

CITIZENS FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS

More languages on the ballot, more voices in the process

June 23, 2021

Hon. Mayor Jim Kenney
City Hall, Office 215
Philadelphia, PA 19107

RE: Voting Rights of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Communities

Dear Honorable Mayor Kenney,

We, the undersigned organizations, join Citizens for Language Access, a coalition of local civil rights and immigrant-led organizations, in calling on the Office of the City Commissioners, City Council, and the Kenney Administration to invest in and expand language access to voting in Philadelphia to at least an additional six languages.

According to the US Census Bureau, between 47,206 and 87,732 Philadelphia citizens of voting age are limited in English proficiency (LEP) and would benefit from expanded language accommodation to the top language speaking communities: Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Haitian, French, and Russian.¹ Without language access in voting, these communities are effectively disenfranchised. Philadelphia's voting machines are capable of accommodating multiple languages, and given their nearly \$30 million price tag to taxpayers, we ought to utilize the technology available to us to its greatest capacity.

Ensuring that our voting systems, polling place information, mail-in ballot materials, and other important voting resources are available for a broader set of Philadelphians is critical to election turnout. Data shows that immigrant citizens participate in elections at lower rates than average, especially if they have past experiences from oppressive countries where voter intimidation and disinformation are the norm. Navigating mail-in voting procedures or entering a polling place when English is not your primary language can also present a daunting barrier to the ballot. While grassroots organizations found that pilot translation resources helped boost LEP voter turnout, they could only reach a small slice of all eligible voters in various languages whereas expanding language access in voting infrastructure citywide can enfranchise tens of thousands of voters.

Enabling these Philadelphians, who worked hard to become citizens and gain all the rights of citizens, to vote in the language of their best ability is a matter of equity for our city's diverse citizenry. Language access is vital to protecting our freedom to vote, upholding voting rights, and increasing participation with our democracy.

¹US Census Bureau 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Estimate (Table C16001)

Therefore, we urge the City of Philadelphia to provide all the resources necessary to uphold all citizens' fundamental rights to vote and to implement the expansion of language access for Philadelphia's election equipment and materials, including both our new voting systems and now widely used mail-in ballots. We have an opportunity to expand language access in voting to ensure that all citizens of Philadelphia—regardless of English proficiency, race, ethnicity, or origin—can exercise the fundamental right to vote. We look forward to working with city officials to accomplish this outcome.

Respectfully,

Citizens for Language Access

Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy - Philadelphia (AAPIP)

AFRICOM

Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture

All Voting Is Local

Americans for Democratic Action, Southeastern Pennsylvania

Arab American Institute

Asian American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Philadelphia

Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)

Asian Americans United

Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote

Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania

Bella Vista Neighbors Association

Better Civics

CAIR-Philadelphia

Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia

CASA Dominicana, Inc.

Caucus of Working Educators

Ceiba

Children's Village

Committee of Seventy

Common Cause Pennsylvania

Democracy For All - PennFuture

Dickinson Square Civic Association

Disability Rights Pennsylvania

Fair Elections Center

Haitian Americans United for Change

Hispanic Bar Association of Pennsylvania

Japanese American Citizens League – Phila Chapter (JACL)

Justice for Our Neighbors - Delaware Valley

Kiths Integrated and Targeted Human Services

Korean Americans for Civic Participation

League of Women Voters of Philadelphia

Northeast Philadelphia Chinese Association (NEPCA)

Northeast Philadelphia Development Corporation,

Organization of Chinese Americans – Greater Philadelphia (OCA)

Orma

PA Youth Vote

Penn Asian Senior Services

Penn Leads the Vote
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Pennsylvania Immigrant and Citizenship Coalition (PICC)
Philadelphia 3.0
Philadelphia Arab-American Development Corps
Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation
Philadelphia Praise Center
Philly Youth Vote
POWER
Radio Haiti of Philadelphia
SEAMAAC
Stand Up America
The Public Interest Law Center
The Welcoming Center
United Voices for Philadelphia
VietLead
Woori Center
Youth United for Change

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