



NASCIO 2017 State IT Recognition Awards Nomination

Shared Remote Court Interpreting

State of Florida

Agency for State Technology

&

State Courts System

Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships

Project Initiation Date: February 2014

Project Completion Date: December 2015 (Phase I)

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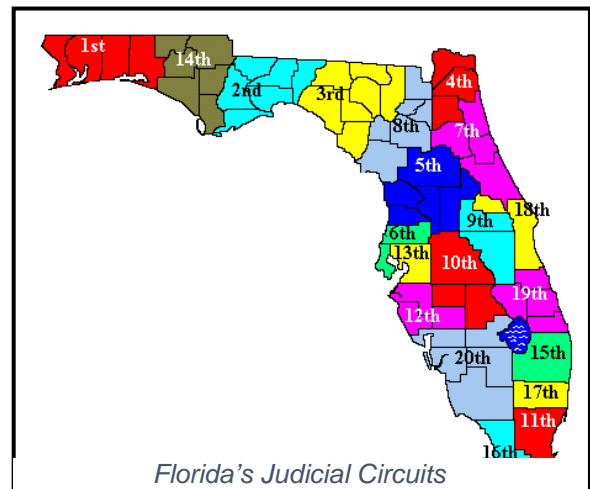
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Executive Summary

With a growing number of linguistic minorities in the State of Florida, it is important that our court system provide access to credentialed court interpreters to ensure the constitutional right of access to justice. Shared remote court interpreting is designed to deliver interpreting services using technology transforming the provision of court interpreting services in a way that benefits court participants, interpreters, courts, and taxpayers alike.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 27% of Florida's population are persons with limited English proficiency (LEP). Florida's state courts face multiple challenges in addressing the increased need for quality interpreting services amid a short supply of credentialed interpreters. While our state's large population centers are home to more interpreters, rural areas lack the same resources. By embracing technology, the Shared Remote Interpreting Project achieved a new business model to help the state courts overcome these obstacles.

A highly collaborative team of stakeholders was instrumental in developing the new business model for court interpreting. In 2014, the Florida Legislature appropriated \$100,000 to initiate a technology pilot across five judicial circuits and including the central state courts administrative office. Additionally, a partnership with Cisco Systems, Inc. contributed ongoing development and systems engineering analysis. To assess the success of the pilot, several court committees, comprised of judges and court administrators, were engaged statewide to refine the pilot approach and offer recommendations for full deployment.



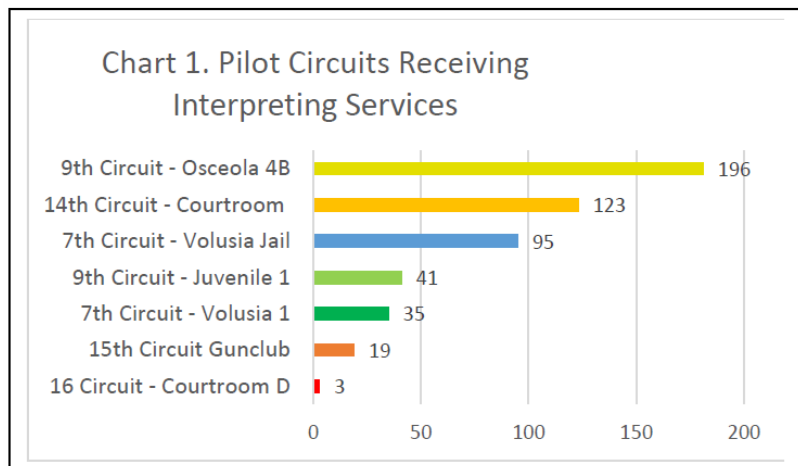
Elevating an innovative use of technology, shared remote court interpreting (a.k.a. Virtual Remote Interpreting) has been found to significantly increase both the **availability** and **quality** of interpreting services. It provides an opportunity to overcome geographical limitations through the willingness of judicial circuits to collectively pool their resources via the innovative use of technology. Further, it is estimated that 32% - or approximately 89,000 - of Florida court interpreting events currently occur using interpreters that have limited or no credentials. With an established statewide pool of credentialed interpreters, these resources may be made available to judicial circuits improving quality of service and assuring that court interpreter resources match demand.

Concept

Fair resolution of court matters for linguistic minorities is intertwined with a party's ability to fully participate in the court process. Currently, due to a lack of available credentialed interpreters, some Florida courts are forced to make compromises between access and quality. In some instances, court staff must spend hours or days locating a credentialed interpreter or pay expensive travel accommodations to bring a credentialed interpreter to the courtroom, especially for less common languages. Delays may occur in court proceedings when interpreters are not readily available. Or, when a credentialed interpreter cannot be found, a less qualified interpreter is used.

Trying to meet all language needs using only interpreters who can physically be in the court is neither practical nor economical. To help alleviate this problem, most courts have employed other modalities of court interpreting services such as telephonic or video conferencing. While these modes assist in providing quicker access to interpreters, they have several disadvantages. For instance, the interpreter's credentials may not be known if provided by an outside vendor, there is no opportunity for confidential client-attorney conversations, the modes are limited to consecutive mode interpretation (requires the interpreter to render an interpretation after the speaker has stopped speaking), and the background noise and lack of visual cues compromise accuracy of the interpretation.

A technology pilot was conducted to test shared remote interpreting, a promising new business process for providing interpreter services. The technology pilot comprised five judicial circuits from the Panhandle to the Keys: the Seventh, Ninth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth. During the pilot, the Seventh and Ninth circuits provided



interpreting services to remote locations within their own circuits (e.g., outlying counties) and other circuits on the statewide network. The Seventh Circuit provided 96 interpreting service events and the Ninth Circuit provided 417 interpreting events. These events occurred primarily to meet Spanish interpreting service needs, although events were conducted in Haitian-Creole, French, Greek, and Arabic languages as well.

A Shared Remote Interpreting Workgroup – which consisted of cross-over membership from the Trial Court Budget Commission, the Court Interpreter Certification Board, and the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability – was established to oversee the project. Judges, court administration professionals, court interpreters, and other stakeholders contributed to the project at various entry points. The Workgroup met several times between February 2014 and October 2015 to review live demonstrations of

shared remote interpreting as it was tested during the technology pilot. The technology pilot identified additional qualitative benefits of shared remote interpreting services: providing flexibility and timeliness in meeting interpretation needs. When used appropriately, virtual remote interpreting can reduce travel and “down time” associated with interpreters walking or driving between courtroom locations or waiting in one location between hearings. Virtual remote interpreting also enables confidential client-attorney conversation as well as simultaneous mode interpreting (allows for continuous interpreting at the same time someone is speaking), which is especially helpful in courtroom settings when judges engage in colloquies or makes statements intended for all courtroom participants.

The Workgroup initiated a six-month data collection effort on court interpreter workload. This data collection effort, conducted from August 2014 to January 2015, involved court interpreters entering information on a web-based form available through a subscription service referred to as Formstack for each court proceeding involving state-funded interpreter services. The information was used to develop resource distribution methodologies and study whether and how to expand the remote interpreting technology pilot to additional areas of the court system.

Through its study and deliberations, the Workgroup concluded that shared remote interpreting services can provide significant benefits to the Florida trial courts in the areas of efficiency, quality, and accountability. Accordingly, the Workgroup developed business model guidelines aimed at leveraging and maximizing state-funded resources using technology. These guidelines are documented in the Workgroup’s [2016 Report](#) to support establishing a statewide pool of court interpreters that are certified in accordance with the Florida Rules for Certification of Spoken Language Court Interpreters.

One of the critical components of the shared remote interpreting project is the Statewide Networking capabilities of the Florida Courts System. The remote interpreting pilot was successfully completed using the statewide infrastructure provided by the My Florida Network (MFN). The robust bandwidth and inherent redundancy of the Multiprotocol Label Switching (MPLS) high performance enterprise infrastructure facilitated the high-quality video and audio components of the remote interpreting sessions. Remote interpreting is provided real-time in live courtrooms; accordingly, high performance and reliability are essential to the success of the project.

Solution complexity was one risk that could have negatively impacted the remote interpreting pilot. The courts mitigated this risk by leveraging their extensive experience with video conferencing, which has been used in the courts for more than a decade. By implementing a solution that is an evolution of the video conferencing systems, there was a shallow learning curve for technical staff and the court infrastructure was already optimized for these audio/video sessions. Local Court Technology Officers were able to work with vendors when implementing technologies such as IP telephony, sound reinforcement, video conferencing units, video displays, and other components that were required from the hardware and software technology perspective.

Skilled human resources presented another risk that the courts were able to mitigate. Interpretation is a challenging and demanding professional skill. Interpretation coupled with managing the technology used in remote interpreting could be overwhelming if the solution is not designed to allow the interpreter to focus on the task of interpreting. To this end, interpreters were involved in planning and implementing the pilot, to ensure an effective system design that supported simultaneous interpretation. There are two types of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. While simultaneous interpreting reduces the time associated with a translation session, it is more demanding on the interpreter. Thus, providing an intuitive and minimally distracting environment was essential to the success of the pilot.

Information about the virtual remote interpreter pilot project has been communicated to court leadership and stakeholders at chief judges' meetings, the State Courts System Annual Report, the Full Court Press newsletter, the Florida Courts website, court education programs, and other court events. A [video](#) was produced to demonstrate the virtual remote interpreting pilot.

Significance

The Florida state court system recognized that ongoing oversight of a shared remote interpreting model is necessary to ensure that language access services paid for with public funds are provided in accordance with not only the mission and vision of the judicial branch but also the applicable federal and state laws. Thus, a Shared Remote Interpreting Governance Committee was established by the Florida Supreme Court via [administrative order](#) to assist with general oversight and administration, coordination of information and data collection, and recommendations on any necessary modifications for the shared remote interpreting services model. Members of the Governance Committee include a chief judge and other judges, court technology officers, due process services managers, staff interpreters, and court administrators from across the state.

Strategic Focus and Goals

Long Range Issue #2 of the [Long-Range Strategic Plan for the Judicial Branch: 2016-2021](#) calls for the courts to “Enhance Access to Justice and Court Services”.

Accordingly, the judicial branch is striving to identify and remove barriers to better provide meaningful access to linguistic minorities and others. The virtual remote interpreting project is an innovative program that allows the interpreter to control the audio and video from a remote location and allows the interpreter to be virtually present in the courtroom. The statewide pool of interpreters is designed to provide improved access to certified court interpreters, which are in short supply. It is also designed to bring efficiencies in the use of in-person interpreters who often have down time associated with travel between court events. Virtual remote interpreting enables simultaneous interpreting, as well as consecutive interpreting. Through the use of both video and audio components, remote interpreters can provide service as if they were

located in the courtroom; there is no degradation of service as there would be with telephone interpreting where the interpreter can only provide consecutive interpreting.

Impact

Like many states, Florida is experiencing an increased diversity of language needs amid a shortage of qualified court interpreters who can provide services in the courtroom. In Fiscal Year 2015-16, there were 285,205 court interpreting events statewide. The ready availability of properly credentialed court interpreters is essential to ensuring that litigants and witnesses can understand the court proceedings fully: what the judge is saying, what evidence is being presented, and what questions are being asked of witnesses. Court interpreting is even more important when an individual is representing himself/herself in court. If litigants do not understand the proceedings, their rights may be jeopardized and courtroom dockets may be delayed.

Case In Point: A Benefit to Florida's Third Judicial Circuit

Currently, there are no certified court interpreters in the Third Judicial Circuit comprising Suwannee, Columbia, Hamilton, Madison, Taylor, Dixie, and Lafayette counties. Some local contract interpreters have attempted to become court certified but have not yet been successful. The circuit offered scholarships to pay expenses for people to become certified, but that recruitment effort was ineffective. The current workload does not justify hiring a full-time staff interpreter. Additionally, the logistics of scheduling interpreters to travel among seven counties would not allow a single interpreter to cover all events in the circuit. Because of the limited options available, the circuit is required to pay contract interpreters to travel from Gainesville to the seven counties of the Third Judicial Circuit. Further exacerbating the problem is that contracts require a two hour minimum plus travel expenses, even though the court event may only take fifteen minutes.

To overcome these challenges, the Third Judicial Circuit requested funds to install equipment in two courtrooms as a part of the Shared Remote Interpreting Initiative. As a result, certified employee interpreters residing in Orlando, which is more than 150 miles away, assist in providing remote interpreting services to Columbia and Suwannee counties through the statewide network. In Columbia County, interpreters located in Orlando are used in county criminal court arraignments on a weekly basis for an average of 1.5 hours per week or 78 hours per year. The anticipated annual savings in Columbia County is \$11,800 in contract fees and travel expenses. In Suwannee County, interpreters located in Orlando provide services for county criminal court arraignments and felony events on an average of 3 hours per week or 156 hours per year. This saves approximately \$12,500 per year. By adding these two small, rural courtrooms to the Initiative, the State Courts System has saved an estimated \$24,300 annually in taxpayer dollars.

A Small Project with Big Implications

While this project is relatively small in comparison to other technology projects, it has far-reaching implications and may serve as a model to other state courts. At the direction of the Conference of State Courts Administrators, the National Center for State Courts is working to implement a national cloud capability to provide state courts with an opportunity to obtain access to national interpreters via the cloud. While many courts around the country have employed technology to various degrees to help with the ever-growing language access demands, most have done so through the use of basic communicative technology such as telephones and video conferencing systems. Advancements in the communicative technology industry now make it possible to provide service via virtual reality technology. The Florida Shared Remote Interpreting Project adapts the use of these capabilities with a sophisticated business model to bring efficiencies and credentialed interpreters into the courtroom. Thus, when a court interpreter is needed, a request for the specific language can be made from the courtroom through a menu on a touch screen tablet. This action allows a remote interpreter, from a statewide pool, to appear via video from a remote location. Florida is the first state to successfully pilot test and develop business model guidelines for shared remote interpreting services. The shared remote court interpreting project has resulted in guidelines to meet the diverse needs of the judicial circuits in Florida along with essential information on what works, what does not work, and what may prove useful for refining best practices nationally.

The Florida courts continue to seek ways to optimize court interpreting resources through the use technology and have requested funding to expand shared remote interpreting services across the state in order to provide a more consistent level of interpreting services at a potentially lower per-incident cost. Overall, with the implementation of shared remote interpreting services, quality may be improved because circuits can leverage state certified staff interpreter resources, thereby reducing reliance on interpreters lacking credentials. Together, these benefits will improve overall accountability of taxpayer funded court resources.