



2020 OUTSTANDING STATE INNOVATION OF THE YEAR STATEWIDE LANGUAGE ACCESS

Nebraska's Statewide Language Access program collaborated with Northeast Community College to launch an innovative program in fall 2019 aimed at increasing the number of certified court interpreters.

Currently, Nebraska has the largest limited English proficient (LEP) population in the Midwest and is second only to Minnesota in providing Language Access in its Judicial Branch. The state has 30 interpreters to serve more than 90 counties. Due to the multiple refugee resettlement programs and increased immigration, the need for language access has outpaced the availability of interpreters. Individuals who speak limited English rely upon trained court interpreters to access judicial services.

Knowing of this challenge, Northeast Community College reached out to Statewide Language Access coordinator Jennifer Verhein in June 2019 in hopes of increasing the number of aspiring interpreters who pass the written and court interpreter certification exams. The College initiated a class for English Language Learners to prepare them for freelance court reporter opportunities that pay family sustaining wages. Affirming the Nebraska Supreme Court's commitment to ensuring that individuals with limited English skills can participate meaningfully in Judicial Branch programs and services using qualified interpreters at no personal cost.

By September 2019, Jennifer had shared numerous interpreter training resources, arranged for coaching by certified Nebraska court interpreters, and devised flexible test schedule options. In addition, she collaborated with Julie Clark of Northeast Community College in the development of course syllabi, co-hosted informational sessions, generated local and statewide media coverage, and provided a two-day Court Interpreter Orientation workshop with the active participation of Nebraska's Court Interpreter Coordinators on site at Northeast Community College. This is a first-ever partnership in the nation to offer tuition-free preparation courses to English language students at no cost using Northeast Community College Adult Education grant programs. The class helps students prepare for the 135-question Written Exam, which covers English vocabulary related to the court system as well as protocol for interpreters. Interpreters must develop native-like proficiency in English and a second language using everyday terms as well as informal, casual language and slang. At the same time, they need to be able to communicate in the higher-level vocabulary of the law.

"Jennifer has been an enviable champion for our students in this venture and we are so grateful for her passion for adult learners," said Julie Clark, Adult Education Coordinator, Northeast Community College.