

Language Access

Building Political Power and Guaranteed Civil Rights

Expanding Language Access

Language access is more than a convenience, it's a matter of equity, dignity, and civil rights. Yet, for New York's foreign-speaking residents, having access to medical and/or legal interpreters including translated information means being able to navigate the healthcare system, find stable housing, advocate for their children's education, and understand their own legal and civil rights. Without access to trained interpreters and translated documents, millions of New Yorkers are effectively silenced. As our state populations become more diverse with new arrivals coming from diverse regions and speak languages such as Haitian Creole, Fulani, Wolof, and indigenous languages like K'iche' and Mam, it highlights the need for interpreters and culturally competent services across several sectors.

Moreover, with the recent election of the Trump administration, New York faces heightened challenges in supporting its immigrant and asylum seeking communities. As the federal government signals a more restrictive approach to immigration and language equity as a whole, New York must step forward to protect and serve all New Yorkers. The incoming administration's stance on immigration and language services is anticipated to heighten the demand for language services among immigrants and asylum seekers who are already navigating complex public systems, while simultaneously reducing federal support for language services, leaving agencies and providers with fewer resources.

New York has a pivotal opportunity to strengthen its commitment to immigrant New Yorkers and their communities by passing the Language Access Expansion Act. This essential legislation would expand uniform language access standards to local branches of critical state agencies that immigrant families depend on—such as the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Department of Education—and establish a countywide list of languages for translation.

Recommendations:

Secure \$10M for Language Access Infrastructure by funding the creation and launch of language services worker-owned cooperatives across the state. A dedicated commitment of \$10 million would enable the critical language access infrastructure, providing county-run agencies with the necessary resources to deliver interpretation services and translate public agency documents effectively. Establishing Language services worker cooperatives would not only address the critical shortage of interpretation services and availability of translated documents in languages other than English, but would also create sustainable employment opportunities for local community members.

Advance the Language Access Expansion Act which would broaden the existing language access law to include additional state and local agencies for the provision of interpretation and translation services, including creating a countywide list of languages to reflect local language needs and requiring local offices of public-facing state agencies, like the Department of Motor Vehicles and Department of Education, to offer in-person interpretation services.

Ensure the Office of Language Access (OLA) is accessible to community members and community-based organizations (CBOs) and Increase collaboration with the new Director to assist with implementation of the law, provide expertise and knowledge from community organizations interacting directly with immigrants, create a process to collect and report complaints and community feedback, as well as to provide regional language data and policy recommendations.

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