FAQs

- **What is a court interpreter?**
  - A court interpreter is anyone who interprets in a trial court proceeding (e.g., arraignment, motion, pretrial conference, preliminary hearing, deposition, trial) for a witness or party who speaks or understands little or no English. Court interpreters must accurately interpret for individuals verbatim with a high level of education and an expansive vocabulary, as well as persons with very limited language skills, without changing the language register of the speaker. Interpreters are also sometimes responsible for translating written documents, often of a legal nature, from English into the target language and from the target language into English.

- **What is the role of the court interpreter?**
  - The interpreter's role is to render a complete and accurate interpretation or translation without altering, omitting, or adding anything to what is stated or written, and without explanation. "Interpret" in this context does not mean explain. It means providing an equivalent meaning in the target language as the one stated in the source language. It is not the job of the interpreter to explain anything independent of what is being said by participants in the courtroom proceedings. It is not the interpreter's job to give advice to or otherwise counsel the non-English speaker in court, and it would be unethical for the interpreter to provide services other than interpreting from one language to another.

- **What kinds of skills does it take to be a court interpreter?**
  - **Being bilingual is not sufficient.** The level of expertise required for court interpreting is much greater than that required in everyday conversation. In addition to having a thorough command of English and the non-English language, a court interpreter must be able to deal with the specialized language of judges and attorneys as well as with the street slang of witnesses and the technical jargon of criminologists, police officers, expert witnesses, etc. The interpreter must also possess excellent mental skills, including the ability to accurately convert the source language into the target language and vice versa, often with only an instant to choose the equivalent words and phrases. In addition, it's very helpful for a court interpreter to have good public speaking and interpersonal skills. If the court testimony to be interpreted is shocking or traumatic, the interpreter must be able to perform the interpreting function without reacting or becoming emotionally involved. The interpreter must understand the interpreter's role; that is, the interpreter cannot express personal opinions or be an advocate for one side or the other in a court case. The interpreter must be able to work well under pressure and react quickly to solve complex linguistic and ethical problems as they arise. A good court interpreter must continually strive to improve his/her skills by reading from a wide variety of sources, researching new terms and concepts, and improving interpreting techniques

- **How do I study to become a court interpreter?**
  - First, know your languages. Full bilingual proficiency, ample vocabulary, and a knowledge of standard grammar are prerequisite.
  - You are encouraged to complete formal, college-level coursework and training in both languages and modes of interpreting. If no college-level courses are available, the

following self-study techniques are suggested: (1) expand your vocabulary, (2) develop your own glossaries, and (3) develop interpreting and note-taking techniques.
    - One indispensable self-training technique is to go to court and observe the proceedings. Mentally interpret to yourself. Can you do it? Write down the terms that stump you, and then look for solutions in dictionaries.

- **How can I become certified in Michigan?**
    - Exam registration dates and links can always be found on the Court Interpreter Certification webpage. You can also sign up for the Foreign Language Interpreter listserv to be notified when written exam registration is open.
    - Beginning in 2007, all previously uncertified interpreters will be required to take and pass a Written Examination before they may take the Oral Proficiency Examination. This will help to predict whether candidates are ready for the oral examination. Candidates for all languages take the exam at the same time. The cost is $60 to take the written exam.
    - When you have passed the Written Exam, then you will be eligible to take the oral certification test. Effective April 2020, candidates taking the oral exam will have their $60 that they paid for the written exam applied to their first oral exam.
    - You may also be granted reciprocity if you have taken and passed the Consortium test (all three portions) in another state.

- **What are the benefits of becoming a Certified Interpreter?**
    - The certification credential enhances the credibility and legitimacy of your skills as well as your marketability. As a member of the National Center for State Courts Consortium, Michigan administers standardized tests, which permits interstate reciprocity. This means that interpreters tested in other Consortium states may not have to retest in Michigan. In addition, the State Court Administrative Office's list of Certified Court Interpreters is public information, which appears on our website, and is intended for use as a resource that courts and others may use to contact certified interpreters directly and to arrange for their services as needed.

- **What does the Written Examination include?**
    - The exam is multiple choice and includes sections on the English language (vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, and idioms,), court-related terms and usage, and ethics and professional conduct. Interpreters must be well versed in the English language and must score 80 percent or higher in order to pass the exam (answer correctly at least 108 of the 135 questions).

- **How long does the Written Exam take?**
    - Candidates are allowed two hours and fifteen minutes to complete the examination.

- **How much does it cost to take the Written Exam?**
    - The cost is $60.

- **What does the Oral Exam include?**
  - The oral examination tests the candidates' skills in sight translation and consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, i.e., all three modes of professional interpreting.

- **How long does the Oral Exam take?**
  - The full oral examination takes about an hour.

- **How much does it cost to take the oral certification test?**
  - The cost varies depending upon the language.

- **Who designs the tests?**
  - The tests are designed and developed by teams of experts from several parts of the country who have extensive knowledge of courts and court proceedings, the job requirements for court interpreters, advanced training, or high levels of fluency in English and the non-English language.

- **Who scores the tests?**
  - The test is scored by teams of two interpreters who have, themselves, taken and passed a similar certification test. They have also received specific training and usually have experience in test administration and test scoring. All members of the teams are evaluated carefully to assure that they follow the testing standards established for the examination process.

- **What if I pass part of the oral examination and fail another part?**
  - If you pass only one of the three portions, you will need to retake the entire exam. If you pass two of the three portions in one sitting, you will have 2 years to take and pass the final portion at a reduced cost. If you do not pass the remaining portion within the 2 years, you will need to take the entire exam again.

- **How do I get work as an interpreter?**
  - The State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) does not hire interpreters. Instead, interpreters are appointed, scheduled, and paid directly by the trial court(s) that need their services.

- **Where can I obtain more information about becoming a court interpreter?**
  - The answers to many questions may be found by exploring our website, or you may contact staff at languageaccess@courts.mi.gov or 517-373-9526.