



# Supreme Court of Illinois

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## **ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT ANNOUNCES COURT INTERPRETER CERTIFICATION PROGRAM**

The Illinois Supreme Court has announced the creation of a certification program for court interpreters. This new program is designed to enhance access to justice in Illinois courts, particularly for those with limited English proficiency.

"The judicial system exists not only to render justice, but also to protect the rights of all who seek justice. When access to justice is limited, justice is not truly served," Supreme Court Chief Justice Rita B. Garman said.

"Access to justice efforts often focus on providing legal representation by legal aid or pro bono attorneys, and this is a very important aspect of the access to justice initiative. However, when focusing on this challenge, it is easy to overlook more subtle and more easily remedied barriers to access.

"When a litigant or witness cannot understand and fully participate in a legal proceeding due to a language barrier, true access to justice is denied. The certification program that we announce today will ensure that competent, ethical, and reliable interpreter services are available in our courtrooms so that parties and witnesses may fully realize the benefits of our system of justice."

The Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC), under Director Michael J. Tardy, will develop training and testing protocols to ensure that interpreters have the requisite skills, ethical knowledge, and fluent proficiency in English and the foreign language.

"The overarching goal of this certification program is to develop and maintain a sufficient listing of certified interpreters to provide Illinois courts with a competent and reliable interpreter program statewide," Mr. Tardy said. "Access to justice in Illinois courts demands complete competency for those tasked with interpreting in criminal and civil court proceedings."

Currently, the AOIC maintains a list of approximately 450 foreign language and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters; however, those lists do not define an interpreter's qualifications or ability. The certification program will present uniform standards for interpreters in Illinois courtrooms.

**MORE**

## **Court Interpreter Certification Program Add One**

The AOIC will offer a tiered certification, categorizing all court interpreters as either "certified", "registered" or "uncertified". All interpreters must attend a two day orientation, including those who currently serve as full-time court staff interpreters in Illinois. The orientation includes training on ethics and interpreter skills and an overview of both legal terminology and the Illinois judicial system. To become a "registered" interpreter, persons must also pass the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) written exam. To become a "certified" interpreter, in addition to attending orientation and passing the written exam, persons must also pass the NCSC's oral exam and a criminal background check.

Sign language interpreters who submit proof of federal or state certification will be listed on the statewide AOIC registry as well, provided that they are licensed to interpret with the Illinois Deaf and Hard of Hearing Commission (IDHHC). Interpreters certified through IDHHC will not be required to undergo any additional testing through the AOIC.

Only the names of "certified" or "registered" court interpreters will be placed on a statewide registry. That registry will be administered by the AOIC.

The AOIC will waive costs for the orientation, plus the written and oral exams for current full-time court staff interpreters. There are currently 47 court employee interpreters across eight counties in Illinois: Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Kankakee, Lake, McHenry, Morgan, and Will. All other interpreters seeking certification must pay fees to cover the exams and orientation. Those fees will run \$50 for the NCSC written exam; \$200 for the two-day orientation; and \$250 for the NCSC oral exam.

Foreign language interpreters who have passed the federal exam for court interpretation in federal courts or the NCSC exams administered in other states would also be listed on the statewide registry, as long as they meet the AOIC's additional standard by undergoing a criminal background check. Results for all interpreters' criminal background checks will be reviewed by an Advisory Board comprised of two retired judges and AOIC staff. The same Advisory Board will also review alleged instances of interpreter misconduct and Code of Ethics violations.

A template for a Language Access Plan for all Illinois courts was approved by the Supreme Court in June 2013. That template recognizes that language access is a fundamental principle of access to justice. Each judicial circuit will prepare a Language Access Plan that identifies language access needs, available language assistance resources, practices and procedures to provide language assistance, and goals for improving language access.

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