



## HARRIS COUNTY DISTRICT & COUNTY COURTS

*For Immediate Release*

### Harris County District and County Courts celebrate adoption of expanded Language Access Plan with Signing Ceremony

Dec. 18, 2024 — The Harris County District Courts and County Courts at Law have adopted an updated Language Access Plan that aims to help community members who aren't fluent in English better navigate the justice system.

Under the plan, access to language assistance services, such as courtroom interpreters and translators, will be expanded for individuals with limited English proficiency.

The expanded access includes an increase in the availability of interpretation and translation services in court proceedings — for plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, victims, parents or guardians of minors, and others participating in proceedings or programs operated by the courts.

The new services are subject to funding from the Harris County Commissioners Court.

"We believe all who interact with the justice system should be able to understand what is happening — not just the proceedings, but all the forms, processes, and resources associated with them," said Judge Toria Finch, Harris County Local Administrative Judge for the 20 County Courts at Law and presiding judge of Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 9.

"The Courts are committed to prioritizing this issue and expanding services, and we hope to get the funding to be able to do it."

Because personal liberty is at stake, the criminal and juvenile district courts and county criminal courts already provide interpreters for all who come before the court and can't speak English fluently. Spanish interpreters are available daily and some court forms are available in both English and Spanish. However, court proceedings are often delayed when someone needs interpretation or translation services in a language other than Spanish.

In the civil and family district courts and county civil courts, interpreters are provided upon request for individuals who can't speak English fluently and have been found to be indigent. But not everyone who comes before the civil courts knows they can request language access services.

The new plan allows for expanded access to court interpreters as well as the translation of existing court forms into more languages. It also calls on the courts to increase public awareness about the resources so community members will know how and when to request them.

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“Our judiciary has come together as a united front to ensure that language — the very thing that connects us — does not impede access to justice in the courts,” said Judge Latosha Lewis Payne, Harris County Local Administrative Judge for the 67 District Courts and presiding judge of the 55th District Court.

“I want to personally thank the tireless effort and collaboration put forth by all stakeholders involved in this process: the Department of Justice, Harris County Commissioners, our colleagues at the Harris County Courts of Law, and our Harris County District Courts Ad Hoc Language Access Committee, which includes Judge Nata Cornelio, Judge Gloria Lopez, Judge Ana Martinez, and Judge Christine Weems. It is my sincere wish that the new plan better serves and reflects Harris County’s growing diverse community.”

The Language Access Plan was developed by the Harris County District and County Courts at Law in coordination with the Administrative Office of the District Courts, Office of Court Management, and U.S. Department of Justice. It was approved by the Harris County Courts at Law in September and the Harris County District Courts in October.

It replaces the Harris County Limited English Proficiency Plan for Court Proceedings, which was adopted in 2012.

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