



On-Demand: Transforming Virtual Remote Interpreting

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Virtual-remote-interpreting (VRI) services have been around for more than a decade but largely remain a niche technology with limited impact. On-Demand VRI takes this technology to the next level and shifts in how courts can leverage their existing resources to provide mission-critical due-process services.

In the ABC series *Shark Tank*, entrepreneurs present business ideas to potential investors with the hopes of winning their backing. These investors spend a good deal of time thoroughly vetting each concept, looking for ways to improve and increase the value of the product. Ideas that make it past this process receive funding and get a boost in the market. The ideas that do not are sent back to the drawing board for revisions. This vetting process is an essential part of the development of any idea—whether that idea is for an innovative material for sponges, a kitschy concept for dog sweaters, or a new system for providing interpreting services.

Virtual-remote-interpreting (VRI) services have been around for over a decade but largely remained a niche technology with a limited impact on the functionality of courts. That early VRI system was designed to streamline court processes; however, the scheduling-delivery model did not eliminate substantive time delays. After taking the technology back to the drawing board for revisions, VRI went on-demand as a first option, creating a seismic shift that provides mission-critical, due-process services to the courts.

Early VRI

The Ninth Judicial Circuit is one of the largest and most diverse circuits in Florida; on any given day in our communities, one can hear conversations spoken in over 160 languages. Located in Central Florida, the circuit serves over 1.7 million people living in Orange and Osceola counties, as well as over 75 million international and national visitors each year. Of the residents who have moved to the region in the past decade, more than half have relocated from another country. This rich, pervasive cultural diversity means that in over 35 percent of the households in Orange County, and over 50 percent in Osceola County, the primary language spoken in the home is a language other than English.

For many of our court users, as well as court users across the state, equal access to justice relies upon access to interpreters. Throughout 2019, the Ninth Circuit called upon certified interpreters for over 16,000 due-process proceedings. In these instances, the administration of justice depends upon the efficient and effective delivery of interpreting services.

Historically, interpreting services were accessed by traditional means. A limited number of staff interpreters moved through and between multiple courthouses in the circuit, drove through congested traffic, searched for parking places, lined up in security queues, desperately searched for an entrance to an elevator, and ultimately arrived in a courtroom only to wait for the hearing to be called. The system needed revising to address the amount of time spent traveling to and waiting for a hearing versus time spent interpreting at a hearing. Looking toward technology to improve upon the traditional system, the Ninth Circuit began using virtual technology to deliver simultaneous interpreting services in 2007. With the advent of VRI, interpreters began delivering interpreting services remotely; however, judges still accessed VRI using the same scheduling business model as traditional, in-person interpreting services.

Implicit in the concept of VRI is immediacy. If an interpreter could appear remotely, then it is naturally assumed that an interpreter could appear remotely at a moment's notice. However, early VRI did not include technology that could provide services on-demand. Judges still needed to request an interpreter in advance of a proceeding, regardless of whether a judge needed an interpreter in five minutes or five days. Interpreters were called into the courtroom at the scheduled time, often to be told the court was not ready for them. They were asked to call back in a prescribed amount of time, putting the interpreters on standby and setting the stage for a potential backlog in the delivery of services. A delay would affect not just the hearing in the courtroom requesting the change in time, but potentially any other hearings that also had that interpreter on their schedule. Like a doctor's office that runs late, early VRI was subject to additional scheduling delays. VRI may have eliminated the need to travel through and between courthouses, but interpreters still waited for hearings to be called, and judges still waited for interpreters to be available.

Without eliminating the critical time issues inherent in traditional in-person interpreting services, it quickly became clear that the court needed to transform the model—to go back to the drawing board and develop a system that provided an interpreter when a judge needed an interpreter. Interpreting services were needed on-demand. So, over the next 12 years, the circuit kept going back to the drawing board, every new step bringing a new improvement. VRI technology in the Ninth Circuit evolved from analog telephone lines to network-based delivery systems to a centralized call manager. All these incarnations led to the system launched in 2018—On-Demand VRI.

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On-Demand VRI

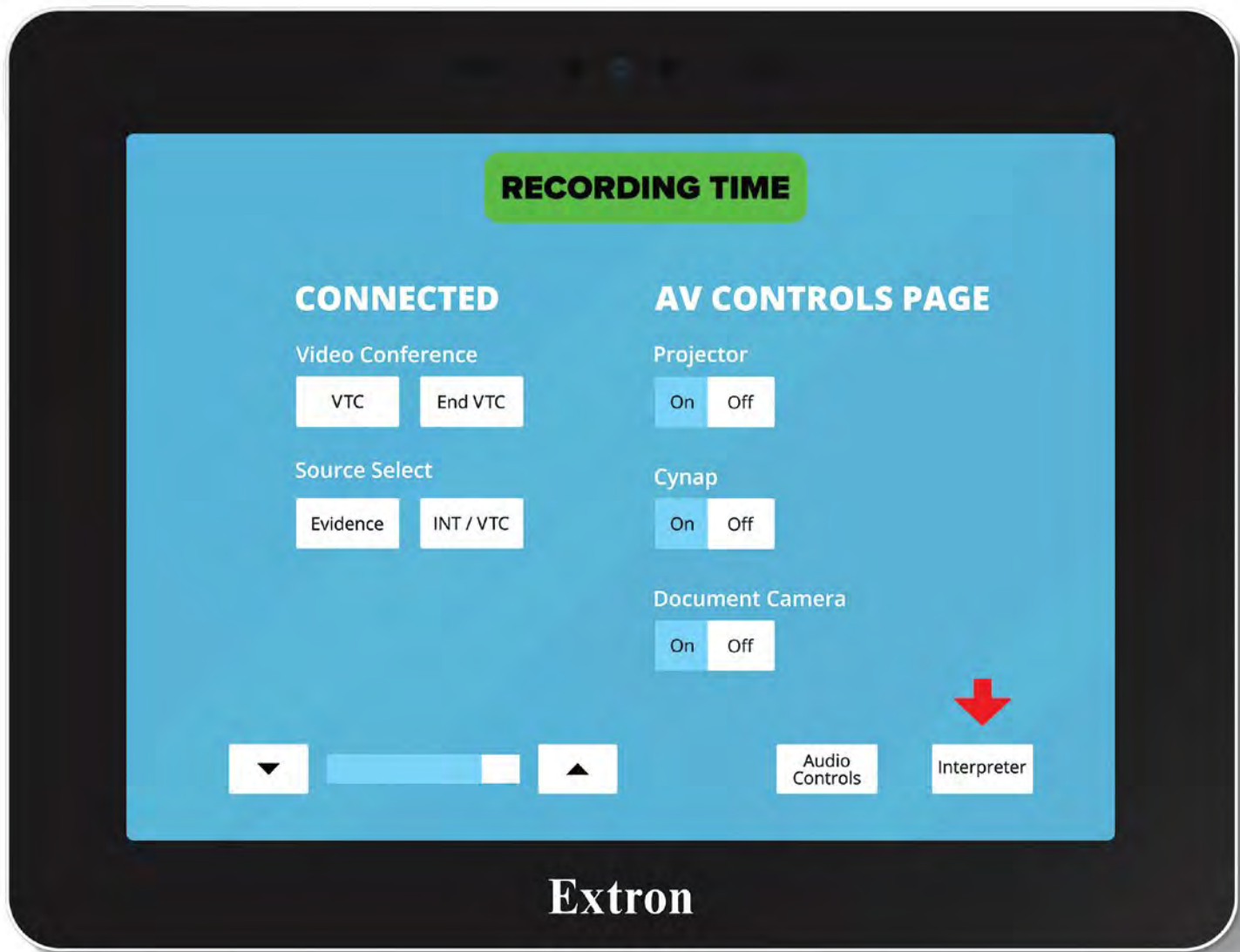
Leveraging the technology used by the early VRI concept and expanding upon it, the Ninth Circuit integrated network audio mixers with voice-over-internet-protocol (IP) cards and video codecs into the court's existing videoconferencing system, which was already accessible through a touch screen located on the bench. Simply put, network technology connects the courtroom to the interpreter—visually through the conference system and aurally through the voice-over IP cards. Through the simple touch of a button, judges could now request an interpreter, in real time, eliminating the delay inherent in the older systems. Now, within seconds of receiving the request, an interpreter appears virtually in the courtroom, available to provide simultaneous interpreting services.

The technology, and how one interacts with it, is simpler than it first appears. A touch screen installed on the bench has a call button preprogrammed to connect to the call manager. The call management software uses a hunt group to connect directly with a pool of Ninth Circuit staff or contract certified interpreters. The system “hunts” for an interpreter by sending an

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IP call to a pool of interpreters that are logged into the program. Once a judge requests interpreting services, an available interpreter receives the call through a videoconferencing unit, desktop, or laptop computer. The incoming call appears on their screen, and the display shows the county location of the call (Orange or Osceola), the courthouse, and the courtroom.





Immediately upon answering, the interpreter is patched directly into the courtroom. From a remote location, the interpreter can view and hear the entire proceeding, toggling between private conversation with the court user and public conversation with the judge by using a simple foot pedal, freeing a hand to take notes during complicated testimony. The interpreter provides simultaneous interpreting services to the court user, who is listening to the interpreter through headphones.

On-Demand VRI instantaneously eliminated the time-delay issues that plagued interpreting services for decades. Without having the delays inherent in scheduling and rescheduling interpreters, judges could hear and rule on proceedings in less time, as interpreters cover more hearings—across multiple locations—directly from their workstation. Additionally, simultaneous interpreting allows for a natural cadence in courtroom conversations, which then allows proceedings to continue at a swifter pace and

ultimately results in faster hearing times. The immediacy of On-Demand VRI improves courtroom flow that assists in mitigating the ever-increasing demands on the courts and helps to eliminate unnecessary backlogs. With On-Demand VRI, when a judge needs an interpreter, a judge gets an interpreter.

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First Option—On-Demand VRI at the Ninth Circuit

The Ninth Circuit launched On-Demand VRI as the first option for Spanish language services in March 2018. Twenty-four courtrooms and eight interpreter workstations were fitted with the full VRI technology. Of the then 65 judges in the Ninth Circuit, (the circuit now has 66 circuit and county judges), 24 had access to the system at the bench.

While On-Demand VRI does not currently cover all proceedings, the system launched as the first option for most due-process events:

- initial appearances
- arraignments
- violation-of-probation hearings
- motions
- long hearings
- witness testimony
- pleas
- traffic
- misdemeanor
- felony pretrial
- dependency
- delinquency
- docket sounding
- Baker Acts
- Marchman Acts
- domestic violence return hearings
- other short-duration, in-court proceedings deemed appropriate by the presiding judge

These events are heard by judges located in seven separate facilities spread across 2,200 square miles. Through the On-Demand technology, the circuit's eight full-time certified interpreters can provide services for all events at all seven locations.

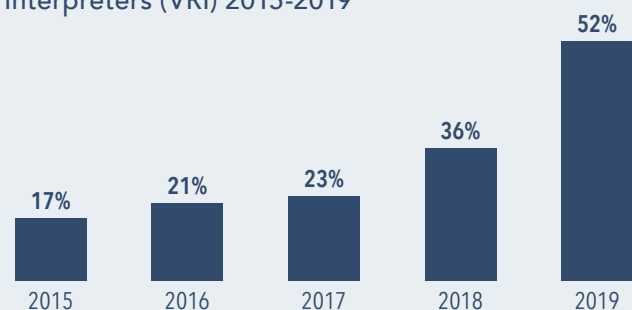
The advantages of an on-demand Spanish-language-interpreting system became apparent when examining the first year of data. In 2019 the On-Demand VRI interpreters covered over 8,000 events, compared to an average 2,000 events using prescheduled or ad hoc scheduled VRI interpreting services before 2018. Over 52 percent of all interpreter requests in the circuit were handled through the system.

On-Demand VRI intrinsically transformed how the courts function, allowing them to leverage existing resources to serve more court users across the circuit.

2019 Virtual Remote Interpreting (VRI)

Events	# of Events	Percentage
In-Person Interpreter	7,953	47.6
VRI Interpreter	8,749	52.4
Total	16,702	
Events per Interpreter		
# of Interpreters for 2019 (FTEs)	6.2	
VRI Events per Interpreter	1,411	

Percentage of Events Covered by Virtual Remote Interpreters (VRI) 2015-2019



While the success of On-Demand VRI is entirely attributable to the system's on-demand technology, it is equally attributable to the circuit's commitment to the system as the *first option* for pooled interpreting services. Within the first week of launch, the system was not just the first option, but also clearly the best option. Judges in the Ninth Circuit immediately saw its benefits. With On-Demand VRI's instantaneous, simultaneous delivery of interpreting services, there was no comparison to any previous system. After years of improving upon new systems and delivery models, providing feedback, and retesting, the judges finally had a product they could invest in.

Since 2018, an additional 14 courtrooms were fitted with On-Demand VRI technology bringing the total to 38. The remaining 24 courtrooms will have access to the technology in the last quarter of 2020. Additionally, two new interpreter workstations were installed in the circuit for certified contract interpreters of Spanish and languages of lesser diffusion. By the end of the year, On-Demand VRI will be the first option for most due-process events.

Next-Level On-Demand VRI

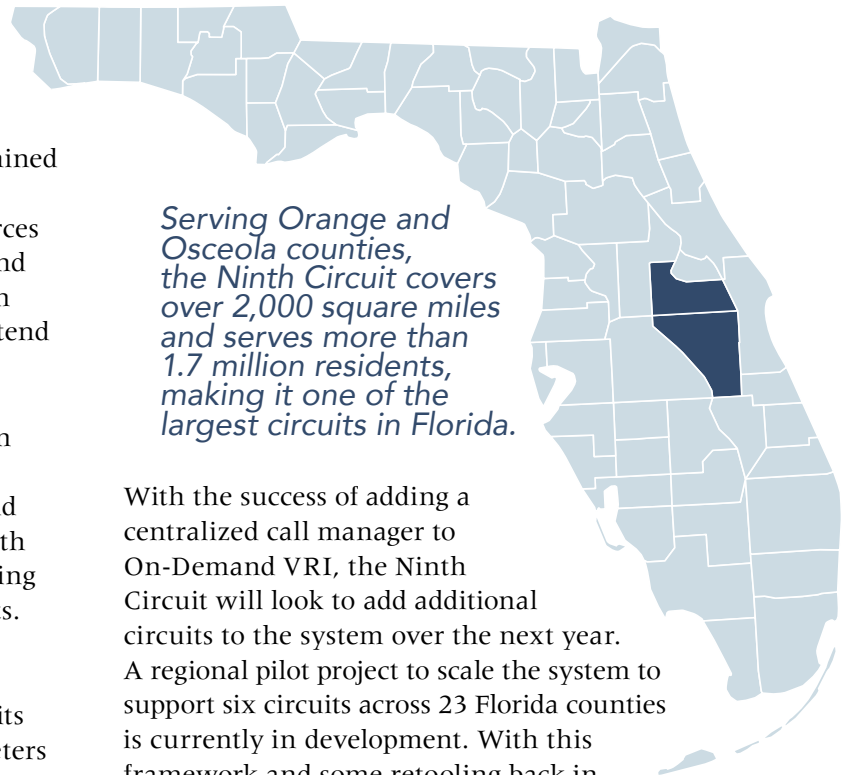
Recognizing the system's success and its incredible impact on the functionality and accessibility of the courts, the Ninth Circuit reexamined On-Demand VRI technology back to the drawing board to see how it could be scaled to share resources across the state. With the next phase of On-Demand VRI ready to test, the Ninth Circuit partnered with Florida's Eighteenth and Nineteenth circuits to extend the system across multiple circuits in 2019.

The accessibility of the technology made scaling an easier endeavor. The Eighteenth and Nineteenth circuits already had videoconferencing systems and were able to integrate their existing equipment with the Ninth Circuit's On-Demand VRI system, creating a centralized call manager serving multiple circuits.

Each circuit has its own call number that directly connects to its own pool of interpreters. The circuits manage their own interpreters, and those interpreters cover their own circuit's proceedings. However, if all the interpreters at one circuit are busy, the call manager automatically connects to another circuit's pool of interpreters. For example, if a judge in the Nineteenth Circuit requests an interpreter through the call button on the bench, that judge will be automatically connected to the Nineteenth's interpreter pool. Should all interpreters at the Nineteenth Circuit be busy with other proceedings, the connection will automatically reroute to the Ninth Circuit pool. A Ninth Circuit interpreter will then connect with the judge in the Nineteenth Circuit and provide interpreting services for the proceeding. This entire process takes place seamlessly in the background within 15 seconds of the judge's initial request.

The ability of On-Demand VRI to connect interpreter pools, share resources, and provide backup between circuits has the potential to intrinsically transform the delivery of interpreting services and access to justice throughout the entire state.

In circuits with a larger population of court users needing interpreters at their hearing, a networked On-Demand VRI system mitigates the increased need for interpreters. For circuits with smaller populations, the networked system allows for access to additional certified interpreting services without significant additional cost.



With the success of adding a centralized call manager to On-Demand VRI, the Ninth Circuit will look to add additional circuits to the system over the next year.

A regional pilot project to scale the system to support six circuits across 23 Florida counties is currently in development. With this framework and some retooling back in the drawing room, it is hoped that On-Demand VRI can provide a statewide solution for providing interpreting services and access to justice for court users regardless of their location or limited-English-language proficiency. As the courts expand the reach of On-Demand VRI, the Ninth Circuit looks forward to judges across the state vetting this system for themselves and hopes to one day see On-Demand VRI in courtrooms throughout the nation.

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