

Building Political Power and Guaranteed Civil Rights



Building Political Power and Guaranteed Civil Rights: Expanding Language Access S.5236/A.7428

Lack of language access is one of the most significant barriers New York's immigrant communities face to accessing critical State services. This language access issue was made more prevalent in the wake of the global pandemic. Most COVID-related information was rapid, instantaneous, and mostly in languages that were not accessible to many immigrant communities.

In March 2021, Governor Cuomo signed Executive Order No. 26.1, which amended the original language access order signed in 2011. However, New York's language access policy has not kept up with the rapid growth and diversification of immigrant communities in the State leaving out large groups of immigrant New Yorkers from access to translations of vital documents. As one example, none of the current 10 languages covered by the Executive Order (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Haitian Creole, Bengali, and Korean, Arabic, Polish, Italian and Yiddish) are widely spoken among immigrants from the African continent. Also, under the Executive Order, translation is only mandatory for the agencies under the jurisdiction of the Governor, instead of across all subdivisions of state and county government leaving out important agencies that many immigrants interact with like the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Department of Education.

Recommendations:

Enact Language Access legislation that codifies and expands on existing Executive Order 26 that includes a mechanism to respond to changing immigration trends and expands the number of statewide languages of translation. High quality data on language needs must be used to specify which languages need to be covered at the state-wide level and should be used to allow variances at the local level. If fully implemented, this would make the State a national leader in language access for immigrant communities.

Create a Community Legal Interpreter Bank that includes a mechanism to respond to changing immigration trends and expands the number of statewide languages of translation. High quality data on language needs must be used to specify which languages need to be covered at the state-wide level and should be used to allow variances at the local level. If fully implemented, this would make the State a national leader in language access for immigrant communities.

Provide funding to create three Language Services Cooperatives to enable immigrant community-based organizations to develop and launch three language services worker-owned cooperative--for African languages of limited diffusion (LLDs), Asian LLDs, and indigenous Latin American LLDs.