



Administrative Office of the Courts

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Contact: Barry Massey, public information officer

bmassey@nmcourts.gov

505-470-3436

NM ranked #1 in nation for language access in the justice system

SANTA FE – New Mexico's court system has received the top ranking in the nation for providing language access services, including interpreters, to assist people with limited English proficiency, low literacy and the deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

In the latest Justice Index [rankings by the National Center for Access to Justice](#) (NCAJ), New Mexico scored 89.31 out of 100 for its language access services and practices. Connecticut ranked second with a score of 80.5.

"Without language access services, many individuals would be unable to tell their story in courtrooms or file court documents across the state," said Chief Justice Michael Vigil.

The Language Access Services (LAS) program in the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) coordinates and funds interpreter and translation services, including on-demand video remote interpreting. The program also recruits, trains and qualifies interpreters. It offers a wide range of other services, including online American Sign Language classes for court employees, translations of web content and training court staff to serve as Language Access Specialists who provide out-of-courtroom help to people in their native language. NCAJ noted in its findings that "New Mexico pioneered the Language Access Specialist qualification, and has since helped spread the concept to other states." LAS recently developed a web-based video conferencing and simultaneous interpreting application known as Clara Connect, which improves the Judiciary's capability for video remote interpreting and has been used to live stream Supreme Court hearings.

"New Mexico is leading the way in language access services, and I commend AOC's Language Access Services program on reaching the #1 ranking awarded by the National Center for Access to Justice," said Chief Justice Vigil.

AOC Director Artie Pepin said the Language Access Services (LAS) program "is always innovating to extend the reach of courts to communities in need." He pointed to the creation of "Clara," a multilingual, interactive avatar in a touchless courthouse kiosk that can

answer user-generated questions to help visitors with such things as directions to courtrooms, forms and allow them to get the assistance of a live operator who can connect them to court staff. Clara appears on the Judiciary's [LAS webpage](#) offering assistance in multiple languages. LAS also provides real-time translation of domestic relations, family, and other forms filed by court users in a language other than English.

"These and many other initiatives demonstrate the dedication and depth of talent LAS brings to its work providing broader access to courts throughout New Mexico," said Pepin.

About 15,000 court proceedings needed interpreters in calendar year 2020 and interpreting was provided in 58 languages, with the most frequently used being Spanish, Navajo, American Sign Language, Vietnamese and Mandarin Chinese. In out-of-courtroom settings, Language Access Specialists provided an average of 2,500 minutes of help to the public in about 20 languages so far during fiscal year 2021.

"If there's something we learned during this pandemic it is that there is no 'them' but 'us.' Language Access Services strives to provide equal access to justice for the most vulnerable members of 'us.' With this in mind and in order to expand the services we offer, we recently created the Diversity and Inclusion Department," said Paula Couselo-Findikoglu, who became deputy director of the AOC's Court Services Division late last year after leading the Language Access Services program for over six years.

[Read the Language Access Services annual report](#) to learn more about the broad range of services it provides. The LAS program is part of the Diversity and Inclusion Department within the Court Services Division.

New Mexico ranked No. 15 overall nationally in the NCAJ's Justice Index, which covered five categories concerning access to state justice systems: attorney access, self-representation access, language access, disability access, and fines and fees. New Mexico's overall ranking was higher than the neighboring states of Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma and Utah.

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