

# Courts need more interpreters

## Immigrant cases spike U.S. demand

By Maité Jullian  
USA TODAY

An existing shortage of certified court interpreters is worsening, court officials say, as law enforcement agencies step up actions against illegal immigrants.

Arrests leading to federal prosecutions and deportations reached record levels in fiscal year 2008, according to an October report by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Wanda Romberger, manager of court interpreting services at the National Center for State Courts, says that almost every state is being confronted with a lack of certified interpreters — who have to pass difficult exams — especially in languages other than Spanish.

"I don't know of many jurisdictions that would say they have enough qualified court interpreters," she says. There are about 3,000 certified interpreters, says Isabel Framar, chairwoman of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators. Only 500, she says, work in languages other than Spanish.

The association did not estimate how many more interpreters are needed, but according to a 2007 report by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, there was a 17% increase in the number of events requiring interpreters in 115 languages in federal courts from October 2006 to September 2007.

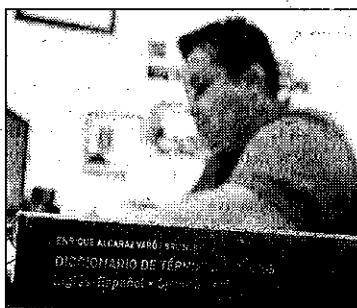
Framar says that several cases have been reversed because of poor interpretation. Parastoo Zahedi, a Virginia-based immigration lawyer says she "repeatedly had to reschedule cases because there was no interpreter."

Administrative Office spokesman Richard Carelli says federal courts provide adequate interpreters for most Spanish speakers, who, he says, represent 95% of immigration-related cases.



Photos by Natl Harnik, AP

**Workload has doubled:** Interpreter Adriana Hinojosa, right, interprets at a hearing in Douglas County Court before Judge Susan Bazis in Omaha on Sept. 5. Hinojosa is one of 21 certified court interpreters of Spanish in Nebraska.



**Well-worn:** Adriana Hinojosa's Spanish-English legal dictionary.

However, he says, it can be difficult to find interpreters in some languages. Carelli also says that "finding interpreters for certain indigenous dialects from Central and South American countries has presented problems."

The shortage affects state and federal courts equally in languages other than Spanish, Framar says. It pushes courts to use freelance interpreters who may lack training, says Suzan

Kern, a former interpreter who is now an immigration lawyer.

"There is an assumption that if you're bilingual, you can interpret and translate but it is most definitely not the case," she says.

Certified interpreters have to pass exams, either through a state certification program, the Administrative Office or the Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification, Framar says.

They are trained in the use of the specific court terms and protocols, Kern says. Courts also use qualified interpreters — non-credentialed but with experience — but there are not enough of them either, Framar says.

Framar says one of the main reasons for the shortage is the lack of funding for training and testing programs. Legislation that would provide federal funds for state court interpreters has stalled, Romberger says.

The Administrative Office spends \$11 million a year in interpreting services, Carelli says, most of which go to travel expenses.

The skills to pass these tests are "phenomenal," Romberger says. In 2007, only 77 of 459 candidates passed the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination, according to the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts.

Courts sometimes hire uncertified interpreters because they are cheaper, Framar says.

According to the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts, a federal certified or qualified court interpreter is paid \$376 a day. Others are paid \$181.

When immigration and Customs Enforcement detained 389 illegal workers at the Agriprocessors meat-packing plant in Postville, Iowa, on May 12, 32 certified Spanish interpreters were flown in, according to Robert Phelps, clerk of the U.S. District Court in Cedar Rapids. Even so, there were snags.

"People were unable to talk some of the South American dialects people were speaking," says Kathleen Campbell Walker, an immigration attorney who has worked in Texas for 20 years.