



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

Public Information Office

Breaking Down the Language Barrier

The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts has established a program to provide qualified foreign language interpreters and sign language interpreters for people charged with crimes or involved in other types of legal proceedings in the Pennsylvania courts.

Interpreters are called upon at least 15,000 times a year to participate in legal proceedings in Pennsylvania, but the need for their services remains unmet for many non-English-speaking or hearing-impaired people. The courts are confronted with people who speak more than 50 languages, the most common being Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Vietnamese, Arabic and sign language.

In the past there has been no mechanism to assure that qualified interpreters are available in all counties; nor have there been uniform statewide training standards for court interpreters.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court, which administers the Pennsylvania court system, directed in 2004 that an Interpreter Certification Program be established to train, test and certify court interpreters, and to require mandatory continuing education for them. The training program is now under way.

The goal is to provide Common Pleas Court judges in every county with a master list of certified language interpreters and sign interpreters who are available to travel where their services are needed. Most interpreters will be independent contractors. A small number will be directly employed by the courts.

In criminal matters, domestic abuse cases, support cases and contempt of court cases, the counties will pay the cost of services when an interpreter is needed. In most civil cases, the parties—plaintiff or defendant—will pay the costs.

To be certified, language interpreters are required to participate in a two-day orientation workshop and to take and pass written and oral examinations. They are required to speak English fluently, to be fluent in one or more foreign languages, to be familiar with court procedures and legal terminology and to be trained in ethics. The

certification program is based on a model established by the National Center for State Courts' Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification.