

## **A QUEST FOR THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE CHICAGO AREA COURT INTERPRETERS**

This article is written with two intentions, one to document my experiences in working for a cause that is tremendously important to me, as an immigrant, and two, hopefully this experience may help others in some way.

The program that has been put in place at the Cook County Courts has been designed to meet the needs of the Cook County Court System. The Cook County Court System consists of 10 major community courthouses and 20 branch courts. Spanish interpreters make over 7,000 appearances a month, Polish interpreters make about 700 appearances a month and other languages make about 200 appearances. A need arose to implement professional standards for the interpreters working in the courtrooms.

At the time I began working as a court interpreter in 1986, training for court interpreters was not the concern of court administrators. And rightly so, It did not concern many court interpreters either. Court interpreters were hired to fill a need, with little regard to qualifications and we, as court interpreters, didn't particularly want things to change. In this case, court administrators were not well informed about what other states were doing about the training and certification of their court interpreters. It was the beginning of the court interpreters' certification movement. The court interpreters here in Illinois were holding their own; it was comfortable and we did not want to know how we measured up against certified court interpreters, stifling any possibility of professionalizing the status of the court interpreter. Don't get me wrong, the court interpreters had every right to fear a certification. Illinois does not offer any training for court interpretation, so their fears are justified and no certification is required to work in the Illinois State Courts. There is also the issue of economics, since translation/interpretation is not recognized as a profession, the salaries do not incite nor compensate the investment one needs to make to be certified. In an effort to establish minimum standards for the interpreters working in the Cook County Court System, a program I was experimenting with, had become the status quo.

The program at first began in 1990 by offering, on a volunteer basis, an orientation to all incoming court interpreters. The material for this program was compiled by attending professional conferences and summer courses in the states and abroad. The orientation then became the focus of my Bachelors Degree at Northeastern Illinois University at Chicago. By forming an ad hoc committee that included an English and Spanish professor, a judge, a court interpreter, a linguistics and criminal justice professor, I was able to give some validity to the court interpreters' orientation. The orientation was successful among some interpreters that practice labs were instituted. However, there was a time conflict between court schedules and interpreters time schedules, which made the practice labs impossible to continue. At that time, another colleague was very much interested in the education of translators and interpreters and we created Tip-Lab (Translators and Interpreters Practice Labs). The practice labs continued at a private university and were open and advertised to the public; a fee to cover the cost was charged. The orientation at the Cook County Courts continued to improve. I went back to school to work on a Masters in Adult Education based on the Cook County Court Interpreters training program experience. By this time I had had the opportunity to be exposed to people who had experience in developing tests and evaluating procedures. At National Louis University in

Evanston, Illinois, I concentrated my efforts on learning about the psychology of adult learning, teaching techniques and assessment procedures. I was very fortunate because I was immediately able to practice the classroom theory, not only on my job, but at the time I was also teaching at a local university. I give this background information because the program that began in 1990 at the Cook County Courts has matured and the following is what is in practice as of June, 1999. By no means has this been a one-person project. The cooperation of many colleagues, friends on the bench, as well as administrators and professors, are invested in this project.

The Cook County Court Interpreters Program begins with an assessment process. This assessment process serves as a screening. Since we have limited resources and our orientation does not allow for practice time, we need to select applicants that have certain abilities already. The written assessment for Spanish interpreters consists of five sections: analytical thinking, vocabulary, language fluency, idiomatic/cultural language and professional judgment. The non-language specific encompasses listening skills, reading comprehension and a back translation section. While this last section is controversial in academic circles, it does give the applicant the opportunity to experience some of the anxiety court interpreters work under and it also gives us the opportunity to see how the applicant handles him/herself under such circumstances. This has served us well in the selection of our court interpreters.

The next step is a 36-hour orientation, based on what I call participatory lecture. In addition to having the traditional topics such as code of ethics, role of the court interpreter, modalities, the legal system, policy and practices in the system, we also include a series of impromptu speeches designed to bring about awareness of any personal biases and/or characteristics one might have never confronted before. The court interpreter is exposed to many delicate circumstances in which extraordinary judgment is a key factor and at times personal issues get in the way of our professionalism. The awareness that is gained from these impromptu speeches, besides quick thinking and public speaking, help alleviate these issues. One day is also dedicated to shadowing, listening skills and memory exercises using audiotapes. A mock trial in which every trainee plays the role of the court interpreter is another element of the orientation. A manual and visual aids also supplement the orientation.

After the 36-hour program, we also have a mentoring program. The mentors have been selected because of their competency, professionalism and willingness to guide and share their knowledge and experiences. The two-week mentoring program was set up to supplement the orientation. This gives an opportunity to the trainees to have hands-on experience in the courtroom while under the guidance of a senior court interpreter (mentor). The mentoring program includes two cycles. The first week is the observation phase, where the trainees observe the senior interpreter (mentor) carry out a day's work. The second week is the supervised performance phase. During this phase the trainee actually does the work and the mentor observes. There is constant dialogue between mentor and trainee in addition to a check review session at the end of each day. The trainees rotate to experience the five major court calls, which are: Criminal, Juvenile, Domestic Violence, Traffic and Civil. The mentors make recommendations as to whether a trainee might benefit from further mentoring or can proceed to assignments.

In 1993, there was a change in administration at the Cook County Court Interpreters Office, which pushed forward projects that, to this point, had remained only in discussions. The orientation became mandatory to all in-coming court interpreters, the assessment process was implemented, the mentoring program was put in place and ultimately the certification, that had

only been a dream, began to take shape and all indicators seem to be pointing to its implementation. On April 8, 1998 in *La Raza* p32, a local Spanish newspaper in Chicago, Donald P. O'Connell, Chief Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County announced the membership of the Cook County Court to The National Center for State Courts (consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification). The efforts of all who worked towards the certification and professionalization of the Cook County Court Interpreters have accomplished a great deal, but there still is a lot of work to be done.

The certification experience has proven to be more complex than expected. Having had interpreters pass the Consortium Certification exam, -sponsored by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), in November of 1999 and lead to believe that they would be considered certified court interpreters-, to this date there is no such recognition. I ask myself how can this process be improved? Should the NCSC not offer the testing until the bureaucratic certification mechanism is in place, or shall we put the cart before the horse and hope for the best. While administrators and directors work on the logistics of how to handle the certification process, certified eligible interpreters remain in limbo, thus stagnating the professionalization of the field.

The State of Illinois signed into law Senate Bill # 445 in August 14, 1998. It is The Foreign Language Court Interpreters Act in which it states on section 5, item one:

THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF ILLINOIS COURTS MAY WORK COOPERATIVELY WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND PRIVATE OR PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND WITH CURRICULUM AND SUITABLE TRAINING PROGRAMS TO ENSURE THE AVAILABILITY OF CERTIFIED INTERPRETERS. TRAINING PROGRAMS MAY BE MADE READILY AVAILABLE THROUGHOUT THE STATE.

Certification seems to have become a relative term. Some states have established criteria that guarantee minimum standards and have court interpreters that have satisfactorily complied with such criteria, these court interpreters are identify as: approved court interpreters, qualified court interpreters, official court interpreters etc. This fact only strengthens the belief that training is what counts. What is going to give court interpreters the professional status they are seeking?

Several universities have shown interest in the project. Introductory courses have been offered and have done well. Other approaches have been to offer community interpretation as a minor to those majoring in a foreign language or to house a masters and certificate program in a cohort program system. However, without the support of those entities that benefit from professionally trained interpreters, any program in a university does not stand a chance.

By combining our resources and efforts, we would all benefit. The interpreters, the profession, and the public we pretend to serve.