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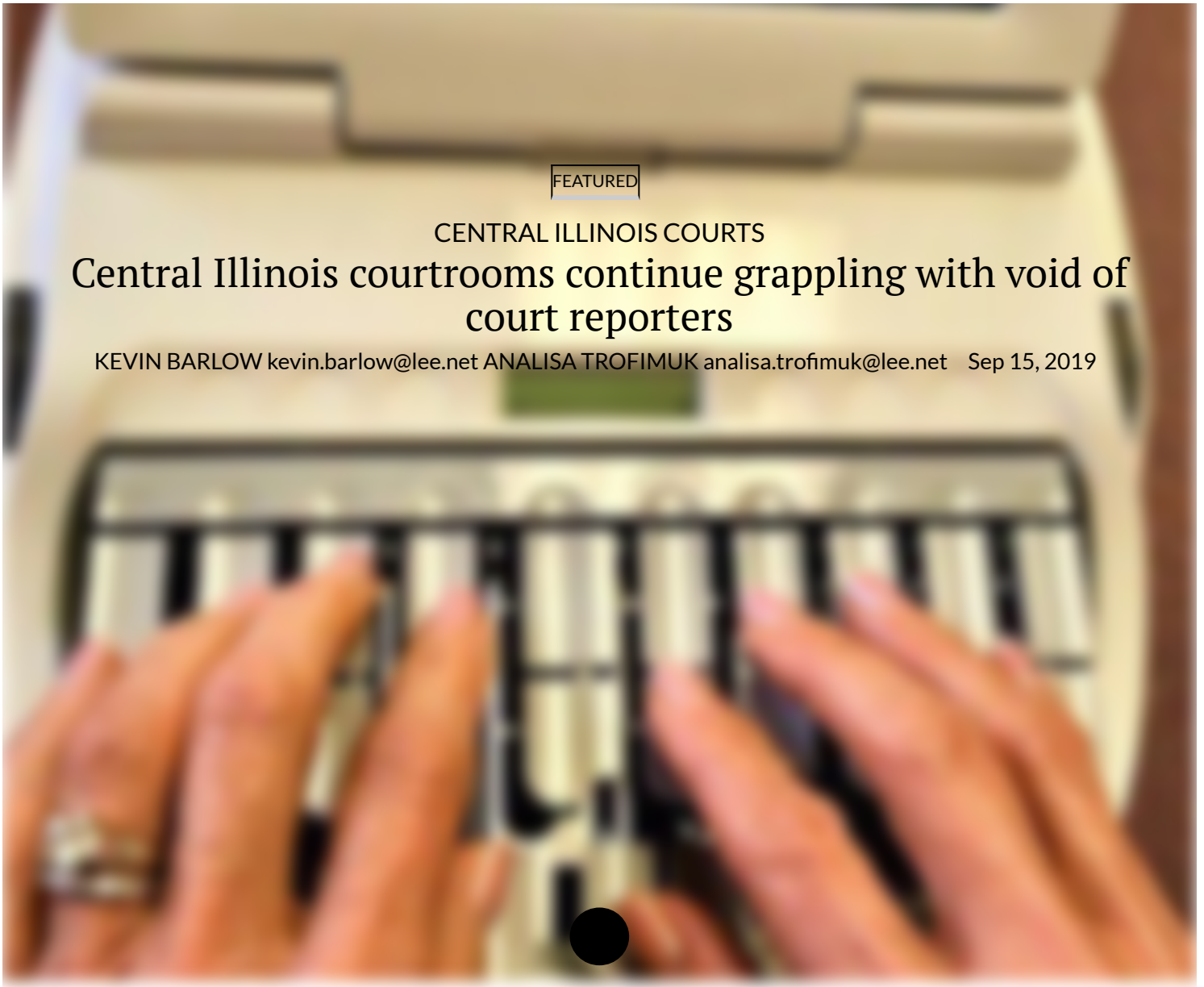


FEATURED

CENTRAL ILLINOIS COURTS

Central Illinois courtrooms continue grappling with void of court reporters

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DECATUR — An ongoing void of court reporters is raising concerns about how court systems will handle a crucial part of the legal process in coming years.

"No one is going to school for this anymore. Less people are coming into the industry," said Circuit Judge A.G. Webber IV, presiding judge for Macon County. "When I started with the courthouse in 2001, there were schools in Decatur that offered court reporter training and those closed due to a lack of enrollment."

Macon County currently has eight court reporters and nine courtrooms. Civil cases are typically recorded digitally. But by Illinois law, felony, adoption and juvenile cases must be recorded by a live court reporter. In both cases, the transcribed words become part of the official court record, so pinpoint accuracy is required.

Ad





A.G. Webber IV, presiding judge of Macon County, shows the operations of microphone controls in his courtroom. Court reporters work in a command center monitoring multiple court rooms through audio and video feeds to their computers.
HERALD & REVIEW FILE PHOTO

Webber said that despite digital advancements, "the recording is still not as good as a live reporter.

"Issues also arise if someone is a fast-talker or is soft spoken. A live court reporter, while they cannot participate in proceedings, is trained to raise their hand when someone isn't speaking loud or clear enough," he said.

Problem is, few people are entering the profession. The National Court Reporters Association estimates a shortage of 5,000 court reporters across the U.S.


"There will be a crisis point in about a decade if things don't change," said Tammy Bumgarner, director of court reporting services for the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts. "Right now, the average age of our court reporters in Illinois is 52 years old, and 75 percent are, right now, eligible for retirement. More than 400 court reporters will have to be replaced in the next 10 years."

A court reporter is responsible for making a full stenographic report of the evidence and all other proceedings presented in a trial court, hearing, deposition or other legal proceeding. Their primary function is to make a verbatim record of all testimony and, upon request, produce a written transcript of the proceeding. The reporter must be an excellent grammarian and speller, and at vocabulary — particularly legal, medical, and technical terminology.

For 40 years, Nancy McClarty was paid to listen to people talk fast, slow, loudly, quietly, in foreign languages, in legalese, and, sometimes, incoherently.

“I was very blessed, and I worked with a lot of great people,” said McClarty, of Bloomington. “I had a wonderful career and it is a wonderful profession. It is a precise profession. I call it a profession of perfectionists.”

McClarty, like others, has recently retired and new court reporters are needed.

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“Our circuit has been incredibly lucky with having court reporters who want to work with us,” McKinney said. “We have three court reporters that were freelancers (private court reporters) that wanted less long-distance traveling, and more benefits than what was being offered, so they joined our circuit as officials. It is hard getting students right out of school because we no longer have a school that offers court reporting close by.”

In Central Illinois, the main pipelines to become a court reporter were Sparks College in Shelbyville and Midstate College in Peoria. But the Shelbyville school closed in 2009. With Midstate's recent closure, there just are five training programs in Illinois. A number of institutions across the country offer online-based programs.

'Like learning a foreign language'

The starting salary for a court reporter in Illinois can vary depending on location, experience, education, certifications, and other skills. The average annual pay in 2018 was \$68,560, or \$30.53 per hour, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and

Statistics.

The old-fashioned idea of a court reporter taking notes on a steno pad, or a machine with an endless feed of paper, is long gone, replaced by paperless real-time translation technology that displays a spoken word on a computer screen almost as soon as it is said. It works this way: A court reporter uses a steno machine (also called a writer), pressing a combination of 22 keys to take down what is being said at a speed of 225 words per minute. Each key represents a phonetic sound, which is translated by the computer program into English words.



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“Particularly with some of the younger attorneys, because they are used to new technology and multi-tasking, they can speak much faster,” McClarty said. “The average speaker is about 240 words per minute, so you really have to be on your game.”

“It’s like learning a foreign language or musical instrument," added Bumgarner. "If you are going to practice daily and become immersed in it, you can actually be ready to take the licensing exam in a year and a half to two years. But they have to be really hard workers. Otherwise, it’s probably going to take three years.”

Electronic recordings can be used as a back-up, but the court's primary concern is to have an accurate record, McKinney said. Court reporters can distinguish between multiple speakers and context of what is being said. Those sometimes can get lost in audio recordings.



Joy McKinney is the court reporter supervisor at the McLean County Law and Justice Center.

DAVID PROEBER, THE PANTAGRAPH

“Having a live court reporter gives the courtroom a presence of having to speak out loud,” Bumgarner said. “For example, a witness might be asked a question and they answer with a head nod. That might be overlooked on an audio recording if no one acknowledges it. However, a court reporter can capture that the witness responded with a head nod. Sometimes, something needs to be repeated while someone is on the witness stand. That audio recording makes it tough to play back right away, versus the court reporter being able to read it back quickly. People do not speak the way it appears on paper for a transcript. Grammar, punctuation and correct spellings are very important when preparing a transcript.”

Not an easy process

You do not need a college degree to become a court reporter. You just have to attain the knowledge and speed to pass the state's licensing exam. Students can enroll in online courses to work at their own pace, mainly from home.

Forbes has named court reporting as one of the best career options that does not require a traditional four-year degree. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says the court reporting field is expected to grow by 14 percent through the year 2020. The National Court Reporters Association offers a program called “A to Z,” which provides free, six-week trial classes to test a student's interest.

“This allows us answer all of the questions and find out who is committed to becoming a court reporter, because it isn’t an easy process at all,” Bumgarner said. “The purpose is to weed out the people who probably aren’t going to make good court reporters before they spend their money on education. They will be able to put their hands on a machine, write some really simple words and see how it works and then they can decide if it is something they want to do.”

Few finish the class and get their certificate. “Out of a class of 40, we will probably get one or two,” she said.

The length of time for certification “depends on how driven the person is,” she said.

The state of Illinois is getting ready to launch several free programs to help people get started. More information is at illinoisofficialcourtreporters.com/firststeps.

“It is difficult covering the entire needs of the circuit with the court reporter shortage and we may not always have a reporter available for those case types that don’t require a reporter, but should have one,” said Chief Judge Mark Fellheimer. “The shortage is compounded when emergency hearings require a reporter and for dealing with court reporter illness, leave and vacation. We are short to begin with and it gets tougher in emergency situations.”

Court reporters love what they do, McKinney said. “We have three court reporters that have retired after more than 25 years each of working in the 11th Judicial Circuit, (who) then turn around and still want to work with us after they retire. I think that speaks volumes of the profession and the people that are reporters.”

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