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Help wanted: court interpreters in Yakima County

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Dora Ornelas, a Yakima County court interpreter, interprets for a Spanish-speaking defendant in Yakima County District Court Oct. 27, 2009. There is a shortage of certified interpreters for the Yakima County court system and Ornelas is kept busy each day moving from courtroom to courtroom to provide interpretive services.

YAKIMA, Wash. -- Dora Ornelas has just spent an hour interpreting for mental health patients at Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital, and she's already late for her next assignment.

Court starts at 9 a.m. in Yakima County's jail basement, but Spanish-speaking defendants will have to wait until she arrives.

Because Ornelas is one of only two full-time staff interpreters employed by Yakima County, she's often rushing from one assignment to the next, and the pager could beep at any time if she's needed elsewhere.

It's part of the daily triage judges and other court officials have grown accustomed to with Spanish-speaking interpreters.

Depending on how busy their day happens to be, Ornelas and fellow staff interpreter Jesus Lemos could be dashing between two different floors of the downtown courthouse, rushing to the main county jail across the street, the juvenile court off 16th Avenue, as well as the Lower Valley court branch in Grandview and Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital, where hearings are held for involuntary mental health detentions.

Ornelas, 39, was looking for a few months of summer work when a county employee suggested she consider interpreting.

"I just fell in love with it," she says nearly 20 years later.

Gloria Hintze, the county court manager who oversees the interpreter program, would like one more full-time interpreter on staff.

Based on the number of Spanish-speaking defendants seen in the courthouse, consultant Harold Delia says the courts could probably use three more full-time interpreters, but nobody wants the job.

The shortage of interpreters is a problem across the state, caused by a mix of high need, few qualified candidates and rigorous testing requirements for those who seek certification.

"I think we will never have enough interpreters, quite frankly," Hintze said in a recent interview.

When she advertised recently for a third full-time position, she couldn't find anybody interested in the job, which would have paid between \$16.67 and \$22.41 an hour, as much as \$46,600 a year.

Most interpreters prefer to work independently, she says. They have more freedom to set their own schedules and typically make more than their salaried counterparts in hourly wages and travel fees. The state rate for an hourly interpreter is \$50; some jobs pay more.

Eva Combs of Yakima, a retired interpreter for the county, said she has spoken with colleagues who weren't interested in working as a staff interpreter.

"They didn't think it paid enough, she said.

The lack of staff interpreters costs the county, an unavoidable expense in order to meet legal requirements for interpretation in criminal cases.

In 2008, the county spent about \$81,000 on salaries for Ornelas and Lemos. Another \$105,000 went to two contractors, and nearly \$59,000 was spent on on-call freelancers.

Between June 2008 and June 2009, Yakima County received \$102,000 from the state to help cover interpreter costs.

While the county has a large Spanish-speaking community, certified interpreters aren't readily available.

For rural areas, part of the problem is the rigorous testing required to gain certification. Having a standard knowledge of English and Spanish is not sufficient.

Interpreters must be able to interpret at the same time the defendant, judge, attorney or witness is speaking. That means being able to block out the sound of a second interpreter working for a witness or other party to the case. In a few cases, interpreters may have to work through a second interpreter; for example, a defendant may speak an indigenous Mexican dialect that is translated into Spanish by one interpreter and then relayed by another interpreter in English.

Interpreters must also learn the legal vocabulary of the courts and use proper language, not slang or common speech.

For example, even though "corte" is commonly used by Spanish speakers in the United States for "court," the proper term is "tribunal."

To become certified, an interpreter must pass extensive written and oral tests. The process takes more than a year because the state staggers the written and oral test several months apart.

The county has been using certified interpreters for more than a decade. Under state and federal law, an interpreter must be provided for all hearings, trials and motions. The government must pay for an interpreter when the person is required to attend the proceeding or if the person is indigent.

Others -- someone seeking a domestic violence protection order, for example -- could be required to pay for their own interpreter. In practice, however, offering an interpreter moves the case through the system more quickly, Hintze said.

Spanish is the most common language in the county requiring interpreters for legal proceedings - averaging about 97 percent of translation requests -- but other languages in recent years have included Russian, Bulgarian and Arabic.

Between July 2008 and June 2009, Spanish interpreters reported 2,255 hours of work. The next highest usage was American Sign Language, with 38 hours.

Because of the shortage of interpreters locally, freelancers are sometimes requested from as far away as Seattle or Oregon, sometimes for Spanish and especially for less-common languages.

This area is certainly not the only one in the state with a high number of Spanish speakers using the courts. And it's better off than some other communities in meeting the need.

The Olympic Peninsula, which has a significant population of Latino residents and migrant workers, lacks any certified interpreters, said Katrin Johnson, coordinator for the interpreter program in the state Administrative Office of the Courts.

Only 159 interpreters statewide are certified in Spanish. And of those, only six -- not counting Lemos or Ornelas -- are based in Yakima County.

Statewide, more than 90 will accept work in King County; less than 60 will travel to Yakima, according to a state database.

Besides courtroom duty, many work directly for attorneys or in different fields, such as medical interpreting.

Ornelas said that her experience interpreting in the courtroom helped her pass the certification tests. After starting part time in 1991, she went full time in 1993, later moved away for a few years and returned in 1998.

Like many children of monolingual parents, she was used to interpreting for her mother at the store or during a doctor's appointment. The family spent part of the year in Skagit County and part of the year in Mexico. She had worked as a grocery store clerk but had never held a formal interpreting job.

"I had never stepped into a courtroom before. This was a completely new world for me."

She says she enjoys the feeling of being able to help defendants understand the process they are going through. Interpreters must translate only what is happening in court; they can't advise the defendant.

Ornelas, who has done freelance work in the past, said she stays with the county for the health insurance and other benefits -- estimated at \$15,000 a year, in addition to her salary.

After the third full-time position went unfilled, court officials requested another half-time position, but that was axed due to the county's budget crunch, Delia said.

The county's criminal justice tax and the state's supplemental funding have helped.

"But when you only have a dollar in the checkbook, that doesn't go very far," Hintze said. "We have to work really hard to be fiscally conservative."

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