

10-1-2016

# Can You Hear Me Now?: Interpreters for California Civil Cases

Jena MacCabe

---

## Recommended Citation

Jena MacCabe, *Can You Hear Me Now?: Interpreters for California Civil Cases*, 49 Loy. L.A. L. Rev. 685 (2016).

This Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Reviews at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

# CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?: INTERPRETERS FOR CALIFORNIA CIVIL CASES

*Jena MacCabe\**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Seventy-year-old Halmoni<sup>1</sup> is poor and speaks no English.<sup>2</sup> She lives in an apartment complex where a trespassing maintenance worker has repeatedly sexually attacked her.<sup>3</sup> After Halmoni reported the incidents to law enforcement, the maintenance worker violently pounded on her door and tried to enter her apartment while she slept.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2010, Halmoni sought a restraining order in pro per against her attacker.<sup>5</sup> The Los Angeles Superior Court (the “Superior Court”) granted a temporary restraining order and set the hearing for the following month.<sup>6</sup> However, the court refused to process Halmoni’s fee waiver request for a Korean interpreter because “it did not provide interpreters in cases such as hers and [Halmoni] could bring a friend to interpret.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the Superior Court did process her request but ultimately denied it, explaining that “[t]here is no right to an interpreter provided at public expense in a civil

---

\* J.D. Candidate, May 2017, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles; B.S. Cognitive Science, 2014, University of Southern California.

1. “Halmoni” is the Korean word for “grandma.” Katie Askew, *How to Say Grandma and Grandpa in 20 Languages*, AM. GRANDPARENTS ASS’N, <http://www.grandparents.com/family-and-relationships/grandparent-names/grandpa-grandma-different-languages>. The following story is true, and her name was redacted to protect her identity. See *Two Litigants Complained the L.A. Courts Did Not Give Them Interpreters*, L.A. TIMES 1, 3 (Nov. 4, 2014), <http://documents.latimes.com/two-litigants-complained-l-courts-did-not-give-them-interpreters> [hereinafter LAFLA Complaint]. Accordingly, this Note will refer to her as “Halmoni.”

2. LAFLA Complaint, *supra* note 1, at 3.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* “Family and friends are often called on to interpret. It is unlikely, however, that family or friends acting as interpreters can provide quality interpretation of a legal proceeding.” Diana K. Cochrane, Note, *¿Como Se Dice, <Necesito a un Interprete>? The Civil Litigant’s Right to a Court-appointed Interpreter in Texas*, 12 SCHOLAR 47, 59 (2009).

case.”<sup>8</sup>

Before 2014, California was one of ten states without legislation providing free interpreters to civil litigants.<sup>9</sup> On September 28, 2014, Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill (“Bill 1657”) into law granting civil litigants the right to a court interpreter.<sup>10</sup> The goal of the legislation is to make this right a reality for all by 2017.<sup>11</sup>

This Note explores California’s new legislation providing free interpreters to civil litigants, while considering the balance between the needs of civil litigants and the costs of interpreters. Further, this Note argues that the statutory embodiment of Bill 1657—Section 756 of the Evidence Code (“section 756”) and Section 68092.1 of the Government Code—complements the federal stance, but in practice, the law could do more. Section II presents the historical background of court interpreters in the American legal system, and more notably, the importance of interpreters in a civil context. Section II also introduces the Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation into the language accessibility of the California court system and the complaint that prompted it. Section III contrasts California’s new law regarding court interpreters with its predecessor. Section IV compares the California law with legislation from two other states and considers the general controversy surrounding the civil right to court interpreters. Section V proposes how the new legislation might be improved with technology and statutory amendments.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### A. *The Right to a Court Interpreter*

California has the greatest share of individuals that are limited-English proficient (“LEP”) in the country.<sup>12</sup> Los Angeles County

---

8. LAFLA Complaint, *supra* note 1, at 3.

9. Sudhin Thanawala, *California Moves to Provide Interpreters in All Court Cases*, BIG STORY (Aug. 16, 2015, 4:07 PM), <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/7f5f98aa585f44d7a2e57392039d2acd/california-moves-provide-interpreters-all-court-cases>. The other nine states were Alaska, Illinois, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Vermont. *Id.*

10. Assemb. B. 1657, 2013–14 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2014). Bill 1657 added section 756 to, and repealed section 755 of, the Evidence Code; it also added section 68092.1 to the Government Code. *Id.* Unless otherwise designated, all code sections in this Note refer to California statutes.

11. JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CAL., STRATEGIC PLAN FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS IN THE CALIFORNIA COURTS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (2015), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/LAP-Executive-Summary.pdf>. [hereinafter Executive Summary].

12. Jie Zong & Jeanne Batalova, *The Limited English Proficient Population in the United States*, MIGRATION POLICY INST. (July 8, 2015), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited>

alone comprises ten percent of the U.S. LEP population.<sup>13</sup> According to the 2010 census, about twenty percent of Californians are considered to be LEP.<sup>14</sup> The five most spoken languages within this population are: Spanish (66.8%), Chinese (8.2%), Vietnamese (4.5%), Tagalog (4.0%), and Korean (3.5%).<sup>15</sup>

A study of California court interpreters concluded, “[a]llowing proceedings to continue when one party is incapable of participating fully significantly impairs the quality of the process and its results.”<sup>16</sup> When roughly 20 percent of the state’s population cannot participate fully in court proceedings because they lack proficiency in English, the only language in which courts are conducted,<sup>17</sup> we have a serious problem. Language, after all, is the primary form of communication in a legal proceeding, and fairness in the proceeding depends on a party’s ability to speak or understand the language.<sup>18</sup> LEP individuals, which are more likely to live in poverty than English speakers,<sup>19</sup> would benefit greatly from the right to free court interpreters.

---

-english-proficient-population-united-states.

13. *Id.* The five counties with the largest LEP populations in descending order are: Los Angeles County, California; Miami County, Florida; Harris County, Texas; Cook County, Illinois; and Queens County, New York. *Id.* While the LEP population in Los Angeles is 10 percent of the total U.S. LEP population, the next largest county, Miami, only comprises 3 percent. *Id.*

14. FIELD RESEARCH CORP., AN OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY SURVEY (2013), [http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/uploadedFiles/CPUC\\_Public\\_Website/Content/Utilities\\_and\\_Industries/Communications\\_-\\_Telecommunications\\_and\\_Broadband/Reports\\_and\\_Presentations/Overview\\_Limited\\_Eng\\_Report\\_Communications\\_2013.pdf](http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/uploadedFiles/CPUC_Public_Website/Content/Utilities_and_Industries/Communications_-_Telecommunications_and_Broadband/Reports_and_Presentations/Overview_Limited_Eng_Report_Communications_2013.pdf).

15. *Id.* These proportions roughly reflect the five greatest nationwide proportions: Spanish (64%), Chinese (6%), Vietnamese (3%), Korean (2%), and Tagalog (2%). Zong & Batalova, *supra* note 12. However, Korean-speaking LEP individuals outnumber Tagalog speakers by 90,000 in the United States as a whole. *Id.*

16. Laura K. Abel & Alice Ho, *Language Access in Civil State Court Proceedings: A Preliminary Report*, 17 PROTEUS 2 (Nat’l Assoc. of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, Washington, D.C.), 2008, <http://nebula.wsimg.com/59dde04f42a333cba98aa66c271055cb?AccessKeyId=5AF78834A5D9003DD559&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>.

17. CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 185(a) (2000). If Spanish becomes the majority language in California, perhaps this law will change so that some cases will proceed in Spanish. See Paul Saffo, *Spanish: California’s Once and Future Language*, PAUL SAFFO: FUTURIST (Jan. 2, 2006), <http://www.saffo.com/02006/01/02/spanish-californias-once-and-future-language> (considering the probability and consequences of Spanish as California’s majority language).

18. Thomas M. Fleming, *Right of Accused to Have Evidence or Court Proceedings Interpreted, Because Accused or Other Participant in Proceedings Is Not Proficient in the Language Used*, 32 A.L.R.5TH 149, 2 (1995).

19. Zong & Batalova, *supra* note 12.

### 1. The Criminal Defendant's Constitutional Right to a Court Interpreter

The right to a court interpreter began in the criminal justice system.<sup>20</sup> Notably, criminal defendants have a constitutionally protected right to an interpreter.<sup>21</sup> The Due Process Clauses of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution require that interpreters be made available to people at risk of losing life, liberty, or property from a criminal charge.<sup>22</sup> The Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution similarly grants criminal defendants the right “to be confronted with the witnesses against him . . . and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his [defense].”<sup>23</sup> Thus, a criminal defendant without access to an interpreter is denied these constitutionally protected rights in trial because she is unable to understand what the witnesses are testifying to or to adequately confer with counsel.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, certain criminal convictions serve as grounds for an alien's deportation from the country.<sup>25</sup> As such, that alien would struggle to remain in the United States without understanding the trial proceedings and therefore being unable to present a proper defense. This risk is considerable in California, a state home to more immigrants than any other state in the country.<sup>26</sup>

The policy of protecting the ability to understand court proceedings, as criminal defendants risk losing their fundamental human rights, applies in the civil context as well. Part IV of this Note will delve deeper into public policy and examine why civil litigants were denied the same right that their criminal defendant counterparts enjoyed.

### 2. The Civil Litigant's Statutory Right to a Court Interpreter

In civil cases, the right to an interpreter is statutorily based; federal or state legislation must explicitly provide the right.<sup>27</sup> For

---

20. Cochrane, *supra* note 7, at 53.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*; see U.S. CONST. amends. V, XIV.

23. U.S. CONST. amend. VI.

24. United States *ex rel.* Negron v. New York, 434 F.2d 386, 389 (2d Cir. 1970).

25. *E.g.*, 8 U.S.C. § 1227(a)(2)(A) (2012) (“Any alien who . . . is convicted of a crime for which a sentence of one year or more may be imposed, is deportable.”).

26. Marisol Cuellar Mejia & Hans Johnson, *Immigrants in California*, PUB. POLICY INST. OF CAL. (May 2013), [http://www.ppic.org/main/publication\\_show.asp?i=258](http://www.ppic.org/main/publication_show.asp?i=258).

27. Cochrane, *supra* note 7, at 55.

instance, the Court Interpreters Act<sup>28</sup> requires that interpreters be provided for parties in federal court who are unable to understand the proceedings or communicate with counsel.<sup>29</sup> The Court Interpreters Act applies in both criminal and civil actions brought by the United States in federal court.<sup>30</sup>

Although there is currently no federal right to a court interpret in federal civil actions not brought by the United States, states like Arizona and Texas have codified that right.<sup>31</sup> However, because each state has its own laws, this right can differ substantially between jurisdictions. For instance, some state statutes require courts to pay interpreters' fees for any legal proceeding, including civil, while others simply give courts the discretion to provide for those services.<sup>32</sup>

### B. *Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles Complaint*

In 2010, the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) filed a complaint with the DOJ on behalf of two indigent Korean speakers against the Superior Court.<sup>33</sup> The court regularly provided Spanish-speaking interpreters free of charge—despite no existing law requiring it to—but failed to provide interpreters for other languages in civil cases.<sup>34</sup>

One of the complainants was Halmoni, the elderly grandmother who needed protection from her sexual assailant.<sup>35</sup> The other was a single mother (“Mom”) who sought child custody and support.<sup>36</sup> Like Halmoni, Mom is indigent and a native Korean speaker.<sup>37</sup> Mom raised her seven-year-old son alone and was struggling to provide for

---

28. 28 U.S.C. § 1827 (2012).

29. Deborah M. Weissman, *Between Principles and Practice: The Need for Certified Court Interpreters in North Carolina*, 78 N.C. L. REV. 1899, 1931 (2000).

30. *Id.*

31. *See infra* Section IV.A.

32. Compare CAL. GOV'T CODE § 68092.1 (West 2015) (“[I]t is imperative that courts provide interpreters to all parties who require one.”), with ARIZ. REV. STAT. ANN. § 12-241 (2003) (“The court may when necessary appoint interpreters . . .”). *See also infra* Section IV.A. (considering statutes from California, Arizona, and Texas regarding payment for court interpreters).

33. LAFLA Complaint, *supra* note 1, at 1.

34. *Id.* at 2–3.

35. *See supra* Part I.

36. LAFLA Complaint, *supra* note 1, at 2. Her name was redacted to protect her identity. *See id.*

37. *Id.*

him against resistance from his father.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, she needed the court's intervention.<sup>39</sup>

Mom knew she would have to testify at the hearing to obtain sole custody, unpaid child support, and modification of child support.<sup>40</sup> She filed a fee waiver request for a Korean interpreter, but the Superior Court denied her request, stating that "Korean interpreters are not provided for this type of hearing."<sup>41</sup> Because Mom could not afford her own interpreter, she looked for a friend or family member who could interpret, but her search was unsuccessful.<sup>42</sup>

Fortunately for Mom and Halmoni, this story has a hero. LAFLA intervened and paid the \$300 fees for Korean-language court interpreters for Mom and Halmoni.<sup>43</sup> Following these cases, LAFLA brought the problem to the attention of the DOJ.<sup>44</sup>

### C. *The DOJ's Investigation (Federal Mandate)*

In response to the LAFLA complaint, the DOJ initiated an investigation into the Superior Court "to ensure that [LEP] individuals have meaningful access to court proceedings and court operations."<sup>45</sup> Access to the courts is a right founded in the Due Process Clause.<sup>46</sup> Because California receives financial assistance from the federal government, including the DOJ, California must comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ("Title VI")<sup>47</sup> by providing meaningful access to LEP individuals.<sup>48</sup>

The DOJ investigation into the Superior Court revealed serious problems in the court's interpretation system. First, where family and friends acted as interpreters, the DOJ found that judicial officials in the Superior Court were often unable to assess the "interpreter's" ability to communicate in both English and the other language.<sup>49</sup> The

---

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.*

41. *Id.* (quoting another source).

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.* at 2–3.

44. *Id.* at 1.

45. Letter from U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, to Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye, et al., Chief Justice, Cal. Sup. Ct. (May 22, 2013) (on file with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles), [http://www.lafla.org/pdf/DOJ\\_Findings052213.pdf](http://www.lafla.org/pdf/DOJ_Findings052213.pdf).

46. *Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U.S. 539, 579 (1974).

47. 42 U.S.C. § 2000d (2012).

48. U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, *supra* note 45, at 2.

49. *Id.* at 5.

DOJ also found that some officials failed to even ask the family members or friends about their language abilities, and some transcripts showed that the “interpreters” inappropriately interjected during the proceedings.<sup>50</sup> The DOJ’s discoveries regarding the Trial Court Trust Fund, which provides state funding for court interpreters,<sup>51</sup> were particularly troubling. California’s state budget allocates over \$90 million annually to the Trial Court Trust Fund, but some of those funds have been underutilized and even diverted to other purposes.<sup>52</sup>

As a result of these findings, the DOJ made the following suggestions: (1) courts must be educated that California law does not impede them from providing interpreters and being reimbursed; (2) the Judicial Council of California (“Judicial Council”) should refrain from re-allocating unspent funds in the Trial Court Trust Fund; (3) to alleviate concerns about exceeding the Trial Court Trust Fund, California might consider initially prioritizing particularly sensitive cases to receive funds first; and (4) California should attempt to identify LEP litigants as soon as possible.<sup>53</sup> Since the DOJ investigation made California aware of the many flaws in its court interpretation system, California adopted the DOJ’s suggestions with the introduction of Bill 1657, and the Judicial Council devised several strategies to help the state satisfy this federal mandate.<sup>54</sup>

### III. CALIFORNIA’S LEGISLATION

#### A. California’s Law Prior to Bill 1657

Bill 1657 brought significant change to two California statutes relating to civil court interpreters:<sup>55</sup> Government Code section 68092—the general rule for who must pay for an interpreter<sup>56</sup>—and Evidence Code section 755 (“section 755”)—an exception for

---

50. *Id.*

51. CAL. GOV’T CODE § 68085 (West 2013); U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE, *supra* note 45, at 6.

52. U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE, *supra* note 45, at 6; JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CAL., TRIAL COURT INTERPRETERS PROGRAM EXPENDITURE REPORT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2010–2011 (2012), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/tcip-expenditure-fy1011.pdf> (reporting that \$3 million of savings from the court interpreter program would assist offsetting trial court budget reductions).

53. U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE, *supra* note 45, at 8–9. This list is not exhaustive but rather touches on a few of the DOJ’s recommendations.

54. Section III.C of this Note will provide specific examples of the Judicial Council’s strategy.

55. Assemb. B. 1657, 2013–14 Leg. Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2014).

56. CAL. GOV’T CODE § 68092(b) (West 2011).



specific family law cases.<sup>57</sup> Still, other statutes persisted despite the change, and they seem compatible with California's new law.<sup>58</sup>

### 1. Government Code Section 68092 and Evidence Code Section 755

Prior to passing Bill 1657, California still reserved the right for criminal defendants unable to understand English to have an interpreter at no cost to the defendant,<sup>59</sup> those fees are to be paid by the court pursuant to Government Code section 68092.<sup>60</sup> But in civil cases, any interpreter or translator fee had to be paid by the litigant.<sup>61</sup> The subsequent enactment of Government Code section 68092.1 casts doubt on the current force of this law.<sup>62</sup>

Section 755 was an exception to civil litigants' general duty to pay interpreters' fees.<sup>63</sup> Under section 755, interpreters were required for proceedings regarding domestic violence, parental rights, and marriage dissolution or legal separation cases involving a protective order,<sup>64</sup> a requirement that was contingent upon federal funding.<sup>65</sup> However, for parties appearing in forma pauperis, interpreters' fees would be waived.<sup>66</sup> Remarkably, section 755 expressly authorized non-interpreters, such as family members or friends, to assist LEP individuals,<sup>67</sup> despite that non-interpreters cannot likely provide effective interpretation for legal proceedings.<sup>68</sup> The later enactment of section 756 expanded the civil litigant's right to an interpreter.<sup>69</sup>

### 2. Other Relevant California Statutes

Notably, other areas of California law remain untouched by Bill 1657. For example, courts still provide interpreters for witnesses in

---

57. CAL. EVID. CODE § 755 (repealed 2014).

58. Compare *infra* Section III.A.2 (discussing older statutes regarding interpreters for witnesses, small claims cases, and deaf parties), with *infra* Section III.B (discussing recent legislation regarding civil court interpreters generally).

59. CAL. CONST. art. I, § 14.

60. GOV'T § 68092(a).

61. *Id.* § 68092(b).

62. See CAL. GOV'T CODE § 68092.1 (West 2015); *infra*, Section III.B.

63. Compare *id.* § 68092(b) (requiring parties to pay all interpreters' fees), with CAL. EVID. CODE § 755(b) (repealed 2014) (requiring courts to pay interpreters' fees under certain circumstances).

64. CAL EVID. CODE § 755(a) (West 2011).

65. *Id.* § 755(e).

66. *Id.* § 755(b).

67. *Id.* § 755(d).

68. Cochrane, *supra* note 7, at 59.

69. See *infra* Section III.B.

either a criminal or civil case if they are unable to understand or express themselves in English.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, in small claims cases, the court may allow a non-attorney to assist a non-English-speaking party.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, California has historically treated and continues to treat hearing impairment as a protected disability, charging its courts with the interpreters' fees for those who cannot hear the proceedings.<sup>72</sup> Yet, while the inability to *understand* the language of the proceedings produces essentially the same result, LEP individuals were denied free interpreters in civil cases.<sup>73</sup>

### *B. California's Law After Bill 1657*

Today, the Judicial Council assumes the financial responsibility of reimbursing courts for providing court interpreters

in civil actions and proceedings to *any party* who is present in court and who does not proficiently speak or understand the English language for the purpose of interpreting the proceedings in a language the party understands, and assisting communications between the party, his or her attorney, and the court.<sup>74</sup>

Notably, the court must provide court interpreters at no cost, "regardless of the income of the parties," under Government Code section 68092.1.<sup>75</sup>

Although Government Code section 68092.1 seems irreconcilable with Government Code section 68092, which requires civil litigants to pay for their own interpreters,<sup>76</sup> the latter also provides the criminal defendant's right to a court interpreter.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, under Government Code section 68092.1, some parties will still have to pay for their own interpreters unless sufficient funds are available.<sup>78</sup>

In any event, California does not blindly ignore the financial hurdles before it. Recognizing that "no cost" interpreters do come at

---

70. CAL. EVID. CODE § 752(a) (West Supp. 2016).

71. CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 116.550(a) (West 1995).

72. *See* EVID. § 754.

73. *See* CAL. GOV'T CODE § 68092(b) (West 2011).

74. CAL. EVID. CODE § 756(a) (West 2011) (emphasis added).

75. CAL. GOV'T CODE § 68092.1(b) (West 2015).

76. *Id.* § 68092(b).

77. *Id.* § 68092(a).

78. *See id.* § 68092.1(b).

a price, the legislature devised a system that offers state-funded interpreters to parties on a priority basis depending on the type of case involved.<sup>79</sup> The categories of cases at the top of the priority list receive interpreters first, while those at the bottom receive interpreters only if funds remain.<sup>80</sup> This hierarchy, ranked from the highest to the lowest priority, is as follows:

1. Domestic violence; protective orders involving the Uniform Parentage Act<sup>81</sup> or ending a marriage or domestic partnership; orders restraining future violence, threats, and stalking; physical abuse or neglect of elders;<sup>82</sup>
2. Unlawful detainer;<sup>83</sup>
3. Termination of parental rights;<sup>84</sup>
4. Conservatorship or guardianship;<sup>85</sup>
5. A parent's sole child custody or visitation rights;<sup>86</sup>
6. All other orders prohibiting harassment and elder abuse;<sup>87</sup>
7. All other family law issues;<sup>88</sup> and
8. Any other civil case.<sup>89</sup>

The coordination of section 756 and Government Code section 68092.1 will eventually make court proceedings accessible to all civil litigants.<sup>90</sup> Until sufficient funds are made available, California focuses on the subject matter of cases<sup>91</sup> and prohibits courts from discriminating based on the financial status of the LEP party<sup>92</sup> or by the primary language spoken by the party.<sup>93</sup>

---

79. *See* EVID. § 756(b).

80. *Id.*

81. CAL. FAM. CODE § 7600 *et seq.* (West, Westlaw through 2015 Sess.).

82. EVID. § 756(b)(1).

83. *Id.* § 756(b)(2).

84. *Id.* § 756(b)(3).

85. *Id.* § 756(b)(4).

86. *Id.* § 756(b)(5).

87. *Id.* § 756(b)(6).

88. *Id.* § 756(b)(7).

89. *Id.* § 756(b)(8).

90. *See id.* § 756; CAL. GOV'T CODE § 68092.1 (West 2015).

91. EVID. § 756.

92. GOV'T § 68092.1.

93. *See* EVID. § 756; *see also* GOV'T § 68092.1.

### C. California's Response to the DOJ's Suggestions

The year after the DOJ reprimanded the Superior Court for its failure to provide LEP litigants meaningful access to court resources, the California State Assembly introduced Bill 1657.<sup>94</sup> California adopted the DOJ's suggestions discussed in Part II (E) above. Initially, California began its reform by prioritizing which cases will receive interpreters at no cost.<sup>95</sup>

Additionally, the Judicial Council plans to improve early identification of LEP litigants while judicial officers undergo training on all language access policies to properly assist those individuals.<sup>96</sup> For instance, the Judicial Council is developing a toolkit that includes "I Speak" cards, which court personnel will use at various points in the courts.<sup>97</sup> To accommodate speakers of non-written languages, the Judicial Council is exploring alternative technological ways to aid early identification of language needs.<sup>98</sup> Education for judicial and court staff will now include a revised course on interpretation, and a group of experienced judges will review the educational content and make recommendations.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, the Judicial Council promises to secure adequate funding without reducing other court services.<sup>100</sup> An online platform making interpretation tools available to courts will aim to minimize costs.<sup>101</sup> The Judicial Council is even considering providing courts with written guidance on pursuing other funding opportunities.<sup>102</sup>

By following the DOJ's recommendations, California seems to have satisfied its duties under Title VI.<sup>103</sup> To fully comply with Title VI, however, the Judicial Council will have to ensure that sufficient funds are appropriated so that all civil litigants—not just those within the first few levels of priority in section 756—will have free interpreters.

---

94. Assemb. B. 1657, 2013–14 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2014).

95. See EVID. § 756(b).

96. Executive Summary, *supra* note 11, at 4–5.

97. LANGUAGE ACCESS PLAN IMPLEMENTATION TASK FORCE, JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CAL., RECOMMENDATIONS PROGRESS REPORT FOR OCTOBER 19, 2015 2 (2015), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/LAPITF-20151019-Progress-Report.pdf> [hereinafter Progress Report].

98. *Id.*

99. *Id.* at 15.

100. Executive Summary, *supra* note 11, at 5.

101. See Progress Report, *supra* note 97, at 19.

102. *Id.* at 17.

103. See *supra* Section II.C.

#### IV. THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: THE IMPACT & SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS LEGISLATION

Bill 1657 protects civil litigants' abilities to understand court proceedings.<sup>104</sup> But Bill 1657 will undoubtedly also have an impact on state court funding.<sup>105</sup> Already, California has significantly more interpreters than any other state, and court interpretation services cost over \$92 million per year.<sup>106</sup> Allocating more money to interpretation might burden California's already strained court budget. In recent years, California has had to close courthouses and lay off employees due to budget problems.<sup>107</sup> To fully understand the impact or effectiveness the law will have on California, it is important to consider Bill 1657 in the context of similar laws in similarly situated states.

##### A. Other States' Laws

Before 2014, forty states provided court interpreters in civil cases, including Arizona and Texas.<sup>108</sup> Because those states, like California, share a border with Mexico, it is particularly important to compare these states' models and their result with California's new legislation and see what California courts should implement or avoid.

##### 1. Arizona<sup>109</sup>

Arizona takes a much less complicated approach to appointment of court interpreters than its neighbor, California, does: "The court may when necessary appoint interpreters, who may be summoned in the same manner as witnesses, and shall be subject to the same penalties for disobedience."<sup>110</sup> Two Arizona evidence rules refine this statute.<sup>111</sup> First, the interpreter is subject to the qualification rules relating to experts and to an oath that the translation will be true.<sup>112</sup>

---

104. See *supra* Section III.B.

105. See Thanawala, *supra* note 9 ("[T]he courts [will] need more than the \$92 million they were spending [on court interpreters].").

106. Executive Summary, *supra* note 11, at 5.

107. Corina Knoll, *After Federal Probe, State Examines Need for Civil Court Interpreters*, L.A. TIMES (Nov. 4, 2014), <http://www.latimes.com/local/countygovernment/la-me-language-access-courts-20141105-story.html>.

108. See Thanawala, *supra* note 9.

109. Nine percent of Arizona residents are LEP, which exceeds the nationwide proportion of eight percent. Zong & Batalova, *supra* note 12.

110. ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 12-241 (1955). Deaf persons are guaranteed interpreters by Arizona Revised Statute section 12-242 (2000).

111. *State v. Burris*, 643 P.2d 8, 13 (Ariz. Ct. App. 1982).

112. ARIZ. R. EVID. 604.

Second, the trial court has discretion to decide whether the interpreter is qualified based upon arguments regarding competency, and the accuracy of the interpretation may be impeached and determined by the jury.<sup>113</sup> To implement these laws, each court must create its own language access plan.<sup>114</sup> Along with other city departments, Arizona's capital's courts have spent about \$260,000 in a year on court interpretation.<sup>115</sup>

In contrast, California purposely elaborates on how courts should approach a case where an interpreter might be necessary. California's more complicated model, however, is preferable. Where courts have too much discretion, such as the Superior Court did before Bill 1657, only a small subset of LEP individuals benefits.<sup>116</sup> For instance, the government routinely offered Spanish-speaking interpreters in many civil cases in the Superior Court, like in Halmoni's hearing, but rarely offered interpreters of other languages.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the Judicial Council created a statewide language access plan to systematically set standards for every court in the state.<sup>118</sup> This plan will once again be more effective than leaving too much discretion to individual courts because consistent application of interpretation services is in the best interest of Californians.<sup>119</sup>

## 2. Texas<sup>120</sup>

The state of Texas gives special consideration to the Spanish speakers in its counties bordering Mexico.<sup>121</sup> In those counties, interpreters can be appointed on a full-time or part-time basis to

---

113. *Id.* 702.

114. Language Access Planning, Ariz. Sup. Ct. Admin. Order No. 2011-96 (Sept. 12, 2011).

115. Eugene Scott, *Phoenix Aims to Balance Cost, Need for Interpreters*, ARIZ. REPUBLIC (Sept. 2, 2014), <http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2014/09/01/phoenix-cost-public-need-interpreters/14948509>.

116. *See* LAFLA Complaint, *supra* note 1, at 3-4.

117. *Id.* at 5.

118. JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CAL., STRATEGIC PLAN FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS IN THE CALIFORNIA COURTS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (2015), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/LAP-Executive-Summary.pdf>.

119. *See* Kevin G. Baker, *Bill Analysis*, Assemb. B. 1657, at 3 (Cal. 2014).

120. About fifteen percent of Texas residents are LEP. Abel & Ho, *supra* note 16, at 7 (citing the 2005 census). Although Texas has the second highest LEP population in the country, California has 5 percent more LEP residents than Texas and over 10 percent more than the nationwide proportion. Zong & Batalova, *supra* note 12.

121. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 21.021 (West 1985).

serve the court.<sup>122</sup> Courts may also appoint an interpreter *sua sponte* or in response to a party's motion.<sup>123</sup> After appointing an interpreter, Texas courts have discretion to appropriate government funds to compensate interpreters or to require one or more of the parties to cover the fee.<sup>124</sup> Because the Texas judiciary is non-unified, interpreters are not paid by the state.<sup>125</sup> Instead, each local government must pay its own interpreters' fees or require the parties to do so independently.<sup>126</sup> In a single year, a single county in Texas spent almost \$63,000 on court interpreters.<sup>127</sup>

Similarly, California could benefit from full-time court interpreters in its counties where the LEP population is greatest. Such counties might be Santa Clara, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Mateo, Imperial, Alameda, and Orange, where immigrants represent more than 30 percent of the population.<sup>128</sup> In fact, the Judicial Council and the courts plan to emulate the Texas model by proactively recruiting new interpreter staff members.<sup>129</sup> However, qualification of staff interpreters should not be limited to a single non-English language.<sup>130</sup> Courts should hire interpreters for all the languages most frequently needed in the respective county's population.<sup>131</sup> Notably, the state pays for court interpreters through the Trial Court Trust Fund,<sup>132</sup> alleviating the burden for a county to have to pay for interpreters itself, as is Texas practice.<sup>133</sup> State—rather than local—funding ensures equal access to the courts because counties that would otherwise be underfunded if expected to

---

122. *Id.* § 21.022 (West 1985).

123. TEX. GOV'T CODE ANN. § 57.002 (West 2013). Although the statutory language is that a "court shall appoint a certified court interpreter . . . if a motion is filed," courts and the Attorney General have interpreted this statute to be discretionary. Cochrane, *supra* note 7, at 64.

124. TEX. R. CIV. P. 183. Deaf parties are guaranteed interpreters by Texas Civil Practice & Remedies Code section 21.002 (West 1985).

125. TEX. JUDICIAL BRANCH, *Translation & Interpretation* (2016), <http://www.txcourts.gov/programs-services/translation-interpretation.aspx>.

126. *Id.*

127. Logan G. Carver, *Court Interpreters Translate into High Cost for Lubbock County*, LUBBOCK-AVALANCHE J. (Jan. 15, 2012, 1:10 AM), <http://lubbockonline.com/crime-and-courts/2012-01-14/court-interpreters-translate-high-cost-lubbock-county#> (noting the 2011 court interpretation expenditure in Lubbock, Texas).

128. Mejia & Johnson, *supra* note 26.

129. Executive Summary, *supra* note 11, at 4.

130. *Cf.* TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 21.023 (West 1985) (Texas border county interpreters must be competent to speak *Spanish* and English).

131. For example, California could focus on hiring staff interpreters for Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Korean speakers. *See supra* Section II.A.

132. CAL. GOV'T CODE § 68085 (West 2013).

133. *See* TEX. JUDICIAL BRANCH, *supra* note 125.

independently compensate interpreters cannot fall short. The Judicial Council must find a way to provide interpreters statewide, regardless of the financial state of any one courthouse.

*B. The Controversy Surrounding Civil Litigants' Rights*

At first glance, the inclination to classify litigants based on the type of legal proceeding might seem logical and fair. Criminals may be subject to death, imprisonment, fine, loss of civil rights, property forfeiture, license revocation, or the duty to register with authorities.<sup>134</sup> They are subject to these dangers through involuntary prosecution while civil litigation is generally considered voluntary.<sup>135</sup> However, such assumptions are imprecise. First of all, civil defendants generally do not voluntarily enter into litigation.<sup>136</sup> Second, when parental rights or safety from an attacker are at stake, litigation can hardly be considered voluntary. These plaintiffs, like Mom and Halmoni, need a court to intervene and protect their rights.

Ultimately, when the dangers resulting from an unfavorable verdict cease to separate the criminal defendant's situation from the civil litigant's, the logic justifying the rights for the former but not the latter falls away. As discussed in Section II(A)(1) above, the Due Process Clause assigns criminal defendants the right to counsel when they are at risk of losing life, liberty, or property.<sup>137</sup> If this right exists at all in civil cases, it has only been when the litigant faced incarceration.<sup>138</sup> Still, civil litigants who are at risk of losing liberty do not have the automatic due process right to counsel that their criminal defendant counterparts do.<sup>139</sup>

That the U.S. Constitution provides a criminal, but not civil, right to counsel is important to the exploration of the right to court interpretation because the imbalance between civil and criminal rights has deep roots in the law. However, denying rights to a litigant simply because the case is civil rather than criminal seems

---

134. 3 B.E. WITKIN & NORMAN EPSTEIN, WITKIN & EPSTEIN, CAL. CRIM. LAW PUNISHMENT § 5 (4th ed. 2012).

135. Cochrane, *supra* note 7, at 57.

136. *But see, e.g.*, CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 387 (West 1995) (permitting a person to intervene as a defendant).

137. *See supra* Section II.A.1.

138. Turner v. Rogers, 131 S. Ct. 2507, 2517 (2011).

139. *Id.* at 2520 (“[T]he Due Process Clause does not *automatically* require the provision of counsel at civil contempt proceedings to an indigent individual who is subject to a child support order, even if that individual faces incarceration.”).



counterintuitive when the policy supporting the right in the criminal case is the same. Although the Constitution only protects criminal litigants' rights,<sup>140</sup> the risk of losing liberty or property potentially makes these civil cases essentially quasi-criminal. Nevertheless, courts continue to treat civil cases—even quasi-criminal ones—differently,<sup>141</sup> and laws, like California's new one, are important to change how courts in the future will treat civil litigants.

## V. PROPOSAL

California courts now face the challenge of implementing Bill 1657. With such great need for interpreters,<sup>142</sup> California must develop new strategies to satisfy the demand. In practice, technological interpretation could help California immediately and into the future by minimizing court costs. Statutorily though, California might want to reconsider which cases will receive interpreters first to maximize access to the courts for the people who need it most.

### A. A Permanent Solution: Remote Interpreting Technology

Technology could alleviate some of the costs that California now faces in providing interpreters to more of the civil cases at lower priority on section 756's list. Not only could it help California realize the 2017 goal for free court interpreters more quickly, technology could also save the state money going forward, money that could be used in other areas of need in the courts. For instance, using remote technology would allow interpreters to devote all of their time to interpreting rather than wasting time—and money—traveling between locations.<sup>143</sup> An interpreter could remain at the same location all day and provide services for cases across the state. That interpreter could also handle a caseload that might otherwise require additional interpreters simply because of the distance between courthouses.

---

140. See *supra* Section II.A.1.

141. See, e.g., *Turner*, 131 S. Ct. at 2520.

142. See *supra* Part IV.

143. Jessica Sperling, *Communicating More for Less: Using Translation and Interpretation Technology to Serve Limited English Proficient Individuals*, MIGRATION POLICY INST. 1, 4 (Jan. 2011), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/communicating-more-less-using-translation-and-interpretation-technology-LEP>. In its investigation of the Los Angeles Superior Court, the DOJ noted that litigation could be delayed because non-Spanish interpreters often must travel long distances to serve litigants. U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, *supra* note 45, at 5.

Arizona has already implemented video remote interpreting technology in various courtrooms across the state.<sup>144</sup> Video remote interpreting allows the party to see and hear the interpreter while the interpreter can hear everything going on in the courtroom from audiovisual equipment that allows them to be in distinct locations.<sup>145</sup> From an interpreter room in Phoenix equipped with video equipment, interpreters can connect with courtrooms in distant counties.<sup>146</sup>

Likewise, Texas provides free Spanish-language remote interpretation by telephone or video.<sup>147</sup> Notably, Texas prioritizes resources to rural district and county-level courts before all other courts and then to cases in the following order: hearings on protective orders; indigent criminal defendants and juvenile respondents; probate and mental health cases; family law cases; civil cases; and other cases.<sup>148</sup> Because this prioritization is reminiscent of that in section 756,<sup>149</sup> California might be wise to adopt a similar system to manage its great need for interpreters.

Texas differs significantly from Arizona though in that Texas's remote interpretation is consecutive<sup>150</sup> rather than simultaneous due to insufficient funding.<sup>151</sup> Any technological interpreting should preserve simultaneity—like Arizona's—because consecutive interpreting would impracticably delay court proceedings by periodically interrupting the flow of dialogue.<sup>152</sup> Fortunately, remote simultaneous interpreting technology is easy to use.<sup>153</sup> The Judicial Council has already recognized the use of video remote interpreting

---

144. ARIZ. JUDICIAL BRANCH, *Video Remote Interpreting* (2016), <http://www.azcourts.gov/interpreter/Video-Remote-Interpreting>.

145. Sperling, *supra* note 143, at 5.

146. ARIZ. JUDICIAL BRANCH, *supra* note 144.

147. OFFICE OF COURT ADMIN., TEX. JUDICIAL BRANCH, *Texas Court Remote Interpreter Service: Policies and Procedures* (2015), <http://www.txcourts.gov/media/907149/TCRIS-Policies.pdf>.

148. *Id.* at 2.

149. *See* CAL. EVID. CODE § 756(b) (West 2015).

150. Consecutive interpreting involves speakers pausing periodically to give the interpreter the chance to relay the words in the language that the other understands. Sperling, *supra* note 143, at 2. Simultaneous interpreting does not require such pauses, which in turn requires a more skilled interpreter. *Id.*

151. *Compare* OFFICE OF COURT ADMIN., *supra* note 147, at 2 (explaining that remote interpretation services will only be consecutive), *with* ARIZ. JUDICIAL BRANCH, REMOTE INTERPRETER TIP SHEET (2013), [http://www.azcourts.gov/Portals/168/RemoteInterpreterTipSheet\\_9.2013.pdf](http://www.azcourts.gov/Portals/168/RemoteInterpreterTipSheet_9.2013.pdf) (reminding remote interpreters to know when to use simultaneous interpretation).

152. Sperling, *supra* note 143, at 5.

153. *Id.*

of sign language in court.<sup>154</sup> Courts could easily appropriate this technology for LEP parties, saving some money that would otherwise be required to invest in new equipment.

Costs for remote interpreting technology may vary greatly depending on the court's specific needs. For instance, a court could rent a simultaneous interpreting telephone and related equipment for roughly \$10,000 per month for ten interpreters.<sup>155</sup> One corresponding basic video version would cost \$3,500 to purchase.<sup>156</sup> Alternatively, video-communication systems on computers, such as Skype or Apple's FaceTime, could allow for less expensive interpretation than specialized equipment would.<sup>157</sup>

California would benefit greatly from the use of remote interpreting technology. In secluded courthouses that need interpreters, remote interpretation would be particularly cost-effective because a single interpreter could service multiple cases without delay due to travel time. The Judicial Council should initially set up remote interpreting technology in those isolated counties and then expand to other areas where hiring staff interpreters would be inefficient.<sup>158</sup>

*B. A Temporary Solution: Subject Matter-Based Priority  
in Addition to Need-Based Priority*

In the long term, California's law giving civil litigants interpreters for free regardless of their financial ability to pay<sup>159</sup> is the best decision. Extending court-appointed interpreters to all would eliminate the bias that would usually accompany a privately funded interpreter.<sup>160</sup> In the short term, however, looking at a litigant's financial situation might be wise.

If California initially prioritized cases eligible for court interpretation by whether the litigant was indigent or not, as well as by the type of case, more individuals would have meaningful access

---

154. See JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CAL., RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR VIDEO REMOTE INTERPRETING (VRI) FOR ASL-INTERPRETED EVENTS, (2012), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/CIP-ASL-VRI-Guidelines.pdf>.

155. Sperling, *supra* note 143, at 5.

156. *Id.* at 6.

157. *See id.*

158. For example, it might be inefficient to hire a staff interpreter in a courthouse with infrequent need for interpretation.

159. *See supra* Section III.B.

160. T. Caroline Briggs-Sykes, Note, *Lost in Translation: The Need for a Formal Court Interpreter Program in Alaska*, 22 ALASKA L. REV. 113, 131 (2005).

to the courts. Those individuals who could pay for their own interpreters would do so, while those who could not afford an interpreter would be provided one. In both situations, the right to an interpreter would materialize.

Even without a priority basis shift, section 756 should be amended to enumerate a couple of troubling areas of law that seem to have been lost in the catchall subdivision at the bottom of the priority list. The first area that should be explicitly included is personal injury, which should be given the eighth priority for interpreters, following “[a]ll other actions and proceedings related to family law”<sup>161</sup> and preceding “[a]ll other civil actions or proceedings.”<sup>162</sup> With medical bills piling up and lost wages slipping away, personal injury victims need access to the courts. Contingency fee agreements allow parties, who might not otherwise be able to afford to, to defend their rights.<sup>163</sup> LEP victims in these cases likewise need interpreters. Section 756 should allow them to defend their rights by giving them a better chance at receiving an interpreter.

Similarly, personal injury defendants need interpreters. Generally, procedural rules should not favor a plaintiff over a defendant.<sup>164</sup> Lady Justice wears a blindfold. She does recognize the difference between plaintiff and defendant—who stands in greater need for an interpreter in any case. Moreover, declaratory judgment actions shatter the traditional notion of plaintiff and defendant.<sup>165</sup> The defendant being sued for declaratory relief might be the victim of the personal injury. Accordingly, California should provide a court interpreter to whichever party needs one, regardless of the side of the courtroom on which the party sits.

Another area of law that should be prioritized higher is employment law, which should be given the ninth priority for interpreters, following personal injury cases and preceding the final catchall subdivision of section 756. Employees needing to enforce their right to minimum wage might often be LEP individuals. After

---

161. CAL. EVID. CODE § 756(b)(7) (West 2015).

162. *Id.* § 756(b)(8).

163. *See Newman v. Freitas*, 61 P. 907, 910 (Cal. 1900).

164. *See generally* CAL. R. CT. 8.212(a) (setting deadlines for appellant’s and respondent’s briefs irrespective of their identities as plaintiff or defendant).

165. *See John Dellaportas & Bernadette McGlynn Reilly, Maintaining Order in Declaratory Judgment Actions*, 235 N.Y. L.J. 1, 1 (2006) (“[T]he party who ordinarily would have been the defendant, by virtue of winning the race to the courthouse, instead becomes the plaintiff to a declaratory judgment action.”).

all, many immigrants tell stories of restaurants that would pocket their tips and carwashes that would short paychecks to retaliate against employees who spoke out.<sup>166</sup>

Hopefully, California appropriates enough funding quickly so that it does not have to utilize the priority system for long but rather can afford to give all parties court interpreters. But in the meantime, the state cannot forget about personal injury and employment law victims by leaving them with the last chance to get free interpreters.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Interpreters are essential to provide LEP individuals meaningful access to the courts. Without the ability to understand the proceedings or effectively express themselves, parties cannot help their case, whether assisted by counsel or appearing pro per. Although the outcome of a case should not concern whether a party speaks English, how could it not when the proceedings are held in English? Court interpreters correct this problem by effectively allowing parties to communicate in English thereby giving them the ability to understand the nature of the legal proceeding.

While criminal defendants have long held the right to court interpretation in the U.S. Constitution, civil litigants have only found this right in certain jurisdictions depending upon the relevant statutes. California's statutes come after many litigants, like Halmoni and Mom, were unable to adequately participate in court proceedings. Now the most language-sensitive cases, according to California, will be given interpreters first until the state can afford to provide interpreters in all cases—a feat that will hopefully be met by 2017.

Despite the controversy of giving civil litigants rights, California met the suggestions of the DOJ and measured up to two other states bordering Mexico. Yet California can and should do more by implementing interpretation technology and reassessing to whom it will give interpreters first. Nevertheless, California has made great progress, and indiscriminate access to court interpreters is just on the horizon.

---

166. Steven Cuevas, *Enforcement of New L.A. Minimum Wage Law Will Be Challenging*, KQED NEWS (July 22, 2015), <http://www2.kqed.org/news/2015/07/22/enforcement-of-new-l-a-minimum-wage-law-will-be-challenging>.