

Court reporters

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Welch, administrator for Shawnee County District Court. Stenography software translates those typed key-strokes into a “readable and printable manuscript,” she said.

Shortage of court reporters has lasted nearly a decade

Shawnee County District Court has been plagued for nearly a decade by a shortage of court reporters. That’s left the court reporters it employs scrambling to complete their assigned duties.

“Right now, the six of us are in court almost consistently because there’s no other option,” Beach said.

But a partnership between the court and Washburn Institute of Technology appears poised to resolve that problem by providing the court four more voice writers.

Administrator: Addition of court reporters is significant

Washburn Tech and the court recently teamed up to offer and provide their inaugural Voice Writing Court Reporter class.

The four students involved graduated March 13 in a ceremony at the county courthouse.

“To take our staff of court reporters from six to 10 is immense,” Welch said. “It will give our court reporters a little bit of a break every now and then.”

Stenographers need more training than voice writers

Court reporters are responsible for making an official record of all proceedings, as well as swearing in witnesses, tracking and maintaining all exhibits admitted by the court during proceedings and preparing transcripts containing the written record of each proceeding, Welch said.

“The formal training for a stenographer is usually about two years and can be quite costly, whereas the training required for a voice writer is much shorter, typically nine to 12 months, and much less expensive,” she said.

Stenographers and voice writers must pass all four components of the same Certified Court Reporter exam, which the state of Kansas offers twice a year, in April and October, Welch said.

New court reporters to each make at least \$59,865 a year

All four class members were employed by the court before they started the class, Beach said.

When class began, four vacant positions the court had designated to be held by court reporters were re-

classified as internships for “transcriptionists,” and the four were hired to fill them, she said.

As transcriptionists, class member were paid the equivalent of at least \$43,650 a year, Beach said.

After being certified, each will be reclassified as an official court reporter, increasing their salary to at least \$59,865 a year, she said.

Class members have committed to serve court for two years

The four have benefited greatly from being employed by the court while being trained, Beach said.

All four signed memorandums of understanding committing themselves to two years of service to Shawnee County District Court once they’ve passed the Certified Court Reporter exam, which will next be offered in April, she said.

Once certified, class members will be reclassified as official court reporters, Welch said.

Class was offered in person

Shawnee County District Court’s shortage of court reporters prompted it in 2022 to reach out to Washburn Tech about potentially creating a program to educate new court reporters, Welch said.

The court worked with Courtenay Wills, Washburn Tech’s associate director of apprenticeships and customized training, to launch the inaugural class last July, she said.

She said that while plans initially called for the class to be offered online, it ended up being taught in person to its four participants, who were all Topekans.

Here’s who graduated

Those students attended classes held for two hours on two evenings each week, said Beach, who was among the instructors.

Class members Zoey Blissett, India Green, Alea Nelson and Douglas Zilch all graduated March 13.

“We are so proud of their continued excitement, enthusiasm and willingness to learn,” Welch said.

‘About 96% of the time I absolutely love it’

Beach has been a court reporter about 10 years, and previously worked about 10 years for the county clerk’s office.

Being a court reporter is “not easy,” involves “a lot of stress” and requires intense concentration, Beach said, but the job is often interesting and tends to be “very fulfilling.”

“About 96% of the time I absolutely love it,” she said.

Job is considered safe but can get tense

Court reporting is a safe job, Beach said. Still, working in a courtroom can bring tense moments.

April Lassiter, then a court reporter for Shawnee

County, stepped out of her high heels to flee as bedlam erupted during a murder sentencing in 2009.

Why having a human is important

At times, Shawnee County District Court will digitally record a court proceeding when no court reporter is available. But using a live court reporter is the best practice to ensure everything is documented, Beach said.

A court reporter can take steps to effectively deal with such distractions as background noise or people talking over each other, speaking with accents, using technical terms or not speaking closely enough to the microphone, she said.

Court reporters can also stop a proceeding to have a statement repeated or clarified, and take note of non-verbal events that occur during a hearing, Beach said.

“Most importantly, a live reporter has the qualifications to produce a certified transcript for appeal proceedings and other legal filings,” she said. “When a transcript is requested from a digitally recorded hearing, a transcriptionist has to listen to the full audio and type word-for-word everything that is heard. This is a painstakingly long and extensive process.”

How to train your dragon

Voice writers in Shawnee County District Court use Dragon speech recognition software, which occasionally incorrectly identifies what they’ve said, Beach said. Fortunately, she said, voice writers can “train their Dragon.”

If the software is incorrectly transcribing a word or phrase the same wrong way every time, voice writers can correct that by telling their software what they meant, Beach said.

“That way, when it hears that again, it will put what’s it’s supposed to put,” she said.

Court, Washburn Tech hope to continue program

Shawnee County District Court and Washburn Tech hope to continue offering court reporting voice writing classes and to perhaps expand the program, though it isn’t yet clear when it might be offered next, Welch said.

She said Shawnee County apparently won’t need any new court reporters, as the hiring of the four recent graduates would leave all its available positions filled.

Still, the court and Washburn Tech would like to educate court reporters to work in other districts, Welch said.

The next class would probably be offered online instead of in person, she added.

Welch encouraged anyone who is interested in taking part or learning more about the program to email her at lea.welch@kscourts.org or call her at 785-251-6789.

Contact Tim Hrenchir at threnchir@gannett.com or 785-213-5934.

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