

Lesley Duncan
Supervising Court Services Analyst
Judicial Council of California
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102-3660

REMOTE COURT INTERPRETING: DEVELOPMENT OF A PILOT PROJECT IN CALIFORNIA

Immigration trends and an increasingly diverse population have challenged the judicial branch in California and the nation to provide qualified court interpreters in order to ensure access to justice. The needs for court interpreting services has forced court administrators to address logistical difficulties of delivering service to courts in both urban and rural areas, to establish qualifying standards for accurate court interpreting, and to form partnerships with others in order to ensure access to interpreters in approximately 224 languages and innumerable dialects. To address these needs, in 1999, the California Judicial Council and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) began exploring alternative methods of delivering interpreting services to the trial courts, including a state-funded telephonic interpreting program.

Before designing a pilot program to provide qualified California court interpretation to trial courts via telephone, AOC staff, under the guidance of the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), gathered information from interpreter program coordinators in other states. In early October 2000, using a combination of closed and open-ended questions about both the practical and philosophical basis for telephonic interpreter programs, AOC staff surveyed respondents about (1) the design of their telephonic interpreting programs, if any; (2) the equipment used in their telephonic interpreting programs; (3) how the service is being delivered; (4) the challenges they have faced; and (5) how to evaluate the data to determine best practices for a California pilot project. Twenty-seven program coordinators participated in the survey, including

representatives of 25 states, the District of Columbia, and the Administrative Office of the United States Courts.

Building on the experience of other jurisdictions, in January 2000, AOC staff began implementing a telephonic interpreting program to achieve the following goals in the California trial courts:

- 1) reduce the number of proceedings delayed or continued due to the unavailability of a qualified interpreter;
- 2) decrease the use of unqualified interpreters;
- 3) use the time of interpreters more efficiently; and
- 4) reduce the costs associated with the use of interpreters in courts without ready in-person interpreter access.

It is also expected that the pilot program will provide courts with access to qualified interpreters in “rare” languages, overcome geographic challenges within a jurisdiction, and implement better control over the quality of interpreter services. The experience of court interpreter program coordinators from other jurisdictions, evaluations of other telephonic court interpreter projects, and the resources available from experts in the field informed and structured the development of California’s pilot project.

Measuring the success of telephonic interpreting will entail an evaluation of both the quantitative aspects of the pilot project (frequency of use, expense, time elapsed, etc.) and the qualitative aspects (effectiveness of service, equipment, etc.). AOC staff expects to have preliminary results available by late 2001 and hopes that implementation of this pilot project in the 5 to 10 initial trial courts will make clear the benefits of effective telephonic interpretation. The project may also provide the proof needed to justify additional funding to expand this delivery option to all trial courts in the state.

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