

**February 14, 2012**

## **D.C. Judge Spearheads ABA Adoption of Language Access Standards**

During the American Bar Association's midyear meeting earlier this month in New Orleans, the House of Delegates adopted a new set of [language access standards \(PDF\)](#) for courts nationwide. The vote was especially good news for District of Columbia Court of Appeals Judge Vanessa Ruiz, a leading proponent.

Since 2010, Ruiz has chaired the creation of new standards as a member of the ABA's Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants. The House of Delegates put the language access measure [on hold at the annual ABA meeting](#) in August, but Ruiz said she came into the midyear meeting with full support from judges and court administrators.

Ruiz, in a phone interview, said the standards are designed to help courts better assist the “great numbers” of people who come to courts with a language barrier.



“It’s a combination of wanting to enhance access to justice and recognizing that for a large group of people...the lack of adequate interpretation and translation was a real obstacle,” she said.

The standards, which were adopted Feb. 6, encourage courts to identify and make court services accessible to litigants with limited or no proficiency in English. That can include making translators more readily available, for example, and setting up procedures for judges to follow once they realize a litigant cannot understand proceedings.

Providing equal access to justice for non- or limited-English speakers has long been required by law, Ruiz said, but the standards are meant to help courts put the concept into practice.

The House of Delegates’ decision in August to delay a vote was motivated, at least in part, by a concern among judges and court administrators that the standards would strain already tight court budgets, Ruiz said. She said that over the past few months, the committee tried to address those concerns and do some other “minor tweaking.”

“When we came before the ABA at the midyear meeting, we came with a full backing of the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators,” Ruiz said. She

noted that the current president of the chief justices group, District of Columbia Court of Appeals Chief Judge Eric Washington, gave remarks in favor of adoption at the midyear meeting.

The standards are guidelines, so they don't come with an enforcement mechanism, but Ruiz said that "we would hope that courts will immediately start to look at what they're doing within their own court systems against the standards."

In terms of the local courts system in Washington, Ruiz called it "quite progressive" in terms of language access. The system is "not perfect, but has come a long way," she said.

Spanish is consistently the most requested language in local courts, but Ruiz said a new challenge will be keeping up with the demands of the region's growing Asian population, which, for example, includes speakers of different Chinese dialects.

Ruiz said she also wants to see lawyers and the legal community at large take steps to make sure clients with limited or no English proficiency can communicate with their attorneys.

"These are the players, they have responsibilities as well," she said.

***National Law Journal photo by Diego M. Radzinski.***

Posted by Zoe Tillman on February 14, 2012 at 01:33 PM