



# Van H. Wanggaard

Wisconsin State Senator

## Testimony on Senate Bill 147

Thank you, committee members, for today's hearing on Senate Bill 147, that Representative Duchow and I have authored, allowing court interpreters to call in virtually during trials.

By now, I think that we are all aware of the staffing shortages and backlogs plaguing our court system. Additionally, county budgets are also feeling the pinch. One way to help alleviate some of that pressure is to remove burdensome requirements that the State places upon our circuit courts.

During most criminal or civil court proceedings, when an interpreter is needed, one may call in and participate in the proceeding virtually. However, Wisconsin statute requires that an interpreter appear in person during a trial. Senate Bill 147 would simply eliminate that requirement.

We have received some feedback from members of the court system, and have drafted, but not yet introduced, an amendment that would require both parties to agree to the interpreter appearing virtually.

This is an easy change that we can make to help alleviate stress, reduce the extra workload, and eliminate the additional cost of bringing a court interpreter into court.

Thank you again, for hearing Senate Bill 147 and I urge your support.



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**Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety**  
**Testimony on Senate Bill 147**  
**Interpreter Action by Telephone or Live Audiovisual Means**  
**April 30, 2025**

Thank you, Chairman Wanggaard, and members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety for holding a hearing on Senate Bill 147, relating to interpreter action by telephone or live audiovisual means in civil and criminal proceedings. Under current law, interpreters are already able to appear by telephone or live audiovisual means for every other court action except for trial. SB 147 extends this ability to civil and criminal trial proceedings.

It is no secret that circuit court budgets are being stretched thin due to insufficient funding and increased trial costs. Interpreter costs are often overlooked, as the court is on the hook for not only finding an available and qualified interpreter, but also for compensating their time and travel expenses. When the next figures come out for the budget, we could be looking at less than the cost to continue; however, our courts are in dire need of additional funding. As such, we needed to get crafty, and introduced this simple change that will significantly reduce court costs. My office reached out to Waukesha County to see what their interpreter costs are and how they affect the circuit court budget. The total charges billed has increased from \$57,289 in 2013 to \$182,034 in 2024, while the state reimbursement rate has decreased from 71.8% to 34.4%. Everyone on this committee can see that this trend is unsustainable, and will have a devastating impact on our circuit courts if we don't do something to fix it soon. SB 147 reduces costs for circuit courts at no additional expense to the State. I call that a win-win.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.



# WISCONSIN STATE PUBLIC DEFENDERS

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Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety  
April 30, 2025

Chair Wanggaard and committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on Senate Bill 147. This proposed legislation would allow either party to request interpreters act by telephone or live audiovisual means for trials, removing an exclusion that currently exists for trials. The Wisconsin State Public Defenders' Office believes the trial exclusion exists for good reason, and we oppose the change proposed in this bill.

As public defenders, our top priority is always to provide the highest quality representation for our clients. We are concerned that an interpreter acting by phone or video in a trial would be logistically unworkable and would impede our ability to effectively communicate with our clients and ensure they fully understand the proceedings.

Trials move quickly. As defense counsel, we are listening and responding to testimony and arguments while simultaneously responding to real-time questions or input our client may have. Utilizing an in-person interpreter makes this more challenging, but allowing that interpreter to appear virtually or by phone would make effective representation unworkable. Not only would the proposed change harm our clients' right to a fair process, it would also increase the likelihood cases would be overturned on appeal due to errors associated with virtual and telephonic interpretation.

Imagine a situation in which an interpreter is appearing via Zoom and the internet connection briefly cuts out – for an indeterminable amount of time, the interpreter wouldn't be able to hear the communication in the room and therefore could not accurately interpret the communication to our client. Alternatively, imagine a situation in which a defendant needs to have a private conversation with their attorney. When an interpreter is in-person, the attorney, client, and interpreter can have a quiet, separate conversation without disrupting the trial. If the interpreter is appearing via Zoom through a television screen and microphones around the courtroom, we are not confident those private conversations would be possible.

Jury trials, more than most other court proceedings, carry extremely high stakes: individuals' liberty and freedoms. We are not willing to risk technical and logistical difficulties hindering a person's ability to fully participate in the legal process, especially when their liberty is at stake.

We support efforts to make our legal process more efficient, but we cannot support expediency at the expense of effectiveness. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our perspective on this legislation. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to our Government and Public Affairs Specialist, Elena Kruse at [krusee@opd.wi.gov](mailto:krusee@opd.wi.gov).