

Judicial Council of California

**COURT INTERPRETERS ADVISORY PANEL
MINUTES OF OPEN MEETING**

June 24, 2026

12:15 p.m. - 1:15 p.m.

Virtual

Members Present: Hon. Maurice Sanchez. (Chair), Ms. Anabel Romero (Vice-Chair), Mr. Hany Farag, Mr. José Navarrete, Ms. Anabel Romero, Hon. Tamara Hall, Ms. Jennifer De La Cruz, Ms. Angie Birchfield

Members Absent: Hon. Michael P. Pulos, Ms. Mary Ma, Ms. Stephanie Cameron, Mr. Bryan Kritzeck, Ms. Bonnie Faye Gibson-Brydon, Ms. Shirley Luo

Others Present: Mr. Ray Mata, Ms. Angela De Leon, Mr. Douglas Denton

OPEN MEETING

Call to Order and Roll Call

The chair called the meeting to order at 12:15, and took roll call.

Approval of Minutes

The advisory body reviewed and approved the minutes of the May 13, 2026, Court Interpreters Advisory Panel meeting.

DISCUSSION AND ACTION ITEMS (ITEMS X-X)

Item 1

Carryover of Bilingual Interpreting Examination Scores (No Action Required)

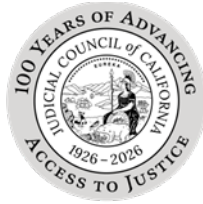
Mr. Douglas Denton, Principal Manager, Language Access Services Program, gave a presentation on potential changes to the court interpreter certification process aimed at strengthening the interpreter workforce and improving candidate success.

A member expressed concern that the proposed policy permitting candidates to carryover passing scores on individual sections of the certification examination could lower the competency standards expected of certified court interpreters. Other members stated that the proposal was reasonable and appropriate, noting that it could assist several candidates in progressing through the certification process, expand the pool of certified court interpreters, and help address the ongoing shortage of court interpreters.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 1:15 p.m.

Approved by the advisory body on enter date.



Judicial Council of California

455 Golden Gate Avenue · San Francisco, California 94102-3688

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REPORT TO THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL

Item No.:

For business meeting on October 16, 2026

Court Interpreters: Changes to Certification Requirements (DRAFT)

Judicial Council Report Details

Rules, Forms, Standards, or Statutes Affected

None

Effective Date

January 1, 2027

Recommended by

Court Interpreters Advisory Panel
Hon. Maurice Sanchez, Chair
Ms. Anabel Z. Romero, Vice-Chair

Date of Report

July 22, 2026

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Report Type

Action Required

Executive Summary

The Court Interpreters Advisory Panel recommends changes to the California court interpreter certification requirements while maintaining the program's high certification standards. The recommendations include: (1) requiring candidates to complete an orientation before taking interpreter examinations; (2) requiring candidates to pass the Oral Proficiency Examination (OPE) at the Advanced High level before taking the Bilingual Interpreting Examination (BIE), which is the oral exam required to obtain certified court interpreter status in major spoken languages; and (3) allowing candidates to retain passing scores on individual sections of the BIE for up to two years, with a one-time retroactive application for eligible candidates. These recommendations are intended to improve candidate success, expand the pool of qualified court interpreters, and strengthen language access in California's courts.

Recommendation

The Court Interpreters Advisory Panel recommends that the Judicial Council, effective January 1, 2027:

1. Require candidates to complete an orientation before taking interpreter examinations; and
2. Require candidates to pass the Oral Proficiency Examination (OPE) at the Advanced High level or higher before taking the Bilingual Interpreting Examination (BIE), the oral certification examination for spoken-language interpreters; and
3. Allow candidates to retain passing scores on individual sections of the BIE for up to two years, with a one-time retroactive application for eligible candidates.

Relevant Previous Council Action

California established a statewide court interpreter certification program in 1992 with the enactment of Government Code section 68562. The statute directs the Judicial Council to designate languages for certification; approve entities to test and certify interpreters; adopt guidelines, standards, and procedures for certification; and establish standards for interpreter proficiency, continuing education, certification renewal, and discipline. In response, the Judicial Council developed statewide testing and certification requirements for court interpreters.

As the demand for court interpreters expanded beyond Spanish, California developed a two-tier credentialing system. For certified languages, including Spanish and a limited number of other high-demand languages, candidates were required to pass a comprehensive written examination and a bilingual interpreting examination (BIE). For registered languages, where valid bilingual certification examinations were not available, candidates were required to demonstrate English proficiency and oral language proficiency in English and, when available, the target language.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the Judicial Council continued to strengthen the certification program by adopting more standardized, psychometrically validated examinations developed through national collaborations and testing experts. Effective in July 2010, the council's Court Interpreters Program (CIP) adopted the written and oral certification examinations developed by the Consortium for Language Access in the Courts, now managed by the National Center for State Courts. This decision was based on a comprehensive 2009 study conducted by ALTA Language Services, which concluded that the Consortium's examinations were functionally equivalent in structure and difficulty to California's existing certification examinations.¹ Under the new testing model, candidates seeking certification in spoken languages were required to

¹ ALTA Language Services, Inc. (2009). *California's Assessment of the Consortium for Language Access in the Courts' Exams*. Prepared for the Judicial Council of California (then the Administrative Office of the Courts).

pass all four sections of the bilingual interpreting examination with a minimum score of 70 on each section during a single sitting.²

The council also strengthened professional standards by implementing requirements for continuing education, ethics, and credential maintenance for certified and registered court interpreters. Statewide administration of interpreter testing and credentialing also advanced during this time, ensuring a consistent certification process across California's trial courts.

Analysis/Rationale

California courts continue to face a shortage of certified and registered spoken language court interpreters. The Judicial Council's *California Court Interpreter Workforce Study* (December 2025) found that in addition to a high number of vacancies for court interpreter employee positions, approximately 33% of credentialed interpreters are at retirement age (65+), threatening service continuity.³ To address the court interpreter workforce shortage, the council's Language Access Services Program has initiated recruitment, retention and credentialing strategies, including:

- Free exam preparation, skills-development training, and educational resources.
- Initiating the California Court Interpreter Workforce Pilot Program where participants receive financial support for educational training and exam fees, and in return, must work in the courts for at least three years after successfully passing all required exams.
- Modernized testing processes.
- Alternative credentialing models, including carryover testing scores and potential tiered certification systems.
- Multimedia outreach endeavors, including a centralized jobs board.

Challenges in the Interpreter Certification Pipeline

Candidates seeking certification must pass the Written Examination in English with a score of 80% or higher before advancing to the Bilingual Interpreting Examination (BIE). They must then pass the BIE for their respective spoken certified language and enroll with the Judicial Council to be included on the Judicial Council [Master List of Certified and Registered Court Interpreters](#).⁴

² The oral court interpreter examination consists of four test sections that measure the core skills required for court interpreting. Candidates complete two sight translation exercises (English-to-target language and target language-to-English), one consecutive interpreting exercise, and one simultaneous interpreting exercise.

³ Judicial Council of California, *California Court Interpreter Workforce Study*, December 2025, pp. 27, 29, 36.

⁴ The BIE is an oral exam that is administered in the following California certified spoken languages: Arabic (Egyptian/Levantine), Armenian (Eastern), Cantonese, Farsi (Persian), Filipino (Tagalog), Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi (India), Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. The BIE is maintained by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) for several major languages, including nine of California's certified languages. The exams are accessible to states that pay annual dues to the NCSC, which provides access to a national exam bank for participating states. In California, the NCSC BIEs have been supplemented by similar exams created for Spanish and other languages unique to our state (e.g., Armenian (Eastern), Farsi (Persian), and Punjabi (India)).

The BIE is recognized for its high level of difficulty. Candidates are required to demonstrate advanced oral bilingual proficiency, mastery of legal terminology, and strong real-time interpreting skills. They must be able to interpret rapid speech and various language registers, which contributes to consistently low pass rates. Recent data highlights the low overall pass rate and significant challenge of passing the BIE without additional training (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Candidate Passers of BIE (Required for Qualification as Certified Interpreter)

Description	Testing Year 2023	Testing Year 2024	Testing Year 2025	Testing Year 2026 (to date)
Total number of BIE takers	322	403	472	201
Overall pass rate	9% (31/322)	8% (32/403)	8% (39/472)	5% (9/201)

Table 2 shows the number of individuals who took the near-passer training and then went on to retake the BIE, showing a significant improvement in overall passage rates.

Table 2. Number of Near-Passer Candidates Passing the BIE

Description	Testing Year 2023	Testing Year 2024	Testing Year 2025	Testing Year 2026 (to date)
Total number of near-passers who took the BIE and the near passer training	41	40	44	26
Total number of near-passers who took the training and passed the BIE within 12 months of training completion	10	8	14	0
Total number of near-passers who took the training and passed the BIE after 12 months taking the near passer training.	2	3	5	n/a
Overall Near-Passer BIE Pass Rate (%)	29% (12/41)	28% (11/40)	43% (19/44)	n/a

Note: Although the table displays the year in which candidates took or passed the BIE, individual near-passer candidates may have completed the training in a prior year.

CIP tests for the BIE in the Spring and Fall each year. Although no near-passers from the Spring 2026 administration passed the BIE, 17 of those candidates came within one to three percentage points of passing all required sections, demonstrating the potential benefit of targeted remediation and carryover scores. Eligible candidates will be able to test again in Fall 2026.

Like California, several states require candidates to achieve a minimum score of 70 on each examination section. Others, including Arizona, Minnesota, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Rhode

Island, allow candidates to carry forward passing section scores rather than requiring all sections to be passed during a single examination administration.

Differences in examination policies can significantly affect candidate success rates. Table 3 summarizes, by language, the number of candidates during 2023–2025 who: (1) passed one examination section—simultaneous interpretation, consecutive interpretation, or sight translation (for carryover scores, both directions of the sight translation section must be completed in the same sitting); (2) passed any two examination sections; and (3) ultimately completed all three examination sections by passing two sections and the remaining section on a subsequent attempt. Candidates who passed all required sections in a single sitting are not included in these metrics. The data suggest that many candidates could qualify for retroactive certification under this model, while others could benefit from a carryover score policy that enables them to focus on developing the skills needed to pass their remaining examination section(s).

Table 3. Candidate Performance by Language and Number of Sections Passed (2023–2025)

Language	Passed One Section	Passed Two Sections	Passed Three Sections (Completed Carryover)
Arabic (Egyptian)	3	1	1
Arabic (Levantine)	1	1	0
Cantonese	0	4	2
Farsi (Persian)	3	1	0
Korean	1	1	0
Mandarin	16	5	5
Portuguese	1	1	0
Punjabi (India)	0	1	1
Russian	10	7	0
Spanish	101	82	52
Tagalog (Filipino)	3	0	0
Vietnamese	1	0	0
Totals:	140	104	61

Table 4 below illustrates candidate performance trends across BIE administrations from 2023 to 2025. The simultaneous interpreting section is the most challenging section of the BIE.

Table 4. Candidate Performance by Section Type Passed (2023–2025)

	Number	Percentage
Candidates who passed the simultaneous section	85	12%
Candidates who passed the consecutive section	212	30%
Candidates who passed the sight translation sections (both parts in one sitting)	234	34%

Note: Based on analysis of 698 unique candidates. Candidates who passed all required sections in a single sitting are excluded from this analysis.

Policy Innovation: Carryover Scores for BIE Sections

A carryover score policy allows candidates who pass individual sections of the oral court interpreter exam to retain credit for those sections for a limited period (e.g., two years), rather than retaking the entire exam. During that period, candidates need only retake the section(s) they did not pass. However, the two sight translation sections must be completed during the same testing session, while credits for other passed sections may be carried over until all required sections are successfully completed within the carryover period. To earn certification, candidates must receive a score of 70 or higher on the simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting, and sight translation portions of the examination.

The policy will be applied retroactively, on a one-time basis, to candidates who passed one or more examination sections beginning in 2023 (see Table 3). Sixty-one candidates have already passed all three sections and would become immediately eligible for certification, contingent upon accepting court employment and remaining available to provide in-person or remote court interpreter services for at least three years, thereby helping courts address interpreter shortages. Other eligible candidates who complete their remaining one or two sections within two years of the policy's implementation would also be eligible for certification under the same employment commitment. This approach allows candidates to focus on the areas needing improvement while reducing retesting costs and helping courts fill interpreter vacancies more quickly.

Although candidates may achieve passage of the BIE over two years rather than in a single sitting, the requirement to earn a minimum score of 70 percent in each section—and to pass both sight translation sections in the same session—ensures that courtroom interpreting standards remain rigorous. By acknowledging partial achievement and promoting targeted skill development, this change addresses the BIE's historically low passage rate, increases the number of certified interpreters, and improves language access for court users. Several courts, including Los Angeles Superior Court, have reported significant numbers of interpreter employee vacancies. The carryover approach, including retroactive application, will help fill those vacancies and provide relief to candidates, allowing them to avoid repeatedly paying the full exam fee by studying for and retaking only the necessary sections.

Other Testing Innovations

To further uphold the high standards of interpreter services in California's courts, two additional measures are recommended: (1) requiring candidates to complete an orientation before taking interpreter examinations, and (2) implementing a language proficiency screener before candidates sit for the BIE. Together, these measures will improve candidate preparedness, testing outcomes, and the efficiency of the certification process.

Candidate Orientation

Requiring candidates to complete an orientation would familiarize them with the role of court interpreters, ethics, court procedures, examination content, and performance expectations, enabling them to make informed decisions before investing significant time and resources in the certification process. Several states already require orientation as part of their certification programs. For example, Delaware requires candidates to attend a mandatory orientation seminar before registering for the written examination, while Washington and Nevada require candidates to complete orientation training before advancing to oral testing.

Language Proficiency Screener

Implementing an Oral Proficiency Examination (OPE) requirement before candidates take the BIE would verify that they possess the bilingual language proficiency needed to succeed on the examination. Several states—including Utah, Tennessee, Arkansas, Arizona, and California for certain registered-language interpreter pathways—already use an OPE or similar assessment to screen candidates before they advance to more rigorous credentialing examinations. These assessments help candidates evaluate their readiness, encourage targeted preparation, reduce unsuccessful examination attempts, and focus testing resources on applicants who have demonstrated the foundational language proficiency required for interpreting.

Under this proposal, candidates seeking to take the BIE would be required to achieve an Advanced High or higher rating on the OPE before advancing to the BIE. This requirement aligns with the proficiency standard already used for California’s registered court interpreter credential.

Policy implications

The recommendations revise the Judicial Council’s Court Interpreters Program certification requirements to improve the efficiency of the certification process while maintaining the standards required for certification. The proposed changes are intended to expand the pool of qualified court interpreter candidates without lowering competency requirements.

Comments

Public comment was not solicited because the recommended changes to California’s court interpreter certification requirements, which implement carryover scores for the BIE, are operational in nature and therefore fall within the Judicial Council’s authority to approve without circulation for public comment. Prompt implementation will also support ongoing efforts to address the current shortage of certified court interpreters.

Alternatives considered

A mentoring program to help candidates prepare for and pass the required examinations was considered. However, this approach was not recommended because implementing and sustaining a statewide mentoring program for the hundreds of candidates in the certification pipeline, across multiple languages, would require significant time and resources.

Fiscal and Operational Impacts

No significant fiscal or operational impacts are anticipated for the trial courts or Judicial Council. To implement carryover scores, CIP will work with its testing vendor to administer individual BIE sections, establish pricing, update tracking and communication systems, and notify eligible candidates. As part of the program implementation in 2027, candidate records will be updated to include individuals who took the BIE in 2026. This update will increase the number of candidates eligible for carryover scores. The Judicial Council will coordinate with the courts to identify employment opportunities for candidates who become eligible for certification under the retroactive carryover policy, including those who qualify immediately and those who qualify after completing their remaining examination sections during the carryover period. The orientation and OPE screening requirements will be implemented using existing program resources. Language Access Services will continue to provide annual reports for the public on the number of test takers and examination pass rates.

Attachments and Links

1. Judicial Council, [*California Court Interpreter Workforce Study*](#), December 2025
2. Judicial Council [Master List of Certified and Registered Court Interpreters](#)