

Breaking Down the Language Barrier

How do the courts help those whose primary language isn't English?

The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts operates a program to provide qualified foreign and sign language interpreters for people involved in legal proceedings in Pennsylvania's courts.

The courts are confronted with people who speak many languages, the most common being Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Vietnamese, Arabic and sign language. Interpreters are called upon thousands of times a year to assist these individuals during legal proceedings.

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 goal is to ensure that uniform statewide training standards for court interpreters are in place and that qualified interpreters are available in all counties.

The program maintains a master list of certified interpreters that is available to judges, lawyers and the public. Most interpreters are independent contractors. Seven counties currently employ a total of sixteen staff interpreters.

In all criminal matters, domestic abuse cases, support cases and custody cases, the counties pay the cost of interpreter services.

To be certified, 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 Language Access in the Courts. Information about Pennsylvania's Interpreter Certification Program is available at www.pacourts.us/T/AOPC/CourtInterpreterProg/default.htm.

Revised November 2012



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS
OFFICE of COMMUNICATIONS