

Date of Hearing: March 17, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
Ash Kalra, Chair
AB 1916 (Lee) – As Introduced February 12, 2026

SUBJECT: COURTS: COURT INTERPRETERS

KEY ISSUE: SHOULD SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS BE INCLUDED IN THE TRIAL COURT INTERPRETER EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR RELATIONS ACT?

SYNOPSIS

Following a transition of the majority of the state's court interpreters from independent contractors to direct court employees, SB 371 (Escutia) Chap. 1047, Stats 2002 was enacted and established the Trial Court Interpreter Employment and Labor Relations Act (Act). Among its many provisions, the Act provides certain workplace protections for court interpreters. The initial legislation recognized the importance of the state's court interpreters to promote access to justice to all of the state's populations. At the time the bill was approved by the Legislature in 2002, for one reason or another, it excluded American Sign Language interpreters. Nearly twenty-five years later, this bill seeks to expand the Act to include ASL interpreters to ensure that all court-employed interpreters receive the benefit of the Act's protections. This bill is sponsored by the California Federation of Interpreters. There is no known opposition.

SUMMARY: Expands the Trial Court Interpreter Employment and Labor Relations Act to include sign language interpreters.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Trial Court Interpreter Employment and Labor Relations Act. (Government Code Section 71800 *et seq.*)
- 2) Defines “certified interpreter” and “registered interpreter” as a natural person who either 1) holds a valid certificate as a certified court interpreter issued by a certification entity approved by the Judicial Council or 2) until January 1, 1996, is named and maintained on the list of recommended court interpreters previously established by the State Personnel Board or established by an entity provisionally approved under one of the certification program designated by the Judicial Council. Excludes sign language interpreters from the Act. (Government Code Section 71801 (a).)
- 3) Defines “qualified interpreter” as an interpreter who has been certified as competent to interpret court proceedings by a testing organization, agency, or educational institution approved by the Judicial Council as qualified to administer tests to court interpreters for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. (Evidence Code Section 754 (f).)

FISCAL EFFECT: As currently in print this bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS: In 2002, the Legislature approved SB 371 (Escutia), Chap. 1047, Stats. 2002, which established the Trial Court Interpreter Employment and Labor Relations Act (TCIELRA or Act). The Act was proposed and enacted at a time when the majority of court interpreters

throughout the state were transitioning from being independent contractors to direct employees of the court. As reflected in the initial legislation's legislative findings, "[c]ourt interpreters provide constitutionally mandated sign and spoken language services to the court, attorneys, defendants, victims, and witnesses in trial court proceedings. These services are vital to ensuring access and fairness in the trial courts. The purpose of this act is to provide for the fair treatment of court interpreters, to enhance access to the court system for persons who depend upon the services of interpreters, and to promote sound court management." While the bill was being considered by the Assembly, it was amended to exempt sign language interpreters from its scope.

In part, TCIELRA set out procedures for the transition of its court interpreters from independent contractors to direct employees. It incorporated a two year "regional transition period" providing guidelines for courts to hire interpreters, and included provisions to ensure those that had already been providing interpretation services as independent contractors were considered first for direct hiring. Of particular relevance today, TCIELRA requires trial courts to appoint *trial court employees*, rather than independent contractors, to perform interpretations in court proceedings, and requires interpreters to be employees of the trial court or another trial court on cross-assignment. (Government Code Section 71802 (a).) While the Act does have allowances for appointment of independent contractors for interpretation services, the emphasis on ensuring most if not all interpretation services are provided by direct employees is clear. TCIELRA also establishes workplace protections for court interpreters including statutory authorization to form, join, and participate in a union. (Government Code Section 71813.)

This bill would eliminate the exclusion of sign language interpreters from TCIELRA and explicitly include ASL interpreters within the Act. According to the author:

Access to justice depends on the ability of every court participant to understand and be understood. For Deaf and hard-of-hearing Californians who rely on American Sign Language (ASL), qualified interpreters are essential to ensuring that court proceedings are fair, accurate, and accessible. Yet despite playing a critical role in our justice system, ASL interpreters working in California's trial courts are currently excluded from the same collective bargaining framework as other court interpreters.

AB 1916 allows ASL interpreters to participate in the collective bargaining process established under the Trial Court Interpreter Employment and Labor Relations Act (TCIELR). Becoming a certified ASL interpreter requires years of education, specialized training, and national certification, and yet these professionals do not receive the same workplace protections as their counterparts who interpret spoken languages.

AB 1916 promotes fairness, strengthens language access, and helps ensure that our courts remain accessible to all Californians by ensuring that ASL interpreters are included in the same bargaining structure as other court interpreters.

What was true then continues to be true today – court interpreters provide a vital service to Californians endeavoring to navigate the judicial system. As of March 2025, the Judicial Council reported nearly 1,856 certified registered court interpreters representing 114 spoken languages and ASL on their Master List of certified and registered court interpreters. The same report reflected that from 2020 – 2024, the superior courts reported *over 2.5 million interpretations*. (2025 Language Need and Interpreter Use Study (June 2025) Judicial Council of California, p. 16 available at: [2025 Language Need and](https://languageaccess.courts.ca.gov/system/files/2025-)
Inthttps://languageaccess.courts.ca.gov/system/files/2025-

07/2025%20Language%20Need%20and%20Interpreter%20Use%20Study.pdf) The same report listed American Sign Language among the most-interpreted languages, with over 20,000 instances between 2020 and 2024. While those 20,000 make up less than one percent of the overall interpretations throughout the state, they represent over 20,000 individual interactions with the court where a party received assistance to fully comprehend the legal matter at issue.

Committee staff has asked a variety of stakeholders for a reason behind the original exemption but has not received a definitive answer, nor is there any clear indication in the bill's legislative history. It seems the underlying reason for the exemption may be anything from the role sign language interpreters initially assumed in the courts at the time of enactment of SB 371 to how their funding was determined. Whatever the reason may have been when the Act was passed nearly 25 years ago, it seems reasonable today to provide ASL interpreters the full benefit of the Act's protections.

Absent any additional information justifying the exclusion of ASL interpreters, this bill seems to propose a reasonable approach to ensure that the community of workers providing an important service are able to access the protections the Legislature considered appropriate for interpreters generally.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: This bill is sponsored by the California Federation of Interpreters. In support of the measure they submit:

Access to American Sign Language services is essential to a fair justice system. Every day, people rely on these court interpreters to participate in these court proceedings and make sure their voices are being meaningfully heard. Without these services, many people face barriers in the courts legal system, which could result in significant consequences affecting their livelihood.

AB 1916 looks to strengthen California's commitment to equal access by ensuring that the framework regarding court interpreters reflects the importance and need for these services across California's courts. This bill recognizes the importance of American Sign Language interpreters in creating proper access to justice for the deaf and hard of hearing community. These individuals must be able to properly communicate and interact with judge, attorneys, and other court staff just as any other individual.

Expanding the provisions of the Trial Court Interpreter Employment and Labor Relations Act to include American Sign Language interpreters is an important step in creating a more consistent and fairer framework across the court interpreter profession. Court Interpreters do important and specialized work that involves extensive training and certification. Ensuring that ALL court interpreters-including sign language- are being properly recognized and compensated for their work is critical to this profession.

Courts across California continue to face challenges when it comes to recruiting and keeping qualified interpreters employed in the courts. The demand for court interpreters continues to grow, as well as the gaps in service. California needs a strong court interpreter workforce, adding sign language interpreters to this legislation helps bridge those gaps building strength in this area. Courts should be looking to employ interpreters instead of looking outward to independent contractors. When courts have a stable and supported staff of interpreters, they

can confidently rely on them to ensure court proceedings needing interpreters are operating efficiently.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Federation of Interpreters

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Manuela Boucher-de la Cadena / JUD. / (916) 319-2334