



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND LASC AGREE TO TERMS REGARDING LANGUAGE ACCESS

After state-imposed budget reductions forced the elimination of one quarter of the Court's staff, the Los Angeles Superior Court (LASC) radically restructured its operations which, in many instances, resulted in reduced services to the public. Since the end of the state budget cuts in 2013, LASC has been aggressively working to create the efficiencies necessary to restore those services.

One of the major goals of that restoration has been to enhance language access. The Court's progress in this area was recently recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) as they concluded their investigation of the Court's provision of language services. The investigation was part of a multi-year, nationwide effort by DOJ's Civil Rights Division to examine the provision of language services by courts, schools and other public institutions across the country. DOJ's investigation into the Los Angeles Superior Court concluded with an agreement between DOJ and LASC that catalogues progress already made and lists improvements to be accomplished in the near future.

Of the agreement, Presiding Judge Carolyn B. Kuhl said, "The Los Angeles Superior Court has a long history of innovation in ensuring access to justice. We welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate how seriously we take this most important aspect of our mission: to provide access to justice to those with limited English proficiency. I believe that the approaches outlined in the agreement represent a state-of-the-art model for language services in state trial courts."

In concluding their investigation, DOJ praised LASC for its efforts to provide a broad range of language services to a broad range of court users:

We are greatly appreciative of LASC's cooperation during the investigation. LASC staff has been responsive, courteous, and open to dialogue with DOJ to solve challenges and identify solutions throughout the course of this investigation.

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This letter and attached agreement describe the steps LASC has taken, and has agreed to take, to reach the goal of providing LEP individuals with meaningful access to LASC services. LASC's efforts will provide LEP court users with free qualified interpreters in all court proceedings and appropriate language assistance services in its court operations. (Letter from the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, to the Los Angeles Superior Court of September 12, 2016, p. 1.)

DOJ recognizes the challenges that LASC faces in providing language services in a county as diverse as Los Angeles:

LASC serves a population of 10 million people in 88 cities located over 4,700 square miles. In recent years, it has provided free language assistance services in over 86 different languages. LASC's size and diversity present challenges that are unique among state and local courts but, as discussed above, it has made significant changes to ensure LEP individuals have meaningful access to its services as required by Title VI and its implementing regulations. (Letter from U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, to the Los Angeles Superior Court of September 12, 2016, p. 5.)

Aided by 2014 legislation that enabled California courts to expand language services outside of those case types where such services are mandated by the California Constitution (AB 1657), LASC has made significant improvements to language access in the Los Angeles courts.

As recognized in the DOJ's letter, LASC has to-date:

- Participated in statewide meetings with community and judicial branch stakeholders to define needs and identify solutions;
- Expanded available free, court-certified interpreters to all case types except general civil – in which interpreters are currently provided, as available, and will soon be covered as part of the court's plan.
- Improved the visibility of language services through courthouse signage and notices on court documents;
- Translated documents, court signage and a wide range of online services (for instance, LASC's award-winning online verbal assistance by use of an avatar for traffic tickets is provided in the five most-requested languages);
- Greatly simplified the process for requesting an interpreter, providing case-type-specific online portals for various cases, with plans to expand this system into additional case types over the next several months;
- Improved the efficiency with which it deploys court interpreters, thereby expanding the provision of interpreters with existing resources;
- Expanded the availability of audio remote interpretation and bilingual staff outside the courtroom, at clerk's windows at every courthouse and in its self-help programs (77 stations in 38 courthouses across the County);
- Improved its ability to continually monitor the needs of court users through, for instance, improved partnerships with community stakeholders; and
- Expanded training for judges and staff in serving litigants and others with limited English proficiency.

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These efforts will continue as LASC is poised to further expand services in a number of areas:

1. The Court will continue to enhance language services online, by monitoring the use of non-English language services, and by helping online users more quickly access services and assistance in languages other than English.
2. Complement those online notices with enhanced signage and document translation.
3. New case management systems will provide a technological foundation for continued efficiencies in how language services are requested, coordinated and provided.
4. Automated phone answering systems at each courthouse will help callers in the five most-frequently requested languages.

In addition, LASC will continue to use its statewide and local community partnerships to explore new innovations.

"Our commitment to language access is a core part of our efforts to build a more efficient, responsive and professional court system," said Sherri R. Carter, Executive Officer/Clerk of the Los Angeles Superior Court. "I am proud of what we have accomplished so far, and excited about expanding our ability to serve the public in the future."

For more information about LASC's language services, visit the Court's website at lacourt.org.

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