The importance of staff interpreters in the courts

The presence of permanently employed interpreters is needed at all levels of the US legal system. Continuity and on-site guidance leads to quality service.

Gladys MATTHEW.  
Published: September 11, 2015 Last updated: December 2, 2015

A recent survey by the Interpreting Division of the American Translators Association included two questions on concerns about the interpreting profession. One question was whether non-qualified interpreters are taking jobs from qualified interpreters and the other was whether remote interpreting technologies are causing face-to-face interpreting to vanish. But I would add yet another: How important is continuity of a court's interpreting services?

Interpreting service users in government and community organizations are more and more aware of the importance of counting on the services of a qualified interpreter. Untrained or unqualified interpreters are likewise feeling the pressure to gain a valid credential. As for remote interpreting technologies, it is important to realize that they have a place in the provision of interpreting services. For example, I recently provided interpreting services for federal defenders who needed to communicate with their clients incarcerated hundreds of miles away. While there is no substitute to face-to-face communication, video remote interpreting technology allowed these defenders to reach their clients and provide them with extremely important information on their case and defense strategy. As an interpreter, the experience was terrific because the technology cooperated: the connection was flawless and the sound was clear.

I, for one, am not concerned so much about unqualified interpreters taking jobs from professional interpreters as court systems completely handing over the provision of interpreting services to an external provider without any quality control mechanisms. This happened recently in an important county of my home state. So far, reports from the interpreters providing services for this court system are positive both in terms of revenue and steadiness of work.

The issues here are two-fold. First, under this new scheme it is the previous contract interpreters who are currently providing interpreting services. Since they know these courts very well, they are already familiar with where the various courtrooms are located, the local procedures, and most of the legal professionals. New interpreters will most likely be inducted and mentored by the current interpreters. However, there is room to ask about who will provide guidance and supervision on-site? Who is there to provide support to those interpreters during crunch time? Also, how can these interpreters seek support from the courts when the latter have outsourced interpreting services?

In court systems with staff interpreters, there is an office where all interpreters can leave their
personal belonging, hold impromptu meetings, and connect during breaks and lunch. When the courts here outsourced interpreting services, this went away. This may sound like a small thing, but it’s not – without space, interpreters lose much of the chance to network, support each other, and talk over issues and problems.

This video, produced by the United States Courts, testifies to the importance of having staff interpreters. As pointed out by one of the interpreters in the video, staff interpreters provide not only interpreting services during legal proceedings; they also translate documents and assist the public on the phone. Language access should be about providing those who do not speak the language of the court with services that would give a true meaning to the expression justice for all – the central tenet of the US Pledge of Allegiance.

Gladys Matthews is a certified court interpreter and teaches court interpreting for Glendon College of York University (Toronto). An earlier version of this article appeared in her blog Translation and Interpretation in America.

Recommended citation format: