

*The Language Access Coalition
- Friday April 4, 2014 -*

*A Statement by
Chief Justice Roberto Ronquillo, Jr.
Chair, Language Access Advisory Committee*

The Massachusetts Trial Court is committed to ensuring equal access to the court system for all members of the public, particularly litigants of limited or no English proficiency. Access to courts and administrative proceedings is critically important. Whether cases involve child custody, domestic violence, eviction, foreclosures, wage claims, or criminal prosecution, the stakes are too high for individuals to be effectively excluded from courtroom participation because of their English proficiency.

To that end, the Massachusetts Trial Court's Language Access Plan is currently being finalized to reflect the needs of limited English proficient (LEP) litigants, the current demands for language services, the resources that are presently available, and a vision for language access in the future. In order to accomplish this mission, I have been named Chair of the Language Access Advisory Committee (LAAC), which includes a group of external and internal stakeholders working together to finalize the plan and make recommendations on its implementation. A series of ambitious action items for language access will be implemented in stages and will set forth transparent success measures to guide and assess our progress.

Language access is an Access to Justice issue, and language access issues arise in many of the strategies and objectives of the both the Supreme Judicial Court's Access to Justice Initiative and the Trial Court's Strategic Plan. Since 2009, the Access to Justice Initiative has worked on a number of important projects, including the need for a true Language Access Plan and increasing access for LEP individuals by translating court forms and informational materials.

Most recently, the Trial Court's Strategic Plan is promoting significant improvements in access to justice issues, specifically language access. Under the direction of Trial Court leadership, planning for many language access initiatives are under way, and my committee is offering input and making recommendations. Our plan will be the product of extensive discussion among internal and external stakeholders. The plan will serve as a guide as we work to address the current and evolving needs of the people of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

I am proud to report that there are several effective and meaningful language access initiatives already in motion throughout the Trial Court. Here are a few examples:

- a new staff translator has been hired
- a new standing committee has been established
- three State Justice Institute grants have been obtained (thirteen small claims forms have been translated into seven languages)
- a small claims self-help video has been prepared in seven languages
- language access within a model courthouse is being studied
- more forms are now available, in multiple languages, for trial court practice; and
- an increase in the number of Information Centers/Desks and the emergence of Court Service Centers and their expanding role in interacting with the public in many languages

Going forward, I will work to ensure that the LAAC remains steadfast to its immediate and primary goals of --

- providing language accessibility in forms of court interaction in more than just the courtroom
- integrating linguistic access into the core of the delivery of justice
- finding ways to ensure that parties are not charged for the cost of interpreters
- identifying gaps in service, primarily in Probation, the Acounter encounter@, court-ordered programs, translated forms and information; and -
- finalizing and disseminating the Language Access Plan and overseeing its statewide implementation

As a committee, the LAAC will continue its focus on the Trial Court=s attention to these goals and strategies, and will work diligently to identify additional objectives to accomplish during FY 2014 and 2015.

Language access is very important to the Trial Court and to me, personally and professionally. We are deeply committed to providing language access to all LEP litigants in Massachusetts. I look forward to bringing together key stakeholders throughout the justice system to discuss efforts to improve language access in the courts and to address the work that remains.

I know that we cannot make language access a reality without the work of other committed stakeholders, including the courts, bar advocates, access to justice communities and, most importantly, the Language Access Coalition. I wish you a successful and productive conference today and look forward to collaborating with the members of the Coalition as we move forward, together, into the next phase of language access.