

Wednesday, September 26, 2007

Courts: Don't skimp on interpreter budgets.

Quality court interpretation requires more than referring to a phrasebook. (Image from the public domain.)
The criminal justice system is so overgrown that it eats up a huge part of federal, state and local budgets. If the government is going to sponsor such an overgrown criminal justice system, it must enable criminal defendants to put teeth into their defense, including assuring the availability of justly-compensated indigent defense counsel, and justly-compensated foreign-language and deaf interpreters. Regarding interpreters, I understand that one of Virginia's nearby county District Courts is switching soon (if not already) from using contract Spanish interpreters, to using salaried interpreters paid too little to have attracted enough of the best longtime contract interpreters to apply. As a multilingual law firm, we know that important criteria for a quality interpreter include the quality of the person's litigation interpreting experience; the interpreter's human sensitivity that is necessary to convey the speaker's meaning, rather than mechanically to transpose words; and the interpreter's likeability to the listener. In other words, it is not enough that the interpreter merely speak two languages as if each were the interpreter's native language. The interpreter must have mastered the art of communicating the speaker's message as flawlessly as possible. The last time I heard of an ill-advised effort by a court to save interpreters' expenses was a few years ago when another nearby Virginia county District Court tried using interpreters by phone. Fortunately, I understand that effort was short-lived. How can an unseen interpreter convey sufficiently the meaning of a speaker on the other end of the phone line, and vice versa? It cannot be done. Of course, some people reply that people have an obligation to learn English if they are going to live in the United States. However, learning a second language is painstaking, as just about anybody will admit who has been on that path, during which a quality court interpreter is essential. Moreover, not everybody arrested in the United States intends on staying here in the first place (e.g., tourists, students from abroad, and short-term expatriates). At least where a client can afford a privately-hired interpreter, sometimes I will recommend that approach if the alternative is not knowing the quality of the interpreter who will be assigned by the court. However, not all criminal defendants have the money for such a private interpretation assistance. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Criminal Defense at 00:01

Thank you for your thoughts regarding the need to compensate foreign-language interpreters justly.

I recently started a legal blog

Translation for Lawyers to educate the legal community about the role of legal translators and court interpreters in the practice of law.

Posts like yours help raise awareness about the role of professional court interpreters.

Once court administrators start hearing and reading similar messages with greater frequency, they may arrive at the conclusion that the long-term benefits of having access to top-notch professional court interpreters far outweigh the short-term gains, brought on by their haisty cost-cutting measures.

Best regards,

Nina

<http://www.translationforlawyers.com>

<http://www.languagealliance.com>

Anonymous on Sep 26 2007, 17:56