



JUDICIAL COUNCIL  
OF CALIFORNIA

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## FACT SHEET

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### Court Interpreters Program

A fundamental goal of the California judicial branch is equal access to justice and to the courts, regardless of an individual's ability to communicate in English. With over 200 languages spoken in California, court interpreters play a critical role in achieving this goal by accurately interpreting for persons who are limited English proficient (LEP) or deaf or hard-of-hearing. The Court Interpreters Program strives to ensure access to the courts for LEP or deaf or hard-of-hearing persons, by developing programs and practices that enhance the quality of interpretation and increase the availability of qualified interpreters in the courts.

#### Overview

Article I, section 14 of the California Constitution was amended in 1974 to provide that “[a] person unable to understand English who is charged with a crime has a right to an interpreter throughout the proceedings.” This provision established a mandate for courts to provide interpreters in criminal matters to all defendants who have limited proficiency in English. The constitutional mandate and subsequent case law have been interpreted to include proceedings related to criminal, misdemeanor, and delinquency matters as well as certain civil matters such as divorce or separation involving a protective order and child custody and visitation proceedings.

Effective January 1, 2015, the enactment of Assembly Bill 1657 (Stats. 2014, ch. 721) through Evidence Code section 756 authorized courts to provide interpreters to all parties in civil matters, regardless of income, and presented a priority and preference order when courts have insufficient resources to provide interpreters for all persons.

Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing are entitled to an interpreter when participating in all court proceedings, both criminal and civil.

As of 2018, estimates indicate that 44.1 percent of the California population five years and older speak a language other than English at home, and 18.1 percent of the California population five years and older (6.6 million out of 37.7 million) speak English less than “very well.”<sup>1</sup>

Court interpreters must accurately interpret for persons with very limited language skills as well as for individuals that possess extensive vocabularies and linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2014–2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

abilities. Interpreters must interpret without altering the language register of the speaker. Court interpreters must possess proficiency in the three modes of interpretation: 1) simultaneous interpreting, 2) consecutive interpreting, and 3) sight translation of documents.

1. **Simultaneous interpretation** is when the interpretation from the source language to the target language happens in real time.
2. **Consecutive interpretation** is when the speaker pauses after one or two sentences and allows the interpreter to interpret from the source language to the target language before the speaker continues on with their speech.
3. **Sight translation** is when the interpreter is called upon to verbally translate legal documents from English to the target language and from the target language to English.

## **History**

California was the first state in the U.S. to adopt laws requiring standards for interpreters' professional conduct and certification requirements (AB 2400, 1978; California Government Code § 68560).

On January 1, 1993, the Judicial Council assumed responsibility for certifying and registering court interpreters and for developing a comprehensive program to ensure an available, competent pool of qualified interpreters. (Government Code § 68562 et seq.). In June 1993, then Chief Justice Malcolm Lucas appointed the Court Interpreters Advisory Panel (CIAP) as a new Judicial Council standing advisory committee, as specified under Government Code § 68565.

The CIAP assists the Judicial Council in performing its duties through promoting access to spoken-language interpreters and interpreters for the deaf and hearing impaired. The CIAP specifically assists the Judicial Council with:

- Designating the languages for which certification programs will be established;
- Adopting standards and requirements for interpreter proficiency, continuing education, certification renewal, and professional conduct;
- Adopting programs for recruitment, training, continuing education, and evaluation to ensure that adequate numbers of interpreters are available and that they interpret competently;
- Setting fees or establish fee guidelines for interpreter examinations, and for certification or renewal of certification; and
- Formulating program and policy recommendations based on the findings of the Language Need and Interpreter Use Study conducted every five years.

## **Court Interpreters Program**

In 1998, the Judicial Council approved the establishment of the Court Interpreters Program (CIP). As part of the Language Access Services Program in the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, CIP oversees interpreter recruitment, training (including the mandatory ethics training), testing, and certification of individuals seeking to become California court interpreters. CIP monitors the compliance requirements for California certified and registered court interpreters, which include continuing education and professional assignments. CIP maintains a statewide registry, *the Judicial Council's Master List of Certified Court and Registered Interpreters* (Master List). The Master List assists the courts and the public to locate California court interpreters in good standing. In addition, CIP oversees the credential review process, which addresses complaints brought against credentialed court interpreters.

### **Certified Court Interpreters**

Interpreters who successfully complete the certification exam process in one of the fifteen certified languages and subsequently complete the application process and enroll with the Judicial Council are referred to as “**certified court interpreters.**”

To obtain certified status in a spoken language, interpreters must successfully pass the written exam as well as the Bilingual Interpreting Exam for their respective certified language. Bilingual Interpreting Exams are currently administered in the following certified languages: Arabic, Eastern Armenian, Cantonese, Farsi, Korean, Khmer, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. (Bilingual Interpreting Exams are not currently available in Western Armenian and Japanese.)

In 2021, CIP will work with the CIAP to develop a new credentialing process for certification as an ASL court interpreter.

Certified or registered interpreters must also fulfill additional Judicial Council requirements for enrollment on the Master List.

### **Registered Court Interpreters**

Court interpreters of spoken languages other than those designated as certified languages are referred to as “**registered court interpreters.**” Registered court interpreters are required to pass the Written Exam, the Oral Proficiency Exam in English, and an Oral Proficiency Exam in their non-English language. The Oral Proficiency Exams in English and non-English languages assess the candidate's functional ability to communicate in that language.

### **Locating a Court Interpreter**

The Master List is a searchable database of currently certified and registered California court interpreters available to the public and to our justice partners. The Master List can be searched by language and county or by the name of an interpreter.

The Master List is accessible via the Court Interpreter Program website at: <https://www.courts.ca.gov/35273.htm>. Currently, there are over 1,800 certified court and registered interpreters on the Master List.

For additional information on California's Court Interpreters Program, or how to become a court interpreter, please visit the Court Interpreters Program website at: [www.courts.ca.gov/courtinterpreters](http://www.courts.ca.gov/courtinterpreters).

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*Additional resources:*

Court Interpreters Program Information: [www.courts.ca.gov/courtinterpreters](http://www.courts.ca.gov/courtinterpreters)  
Exam Information: <https://www.courts.ca.gov/2695.htm>  
Court Interpreters Advisory Panel: [www.courts.ca.gov/ciap.htm](http://www.courts.ca.gov/ciap.htm)  
Language Access: [www.courts.ca.gov/languageaccess.htm](http://www.courts.ca.gov/languageaccess.htm)