



## Court Interpreters Project

**Language access** is a vital issue for immigrants, particularly in their dealings with the justice system. In Sakhi's experience, court interpreters play a crucial role in the lives of many immigrant survivors of violence. Women who do not have the means to communicate in English must rely on the use of court interpreters to convey their experiences and pleas for justice.

Sakhi has performed ground-breaking policy research and advocacy work in this area—work unparalleled for an organization our size. We have found that some interpreters are inadequately trained, not fluent in the survivor's language, and offer biased or inaccurate interpretation. Survivors have even reported being intimidated, threatened, and sexually harassed by interpreters.

As a means of addressing these critical issues, Sakhi spearheaded the Court Interpreters Project in 1995. Since that time, we have had a number of pivotal successes which have reshaped New York State policies on court interpretation:

### Sakhi's achievements

- **In October 2007**, largely as a result of Sakhi's relentless advocacy, research, and persistence, New York State administered Rule 217, which obligates courts to ensure an interpreter in all civil and criminal cases when a party is not proficient in English.
- **In May 2007**, Sakhi spoke at the NYC Bar Association's Task Force on Women in the Courts, raising concerns regarding attorney and interpreter availability based on data from a convenient sample survey conducted by the Justice Speaks Initiative, which Sakhi co-chairs. For more information on the survey and a summary, please visit: <http://www.sakhi.org/learn/CIPsurvey.php>
- **In April 2006**, Sakhi helped mobilize the Office of Court Administration to release a workplan to address improving the court interpreter system. The plan includes pay increases for per diem interpreters – the first in a decade – a mandated English test, and required training.
- **In May 2005**, Purvi Shah presented testimony to the New York State Matrimonial Commission about language access. Some of Sakhi's testimony was woven into the Commission's final report.
- **In September 2004**, Sakhi Executive Director Purvi Shah delivered a presentation at the Department of Justice's first-ever Limited English Proficiency (LEP) conference,

aimed at discussing obstacles LEP individuals face when accessing the courts. 150 people attended the path-breaking conference, including court personnel, advocates, and government officials.

- **In 2003**, the Office of Court Administration hired three South Asian interpreters as employees of the court, requiring them to attend an orientation that included domestic violence training.
- **In October 2002**, Sakhi produced a documentary film, *Creating Community Change*, to enhance awareness about the language access barrier in the courts.
- **In 1995**, Sakhi wrote about its campaign in its newsletters and disseminated its article “*Silence! The Court is in Session*” to judges with the help of the National Organization of Women Legal Defense and Education Fund.

## Broadening our impact

Sakhi has been pivotal in bringing together diverse partners in a coalition for change in order to ensure our courts are open to all. Examples include:

- **In May 2006**, The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) published an article Sakhi co-authored about the importance of qualified court interpreters for survivors with limited English proficiency.
- **Sakhi** is building partnerships with interpreters in order to ensure change at all levels. Clifford Koppelman, representative of the court interpreters’ union, commented, “It is apparent that immigration demographics have changed. This change becomes apparent in courts, hospitals, and city agencies, who must respond. A lot of interpreters have been suffering because the court system doesn’t understand their role. I encourage organizations like Sakhi to keep demanding this kind of change.”

## Next steps

Sakhi continues to partner, collect data, and advocate for change:

- Sakhi is **a leader** of Justice Speaks: Initiative on Ensuring Language Access in the Justice System, which also comprises representatives from Sanctuary for Families, the Vera Institute of Justice, and Voices of Women.
- As part of the initiative, Sakhi has conducted a **nationwide survey** of court interpreters, receiving nearly 150 responses in an effort to document interpreter’s needs and perspectives as well as gaps in training and services.
- Sakhi’s preliminary results have **highlighted critical issues**, such as inconsistency in the certification process and continuing inaccuracies in services provided. One respondent noted, “I was invited to the court hearing at immigration and naturalization court...and was surprised at the official court interpreter’s inaccuracies.” Another pointed out, “Most of our interpreters don’t even have a bachelor’s degree, and those who do, never went to college to study translation or interpretation.”