

TRI-STATE AREA

The Silent Problem Facing the Nation's Courtrooms

A shortage of court reporters across the U.S. is prompting some courts to delay legal proceedings and others to ask people to work extra shifts.

By Alexis Gravely

Courtrooms across the country have a quiet and growing problem: a shortage of court reporters.

A lack of stenographers is prompting some courts to delay legal proceedings and others to ask people to work extra shifts. Many proceedings can't legally go forward without the presence of court reporters, who attend depositions, hearings and trials and create word-for-word transcripts that serve as an official and complete record. Three years ago, 17,700 people worked as court reporters in the U.S., according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As of May 2018, that number was around 14,500, a decline of about 18%.

"There is a severe shortage and it's rough," said Nancy Varallo, who owns a Massachusetts-based court reporting firm. She said her firm turns down about five assignments a day because there aren't enough reporters for the jobs.

Court reporters are the “silent people” in the courtroom, said Max Curry, the president-elect of the National Court Reporters Association.

As longtime court reporters retire, new reporters aren’t stepping in to take over, said Toby Feldman, who owns a court-reporter agency based in Manhattan. People are simply unaware the career exists, some say.

The median salary for a court reporter is about \$57,000, according to BLS. Some can earn more than \$100,000, depending on their experience.

For people who do enroll in schools to become court reporters, the dropout rate hovers around 80% to 85% due to its difficulty, Mr. Curry said.

California and Texas are two of the states with the largest shortages. They are also the states with the most difficult certification tests, said Mr. Curry. In March, only six of the 111 students who took the California certification exam passed.

A few months ago, when court reporter Shari Krieger, 48 years old, got sick, she called several firms to find a replacement. When no one was available, the judge had to reschedule the entire day. “Everybody was there ready to go,” said Ms. Krieger, who works in the Fort Worth, Texas, area. “To know that nothing can happen without you—that’s a big responsibility.”

Court reporters use stenotype machines to capture courtroom dialogue in shorthand, a form of writing that can be typed more quickly and uses phonetic spellings rather than exact spellings to create words. Most modern stenotype machines translate shorthand to words in real time.

At Plaza College in Queens, N.Y., students spend two semesters learning the theory behind court reporting—such as how to write shorthand and legal terminology—before taking different levels of speed classes. At the end of the two-year program, students are expected to be able to type at 225 words a minute.

“I studied and practiced for four hours a day at the beginning of the program,” said Brianna D’Amico, 20, of Hicksville, N.Y., who just graduated.

“The thing with this profession, it really is a well-kept secret,” said Karen Santucci, director of the court reporting program at Plaza College. “People really don’t know about it.”

Fewer schools are offering court-reporting programs. There are 28 programs approved by the National Court Reporters Association, down from 38 four years ago. Ms. Feldman said the high cost of attending school—Plaza College’s program is about \$7,225 per semester, plus the \$1,845 stenotype machine—and low graduation rates are also deterrents.

Reporters in New York’s state supreme courts are assigned to a specific judge and often work throughout the day, said Eric Allen, union president for the Association of Surrogates and Supreme Court Reporters in New York City. If they finish early, they may now be asked to go to a different courthouse and cover another job because there aren’t any reporters to fill it, said Mr. Allen, who has worked in the industry for 31 years.

Several courts in New York, California and Texas didn’t respond to a request for comment for this article.

Mr. Curry said some attorneys have been forced to reschedule depositions to fit the availability of the court reporters. Mr. Allen said courts in the city have had to wait for a court reporter to become available until they can do proceedings.

Some courts and lawyers have tried to cope with the reporter shortage by using digital recording and transcribing technology. Courts have found, however, that they were often unable to get an accurate record of proceedings, which can lead to judges and attorneys having to redo proceedings.

Ms. Santucci said transcriptions—even with accurate recordings—can be made difficult by background noise and inaudible speech. A court reporter, she said, can correct on-the-fly by asking courtroom speakers to repeat sentences.

“You need the human factor,” she said. “Alexa and Siri can’t take over.”