

Language Access in the California Courts – Implementation Update

More than 200 languages and dialects are spoken in California, with nearly 7 million Californians (19%) reporting that they speak English “less than very well.” Without proper language assistance, limited-English-proficient (LEP) court users may be excluded from meaningful participation in the judicial court process.

Background and a Strategic Plan for Language Access

On January 22, 2015, the Judicial Council adopted the [Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts](#), which provides a consistent statewide approach to ensure language access for all limited English proficient (LEP) court users in all 58 superior courts.

In March 2015, the Chief Justice formed the Language Access Plan Implementation Task Force—chaired by Supreme Court Justice Mariano-Florentino-Cuéllar—which advises the council on implementing the recommendations contained in the *Strategic Plan*. These recommendations address the needs of LEP court users both *in court* (access to interpreters) and *out of court* (multilingual signage, translated resources and in-language assistance), with the goal of full language access to the courts and to the legal system for all Californians.

Highlights of Task Force Achievements

Since 2015, the Task Force has made significant progress toward implementing the 75 recommendations contained in the *Strategic Plan*, including the following:

- ✓ **More Interpreters in Civil Court.** Assembly Bill 1657, which provides a specific order of civil case type priority for interpreter coverage, went into effect in January 2015. In response to this bill, the courts have made great progress expanding interpreter coverage in civil matters. As of December 2016, 47 of 58 courts indicated they are now able to provide court interpreters in all eight civil priority levels established by the bill. In 2016, pursuant to a council funding request, the Legislature and Governor appropriated an additional \$7 million, ongoing, so that courts can continue their efforts to expand access to court interpreters in civil cases.
- ✓ **Video Remote Interpreting (VRI).** In 2017, the Task Force will embark on a VRI Pilot Project in three courts (Merced, Sacramento, and Ventura) to determine, among other objectives, whether appropriate use of VRI will increase court user access to qualified, certified, and registered interpreters. Findings will be reported to the council and public.
- ✓ **Education for Judges and Court Staff.** The Task Force developed a guide for judges on working with court interpreters, and numerous other educational tools and resources for judges and court staff, including a translation protocol and signage recommendations.

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- ✓ ***Language Access Toolkit.*** In December 2015, the Task Force launched a web resource that serves as a one-stop online site for language access resources for courts. Court staff can access various multilingual resources, such as a notice of available services, court closure signs, and information on how to request an interpreter.
- ✓ ***Community Outreach.*** In March 2017, the Task Force held a community outreach meeting in Rancho Cucamonga, hosted by the Superior Court of San Bernardino County. Two previous outreach meetings were held in San Francisco and Los Angeles.
- ✓ ***Language Access Metrics Report.*** A March 2017 Language Access Metrics Report was published to show current language access data and ongoing progress being made by the courts with LAP implementation.
- ✓ ***Model Complaint Form and Procedures.*** The Task Force created a model complaint form and procedures to allow LEP court users to register a complaint regarding the court's provision of (or failure to provide) language access services.
- ✓ ***Wayfinding and Signage Strategies:*** The Task Force recently issued a 2017 report that compiles best practices from around the state in courthouse design and in the use of signage and wayfinding strategies to enhance access for LEP court users.

Next Steps for the Task Force

- ***Interpreter Coverage in Civil Matters.*** The Task Force will continue to seek funding for language access expansion and to support efforts that grow the pool of qualified interpreters available to courts to achieve full coverage in civil matters.
- ***Courthouse Design, Signage and Wayfinding.*** Based on identified best practices for multilingual signage and wayfinding strategies, the Task Force will support courts in their efforts to translate signage and implement wayfinding approaches that will ensure that all LEP court users have full access to courthouse buildings.
- ***Language Access Toolkit.*** The Toolkit currently serves as a resource for judicial employees to enhance language access in the local courts and better serve their LEP court users. The Toolkit has a potential to directly serve LEP court users seeking substantive legal information in multiple languages.
- ***Language Access Representatives (LARs).*** Task Force staff will soon launch regular meetings with the 58 LARs to discuss language access expansion and guidelines.

For more information: <http://www.courts.ca.gov/languageaccess.htm>