

[Note: The Office of Court Interpreting Services is now the Office of Language Access (OLA).

See <http://www.nycourts.gov/courtinterpreter/> for more information.]

HOST: Welcome to “Amici,” news and insight from the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System. On today’s Amici, we bring you Sandra Bryan, the recently retired coordinator of interpreting services in the Division of Court Operations.

HOST: The Unified Court System is statutorily obligated to provide interpreting services for individuals who are involved in court matters in each of the 62 counties of the state. Sandy, to start, tell us a little about your background -- how you ended up in this profession.

MS. BRYAN: I began by actually speaking Spanish and English at home with my family and friends as a child and I learned to read and write Spanish before I even started school. I never thought I would earn a living with this, but I found I loved languages and took Spanish and French throughout my high school and college years. Then, one day my dad, who as a court officer, brought home an application for a court interpreter. I didn’t even know at the time what an interpreter was, but I took the exam, passed it, and the rest is history.

HOST: Wow. That’s amazing. Can you briefly explain how the office fulfills its mission? How many interpreters are on staff, and how many languages are represented?

MS. BRYAN: Well, the Unified Court System, through the Office of Court Interpreting Services, provides interpreters for 106 languages, ranging from Arabic to Zulu. Included are languages such as Spanish and Mandarin, which are spoken by a large portion of the Limited English

Proficiency or LED population, as we say these days, who come in contact with the courts. We also see a need for less frequently used languages, such as Papiamentu, Oromo and Telugu.

HOST: How many interpreters are on staff?

MS. BRYAN: Currently, we have about 270 staff interpreters on staff. In addition to that, we also rely on approximately 500 per diem interpreters or freelancers. These trained interpreters provided close to 300,000 hours of interpretation services in 2013. Keep in mind that New York has a foreign-born population of more than three million people.

HOST: Wow! That is quite an operation. What languages are the most common?

MS. BRYAN : The most common, and I'm sure this comes as no surprise, is Spanish, followed by Mandarin, Russian, Haitian Creole, Arabic and Cantonese. But we also have a high demand for interpreters fluent in Polish, Korean, French, Bengali, and American Sign Language and Hebrew. Recently, we have seen more requests for languages in Central and South America and Africa. We really never know what will be needed at any given time because we have unscheduled appearances and walk-ins at many of our courts. For instance, someone who speaks only the Berber language may get arrested in a remote county, and we'll need to provide interpretative services so the person can be arraigned.

HOST: How do you do that? Let's say someone, using your example, speaking only Berber is in need of an interpreter in Franklin County, a seven-hour journey through the Adirondacks from your central office in lower Manhattan. How do you meet that need?

MS. BRYAN: The Unified Court System has videoconferencing equipment in all of our 62 counties. We also have equipment in our office in downtown Manhattan where interpreters can remotely interpret for parties that are many hours away.

HOST: Tell us about the requirements to become an interpreter and the training that they receive.

MS. BRYAN: The basic requirements to take the exam covers just three things: the person has to be at least 18 years of age; a completed high school education or the equivalency; and have a legal right to work in the United States. U.S. citizenship is not a requirement. Following successful completion of the exam, all applicants must be fingerprinted and undergo a criminal background check. Then they are able to get on board and provide services to the courts. Once that is completed, the Office of Court Interpreting Services offers a very important program on ethics, professionalism and protocols. What we cover there are the other situations interpreters face that are not necessarily linguistic so they can be better prepared for their assignments.

HOST: So, I guess the testing is pretty rigorous.

MS. BRYAN: Well, yes. Of all the candidates who apply, 30 to 40 percent are successful on the written exam and then of those one in four is successful on the oral performance. The assessment is meant to test the language the interpreters would face in the various court cases.

HOST: Just remind me again. How many interpreters are on staff?

MS. BRYAN: About 270.

HOST: That's like an army!

MS. BRYAN: And it's not enough. We are recruiting all the time and we hope to bring more on board soon.

HOST: Is the testing rigorous?

MS. BRYAN: The court interpreter exam is comprised of two parts. There is a written test of English language proficiency legal terminology, which candidates have to pass first, and those who are successful must come in for an oral performance assessment where they interpret out loud in simulated court situations.

HOST: Tell me, where do you find interpreters and how do you recruit them, or do they find you?

MS. BRYAN: I guess it is a combination. We have announcements posted on the court system's website. Our office also routinely participates in career fairs at colleges and universities throughout the state. We send information to employers whenever we are asked to participate at career fairs at libraries and other venues, so we are constantly receiving applications for interpreters.

HOST: How has the Office of Court Interpreting Services changed and adapted over the years?

MS. BRYAN: Well, we are definitely busier. The Office of Court Interpreting Services was originally created in 1994. I am not the first coordinator; there was someone before me. I joined the office in 2001. Thereafter our office grew to about eight people, mostly in New York City. Overtime, the office has been reduced and revamped and we are now an office of four,

actually. But we have support from the Office of Court Administration Division of Court Operations and we routinely meet with the district executives throughout the state and we manage interpretative services through their participation as well as the supervising and senior court interpreters we have throughout the state.

HOST: What do you see as the key challenges the court system will face in providing interpretive services one year down the line, five years down the line?

MS. BRYAN: I think one of the key challenges, and it is not unique to the New York State courts, is qualifying, finding instruments that qualify our bilingual candidates. By that I mean, throughout the United States we have a need that is growing. On the eastern coast we have a need for Bengali and many of the languages of India. In other parts of the country we need people to speak the languages of perhaps Morocco or Myanmar. All of us collectively are in the middle of creating exams for the type of fluency needed in the courts. We don't doubt that there are many bilingual people who are interested, but we need people who are able to interpret for forensic experts, for judges, and the legal-speak that attorneys use. It runs the gamut from slang to interpreting for individuals who do not have much education in their lives, all the way to the most erudite. So, creating exams that qualify people is the challenge, particularly for languages that in some cases are not written languages and where we haven't had experience using these languages before. That I think is the challenge, getting individuals with the credentials that give us the confidence to send them into a courtroom and a high profile trial. I think that is the challenge.

HOST: Well, Sandy, it has been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you very much for your insight today and your service to the court system and the State of New York. And thanks to our audience for listening to this edition of “Amici.” If you have a suggestion for a topic on Amici, call John Caher at 518-453-8669 or send him a note at jcaher@nycourts.gov. Thank you.