

CIRCUIT COURT OF COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS LANGUAGE ACCESS PLAN

I. LEGAL BASIS AND PURPOSE

This document shall serve as the Language Access Plan (LAP) for the Circuit Court of Cook County to provide services to limited English proficient (LEP) individuals, as required under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 45 C.F.R. §80 *et seq.*, and 28 C.F.R. §42 *et seq.* The purpose of this LAP is to provide a framework for the provision of timely and reasonable language assistance to LEP persons who come in contact with the Circuit Court of Cook County, and ensure that LEP individuals within the jurisdiction of the Circuit Court of Cook County are provided with meaningful and equal access not only to the courts themselves, but also to court services and court-annexed programs. This LAP has been prepared to highlight the language access services needs and services available in 2026.

II. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND LANGUAGE ACCESS DATA COLLECTION

The Circuit Court of Cook County will make every effort to provide services to all LEP persons. The following list includes the ten foreign languages most frequently used in this circuit's geographic area:

1. Spanish
2. Russian
3. Arabic
4. Ukrainian
5. Mandarin
6. Polish
7. Urdu
8. Cantonese
9. Vietnamese
10. French

This information is based on data collected and maintained by the Office of Interpreter Services, Office of the Chief Judge, Circuit Court of Cook County.

The Circuit Court of Cook County complies with the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) language access data collection requirements. The Circuit Court of Cook County collects the following data and submits a report to the AOIC on a quarterly basis:

- The number of court events and non-court events that included a limited English proficient party by case type and the language interpreted; and
- The type of interpreter used in court events and non-court events: certified or registered foreign language interpreter listed on the AOIC interpreter registry; a sign language interpreter listed on the AOIC interpreter registry; an unregistered interpreter; interpreter present via phone conference; or interpreter present via video conference.

The Director of Interpreter Services is ultimately responsible for collecting and maintaining the required information. Individual interpreters record individual case and party data on daily log sheets. Clerical staff records the contents of interpreters' daily log sheets in daily log books, which are used by supervisors to compile monthly statistics. The staff then compiles monthly data into Quarterly Reports and a Fiscal Year Report. The collection and recording of data is currently done manually; efforts are underway to develop a system that will automate record keeping and data reporting.

III. LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE RESOURCES

A. Interpreters in the Courtrooms

1. Determining When an Interpreter is Needed

The Circuit Court of Cook County strives to utilize three primary methods for ascertaining the necessity of an interpreter in a given proceeding.

First, the LEP individual may request an interpreter, through counsel or pro se, to provide language assistance.

Second, a judge or other court employee may determine that an interpreter is appropriate for a certain proceeding. To determine whether a court user needs an interpreter, the judge will ask a series of open-ended questions. Where it appears that an individual is incapable, due to limited English proficiency, of understanding and communicating at the level required in a given proceeding, the judge appoints an interpreter. The appointment may be made by request to the Office of Interpreter Services or by court order, as circumstances require. The court is working with the Access to Justice Committee to obtain language identification devices. "Language Line," a telephonic service that provides interpretation in all languages, is available for a user's first appointment with Pretrial Services, the Elder Law Justice Center, and at most courthouse Information Desks.

Third, in certain types of cases, other stakeholders in the court system notify the court that an interpreter will be needed for an upcoming proceeding. In the Circuit Court of Cook County, personnel of the State's Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the Sheriff's Office, and domestic violence advocates commonly notify the court of the need for interpreter services. Police officers occasionally also notify the court.

2. Court Interpreter Qualifications

In the Foreign Language Court Interpreter Act, the Supreme Court was given the authority to establish and administer a program of testing and certification for foreign language interpreters through its AOIC. 705 ILCS 78. Pursuant to its statutory authority, the AOIC has created a statewide certification program. In order to receive certified status in Illinois, an interpreter has to pass rigorous written and oral examinations that test for skills, vocabulary, ethics and court procedural knowledge. The AOIC maintains a statewide registry of interpreters that is distributed to the circuit courts and contains contact information for interpreters in several languages. After the AOIC receives results from the certification exams, the registry indicates which interpreters have achieved "certified" or "registered" status.

In accordance with the Illinois Supreme Court Language Access Policy, the decision to provide an interpreter for any legal proceeding is left to the discretion of the judge, who must decide whether a party or witness has a limited ability to speak and understand English. Pursuant to Supreme Court Policy, the Circuit Court of Cook County will make reasonable efforts to appoint a "certified" interpreter if available, recognizing that the availability of certified interpreters may be limited in the initial phases of implementing the certification program. If a certified interpreter is not available, the judge will seek a "registered" court interpreter that has met the requirements to be on the statewide interpreter registry. The court appoints a non-registered interpreter only when certified and registered interpreters are unavailable. Whenever a non-registered interpreter is used in the courtroom, judges are encouraged to inquire into the interpreter's qualifications, skills, and potential conflicts of interest.

The Circuit Court of Cook County employs 61 full and part-time foreign language interpreters, 32 of whom are currently certified by, or whose certification in other jurisdictions is recognized by, the Illinois Supreme Court. The court employs 19 full-time and 17 session Spanish language interpreters, two full-time and four session Polish language interpreters, and 19 session interpreters whose languages include Albanian, Arabic, Assyrian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Czech, German, Gujarati, Italian, Hindi, Korean, Lithuanian, Mandarin, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Toison, Ukrainian, and Urdu. When no interpreter employed by the court is available, the Office of Interpreter Services requests an interpreter from an agency with whom Cook County, on behalf of the court, has contracted for this purpose.

3. Providing Interpreters for the Court

a. For Felony, Misdemeanor, Traffic and Juvenile Matters

Pursuant to the Illinois Criminal Proceeding Interpreters' Act, an interpreter must be provided, at no cost to the accused, to all defendants charged with misdemeanors or felonies, who, due to limited English proficiency, are unable to understand the proceedings or express themselves in a manner that is clearly understood by counsel, court, and jury. 725 ILCS 140/1.

The Circuit Court of Cook County complies with the Illinois Criminal Proceeding Interpreters' Act and provides interpreters if needed for misdemeanor and felony proceedings. If an interpreter is needed but one is not available, the judge stays the proceeding until an interpreter is available. Foreign language court interpreters provide interpreter services in felony, misdemeanor, traffic

and ordinance, and juvenile matters.

b. For Civil and Family Matters

The Illinois Supreme Court Policy provides that courts should appoint an interpreter for any legal proceeding, including civil cases and court-annexed proceedings. Recognizing the limited resources for language access, funding priority should be given to providing interpreter services to low and moderate income persons.

Language access has also been incorporated into Supreme Court rules in mediation settings. Illinois law requires that, where a judicial circuit chooses to implement a mortgage foreclosure mediation program, it must provide resources for “meaningful language access for program participants.” Ill. S. Ct. R. 99.1 (d) (iv). Illinois law also requires that, “where a litigant can only communicate in a language other than English, the court will make a good-faith effort to provide a mediator, and a pro bono attorney where applicable, and/or an interpreter who speaks the language of the litigant who needs English assistance.” Ill. S. Ct. R. 905.

For more than 20 years, foreign language court interpreters of the Office of Interpreter Services have provided interpreter services to court users in civil and family matters.

B. Beyond the Courtroom: Services for LEP Individuals

The Circuit Court of Cook County is also responsible for taking reasonable steps to ensure that LEP persons have meaningful access to services outside of the courtroom. LEP individuals might never make it to the courtroom in the first instance without the assistance of court staff and other personnel. This presents challenges for court employees that are not bilingual and must assist LEP persons without an interpreter.

The Circuit Court of Cook County provides in-person foreign language interpreting services for court-related proceedings, including court mediation programs, in all courthouses. The court also provides Language Line telephonic interpreter services at most information desks in all courthouses, pre-trial services at the Leighton Criminal Court Building, the screening and intake areas of the Domestic Violence courthouse, and the Elder Law Justice Center located in the Richard J. Daley Center. The court also employs English-Spanish bilingual employees for customer service in the court’s Jury Administration department. The employees offer their language skills as a courtesy and are not required to perform interpreter services as part of their job duties. As non-attorneys, they are not permitted to offer legal advice.

IV. TRAINING OF COURT STAFF

The Circuit Court of Cook County is committed to the training of court staff and to increasing awareness of LEP issues and responsibilities among court staff and other professionals who regularly come into contact with the courts. One critical component of language access is the identification of an LEP person who needs language assistance, whether the situation is presented during a courtroom proceeding or other court-related activity or function. Education and training concerning the rights of, and procedures regarding, LEP individuals will be

provided on a regular basis for all courthouse personnel, including courtroom clerks, deputies, and all filing and records staff. All personnel should be reasonably capable of identifying an LEP individual in need of language assistance and of directing that individual to the appropriate resources (*e.g.*, interpreter services, help desks, translated forms and brochures).

The AOIC has represented that it, in coordination with the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice and the Illinois Judicial Conference Committee on Education, will be responsible for ensuring that judges and other personnel of the court are provided with quality ongoing training about the provision of services to the LEP population.

This includes providing all judges, court personnel, and court-appointed professionals with training on the following: legal requirements for language access; court policies and rules; language services provider qualifications; ethics; effective techniques for working with language services providers; appropriate use of translated materials; and cultural competency.

At a minimum, with very little cost or specialized training, mandatory education concerning the needs of LEP persons should be provided on an ongoing basis to judges and courtroom personnel so that they are able to perform the following tasks within the courtroom:

- Identify LEP persons
- Ascertain the native language of the LEP person
- Access language assistance tools and interpreter services
- Inform LEP person of language assistance services and reference materials available
- Provide "Need Language Assistance?" signs or forms near or within the courtroom
- Use a language identifier sheet or bench card
- Note in the docket and/or order that language assistance was required and provided

The Circuit Court of Cook County will work in collaboration with the AOIC to ensure that all judges and court personnel receive relevant language access trainings and have the adequate support to provide language access services as needed.

V. PUBLIC NOTIFICATION AND ONGOING PLAN EVALUATION

A. LAP Approval and Publication

The Plan will be reviewed by the Chief Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County. Upon approval by the Chief Judge, the Plan will be submitted to the AOIC. The Language Access Plan of the Circuit Court of Cook County is subject to review and approval by the AOIC Senior Program Manager for Language Access. The Plans will be available to the public via the AOIC and each Chief Circuit Judge. Any revisions to the plan must be submitted to the Language Access Senior Program Manager of

the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts.

B. Ongoing LAP Evaluation

The AOIC will review each county's LAP on an annual basis to ensure that it reflects both the status of services available to LEP individuals as well as the need for such services. During the process of evaluation, the following will be among the considerations: (1) the demand for interpretation services throughout the state by language; (2) the need for documents or other services in languages other than English; (3) the level of awareness and understanding of LEP policies among court personnel; and (4) feedback from the various LEP communities served by the circuit courts. The evaluation will be meant to identify both strengths and weaknesses in the Plan and its implementation as well as to determine strategies for strengthening identified areas. An annually revised version of these LAPs will be made available through the AOIC's Language Access Senior Program Manager.

VI. STATE WIDE GOALS AND BEST PRACTICES

Ultimately, as identified by the Illinois Supreme Court Language Access Policy, it is the goal of the Illinois Supreme Court that every LEP individual in the state will have meaningful access to the justice system. As such, the Circuit Court of Cook County will strive to ensure that:

- Signs pointing LEP persons to language assistance will be posted in at least one key spot in every courthouse in the Circuit.
- Court personnel in every courthouse in the Circuit will know how to identify an LEP individual and will have access to a language identification flashcard (or other relevant resources) in order to help the LEP individual to obtain assistance; and then, will know where to direct that LEP party to get additional assistance.
- Certified, registered, or otherwise qualified interpreters are provided, at no cost to the litigant, in both criminal and civil matters any time an individual is unable to understand and communicate effectively in a court proceeding due to limited English proficiency.
- A statewide list of certified interpreters is available to the administrative staff of every circuit throughout the state.
- All interpreters who are listed as certified have, at a minimum, passed a written examination testing their English proficiency, ethics, and court procedural knowledge and an oral examination testing their interpreting skills.
- A statewide court interpreter certification program is created, including screening and a test of their interpreting skills in a legal setting, which uses the National Center for State Court (NCSC)'s written and oral exams.
- Avenues of communication are in place between law enforcement officials and court personnel so that an individual's status as an LEP individual is identified and noted prior to his or her first appearance in court, thereby reducing the likelihood of delay.
- A system is implemented whereby a person's status as LEP is noted within all civil case files, thereby reducing the likelihood of excessive delays.
- Official court documents are available in the languages most commonly understood by LEP persons.

- LEP persons are able to meaningfully participate in court-annexed programs, and that LEP services are available for all court, clerk and court-annexed programs.
- Each circuit develops and implements a comprehensive LAP that outlines the rights of LEP individuals as well as the ways in which LEP individuals within that circuit can obtain meaningful access to the courts and their ancillary services.
- LAPs for the Illinois courts are reviewed regularly to ensure that they accurately reflect and address the needs of the LEP populations they serve.

VII. CIRCUIT COURT GOALS AND ACTION STEPS

The Circuit Court of Cook County will strive to accomplish the following actions steps in the coming year to address language access:

1. Post additional multilingual signs in high traffic areas of the court;
2. Continue to work with the Language Access Committee to provide input into the development of the Language Action Plan;
3. Improve standardization of data collection regarding the frequency of interpreting services by language; and
4. Ensure that the Circuit Court of Cook County is in compliance with all standards promulgated by the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts.

VIII. CONTACT INFORMATION

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IX. EFFECTIVE DATE

This LAP shall be effective as of May 2026.