.



*NCFH has collaborated with several excellent Indigenous-led organizations that provide interpretation into Mesoamerican Indigenous languages. See the Further Resources section for more info.*

### 3

#### Step 3: Preparing Materials for the Event

In order to minimize the total amount of time we asked of workers, NCFH did the following:

- **Handouts/printed materials:**

NCFH staff wanted each audience member to have three flyers with printed information to reference during the talk. For time efficiency and to avoid confusion, the flyers were included in prefilled drawstring bags that were provided to workers attending the sessions. If outdoors, even a light breeze will make holding printed materials difficult, so providing a folder or bag to hold documents will be appreciated by workers.

- **Food:**

Food or drinks are an easy incentive and always appreciated by workers. Ordering in advance is a must if you are getting food for a large group. NCFH ordered a large quantity of breakfast tacos from a local restaurant a day in advance. Depending on the availability of restaurants/independent caterers, the food orders should be made several days in advance. Easy-to-eat foods like tacos, pizza, or sandwiches are recommended.

- **Seeing the Space Beforehand:**

If you are coordinating with the employer, ask to see the site of the talks beforehand. Think about where you will set up a table for your materials, and where you will present in relation to where the workers will be standing or sitting, and if you will need a microphone and speaker.



### 4

#### Step 4: Executing the Large Talks (No Interpretation)

Two Spanish-language talks were delivered to a total of 140 farmworkers, each lasting approximately 15 minutes. Participants were provided with tacos since the talks took place at 6 AM before the start of their work day. Participants were also provided with printed health education materials to reference during the talks, and were encouraged to ask questions.



*We recommend that health educators arrive 30 minutes before the scheduled talk to set-up materials, a microphone and speaker, and tables and chairs if needed.*



## 5 Step 5: Delivering and Interpreting the Small Talks: WhatsApp Mechanics

To test remote interpretation, three talks were given to smaller groups of workers: two from English to Spanish, and one from Spanish to Tsotsil. These talks were conducted before the work day or during the workers' lunch break. The 18 participants in these groups each received a \$30 gift card for providing feedback about the interpretation at the end of each talk. Their ages ranged from 26 to 62 years and all were employed as farmworkers. Forty-four percent of participants spoke only Spanish, 33% spoke Spanish and Tsotsil, and 28% spoke English and Spanish.

Prior to beginning the talk, an NCFH staff person collected participants' phone numbers and created a WhatsApp group that included the presenter and the interpreter along with the participants. All participants were asked to put themselves on mute once the call started. The presenter started the group call upon beginning the talk, and would speak a few statements at a time. The presenter would then put themselves on mute, allow the interpreter to speak, and then proceed with providing a few more statements. The presenter stopped at certain intervals to ask if participants had questions. If they did have a question, they could unmute themselves, and the interpreter would provide the question to the presenter. This was conducted in both indoor and outdoor settings.

[Click here](#) to see a video of the live interpretation being done from Spanish into Tsotsil.



## Evaluation Results

After the presentation, participants were asked to fill out an evaluation survey about the interpretation approach. The following summarize their evaluation results:

- 94% said the interpreter was very easy to understand
- 100% said they trusted that the interpreter was translating the information correctly

Participants also provided qualitative feedback on how to improve the vaccine education session and interpretation. Participants offered the following suggestions:

- Two participants felt that the talk was too long, especially when using consecutive interpretation, rather than simultaneous interpretation
- One participant suggested incorporating videos into the talk

## Tips for Delivering Health Education Talks with Remote Interpretation in Farm Settings

- Determining what languages are spoken in a culturally appropriate way
  - Speak with the crew supervisors ahead of time to see if they know of specific language needs
  - Since many Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples are bilingual and supervisors may be unaware of workers' language preferences, it is advisable to have a staff member meet workers informally a few days before the talk. During this time, the staff member can introduce themselves, ask about their vaccination questions, and also ask if they prefer to have information provided in other languages.
  - If the health outreach staff are unable to go ahead of time to determine language needs, ask workers before or after the talk if anyone would prefer the information in a different language. If there is interest, create a WhatsApp group, and follow up with them later to plan a group call after finding the proper interpreter.
  - Provide the interpreter with the materials/script ahead of time to allow them to familiarize themselves with the content.
- Place and time of talks
  - Deliver the talks before or after the workday (lunch breaks may be too short).
  - A central location like an office (instead of the field) is best for workers, and more likely to have cell signal and electricity.
  - Arrive early to account for unforeseen delays and to show the workers you value their time
  - Delivering the talk indoors is recommended for better audio quality.
  - If outdoors is the only option, consider bringing a tent for shade, water and sports drinks for workers.
  - If outdoors, remember that wind may make it hard to hold printed materials; bring folders or bags for the audience.
- WhatsApp mechanics
  - Assign someone from your team the sole role of saving contacts and starting the WhatsApp group. Engage the audience members while this is being done (making small talk, giving food).
  - Go over the mute button. Make sure each worker knows to be on mute unless they have a question.
  - For groups larger than 20, we suggest having a phone call between just the presenter and the interpreter, and directing the interpreter's responses into a microphone for a group of workers to hear.
- Mingle with audience beforehand
  - Spend two minutes (but no more!) introducing yourself in a personal way, asking if people have any questions.
  - If people are still eating, wait to start the talk so their full attention can be on the talk and any handouts.

## REMEMBER:

*Many Farmworkers who speak Indigenous languages are also fluent in Spanish, but they may prefer to receive information in their Indigenous language*



## Further Resources

### English-Spanish language interpretation

American Translators Association



Language Line Solutions



### English-Mesoamerican language interpretation

CIELO's Center for Indigenous Languages and Power (CILP)

To request a Mesoamerican language interpreter, contact Luis López Reséndiz (luislr@mycielo.org) and Aurora Pedro (aurorap@mycielo.org)

[MICOP Interpreter Services](#)

Request a Mesoamerican Language Interpreter [here](#).

[Red de Pueblos Transnacionales](#)

[Colibrí Interpreters Collective](#)

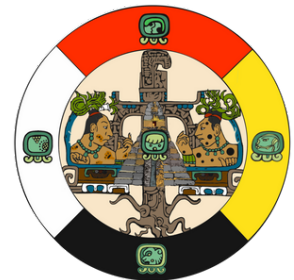
They offer interpreters for Mixteco, Nahuatl, Me'phaa- Tlapanec, Totonaco, Triqui, Mixe, Garifuna, Kichwa, and K'iche.

[International Mayan League](#)

A Mayan Language Interpreter can be requested [here](#).

[Language Access Florida](#)

To request a Mesoamerican Language Interpreter, contact Dr. Laura Gonzales at [languageaccessflorida@gmail.com](mailto:languageaccessflorida@gmail.com)



For resources for health outreach professionals or medical providers wanting to reach farmworkers, [click here](#)  
For resources that agricultural employers can utilize for their workers' health, [click here](#)

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For any questions about this event and the lessons learned, reach out to [Matt Solberg](#)

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