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Barriers to Justice for Non-English Speakers in Pennsylvania Courts

New Report from Temple Law School Highlights Need for Reform of Language Access Services

Philadelphia, PA (February 2, 2015) – A new report from the Sheller Center for Social Justice at Temple Law School reveals Pennsylvania’s lowest level courts often failed to ensure that people with limited English proficiency understood court procedures and hearings. Authored by law students in the Social Justice Lawyering Clinic, the report is based on a 2014 survey of Pennsylvania’s magisterial district judge courts. The report comes as the state judicial system is formulating its county and statewide language access plans early this year.

“Magisterial district judge courts handle important cases such as tenants facing eviction or domestic violence victims seeking a protection from abuse orders. Because litigants in these courts frequently do not have attorneys, they are in dire need of assistance from the court if they are limited English proficient,” said Alicia Anguiano, a 3L law student and co-author of the report.

The report found that the courts often operated in violation of federal and state laws requiring state courts to provide language access services. According to the report, problems included litigants being told to bring a friend as interpreter and court clerks who could not communicate with limited English proficient individuals about court procedures. It also found that there were no uniform policies or practices across Pennsylvania for providing language assistance to limited English proficient individuals and that district court administration did not provide adequate training or oversight to court staff.

“The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts is currently undergoing a process to develop both county and state level language access plans. We hope that the state will take our findings into account as it formulates requirements to ensure that limited English proficient individuals have access to the state courts,” said Danielle Newsome, another 3L law student and co-author of the report.

The report offers a series of recommendations drawn from other state court systems, which include establishing guidelines for ensuring that certified or qualified interpreters are provided in

all proceedings, improving communication between court staff and limited English speakers, and notifying individuals of their right to language services.

For more information, please contact Rebecca Schatschneider, Director of Law School Communications, (267) 670-0882, lawcomm@temple.edu. The report is available at: www.law.temple.edu/Pages/Law_School/cs.j.aspx.

Students in the Social Justice Lawyering Clinic at the Sheller Center for Social Justice, under the guidance of Professor Jennifer Lee, engage in advocacy on behalf of legally underserved groups in Pennsylvania.