

SPEAKING OF JUSTICE:

County courts deal with growing language gap

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Body

Three years ago, Marly Smith searched desperately for anyone who could **speak** Visayan ---a Philippine dialect of Tagalog. Smith was responsible for providing foreign **language** interpreters for criminal defendants in Gwinnett **County's court** system.

Her crude list of interpreters, people who claimed to **speak** other **languages** and had time to spend in **court**, turned up no one. She finally found a native Filipino woman working as a deli clerk at a Lawrenceville A&P store and pressed her into service.

As increasing numbers of immigrant and minority residents settle here, officials have been forced to find more efficient ways to serve those who end up in **court** but don't **speak** English. In doing so, they have toughened their selection process for interpreters and, with help from the state, tried to cultivate a more professional and qualified bank of interpreters.

In metro Atlanta, the immigrant population has quadrupled in two decades, with an estimated 266,000 immigrants and refugees living here. Gwinnett's immigrant and minority population swelled by 8,500 documented residents from 1990 to 1995, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission and Gwinnett's planning division.

Most of the foreign-**language** speakers who show up in Gwinnett courtrooms **speak** Spanish, Vietnamese or Korean.

Brenda Avera, deputy director of trial services in Gwinnett, has worked for the **county's court** system since 1987, when she started as a calendar clerk for Chief Superior **Court** Judge Homer Stark. She said she can't remember ever needing a **court** interpreter back then. These days, she fields six to 12 requests a week.

That's understandable, since 99 percent of Hispanics, 95 percent of Vietnamese and 85 percent of Koreans who end up in Gwinnett's **courts** don't **speak** English, said Anna Wlasiuk, who has been an interpreter in more than 5,000 **court** cases in metro Atlanta since coming to Georgia in 1993.

Court officials must choose interpreters carefully, said Wlasiuk, who **speaks** Spanish, Russian, Romanian and German. With personal bias and an imprecise knowledge of the **language** they **speak**, unskilled interpreters can skew the legal process for a non-English speaker. They also have to fend off the urge to advise those for whom they interpret.

"Just because you **speak** another **language** doesn't mean you understand **court** processes and terminology," added Gwinnett **Court** Administrator Art O'Neill.

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Gwinnett judges recently adopted a code of professional responsibility for court interpreters and guidelines drafted by the Georgia Supreme Court Commission on Equality to ensure that they are qualified, accurate and impartial. All of those are important in protecting the rights of those who don't speak English as they move through the court system, O'Neill said.

Avera now uses only proven interpreters who adhere to commission guidelines and the professional code.

Graphic

Color Photo: In other words: Anna Wlasiuk takes a familiar post in a

Gwinnett courtroom, where she has interpreted court proceedings in

numerous cases for people who do not speak English. / Phil Skinner /
Staff

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