

# CITIZENS FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS

*More languages on the ballot, more voices in the process*

**March 16, 2022**

**Hon. Jim Kenney**

Mayor, City of Philadelphia  
City Hall, Office 215  
Philadelphia, PA 19107

**RE: Budget Allocation for Voting Rights of Limited English Proficient (LEP) Communities**

Dear Mayor Kenney,

Thank you for your words of support to expand language access for Philadelphia voters at our January 25th event at UPenn's Fels Institute of Government, [Developing a Stronger Democracy: Language Access to the Ballot](#).

On behalf of Citizens for Language Access and the undersigned organizations we urge your administration to allocate additional funding to the Philadelphia City Commissioners office to address the language barrier to full participation in civic affairs. Citizens for Language Access is a coalition of local civil rights and immigrant-led organizations working to achieve full access and engagement for citizens whose first language is not English.

We write as a follow up to the February 15, 2022 Philadelphia City Council [hearing of the Law and Government Committee](#) which featured several witnesses who testified about the benefits of expansive language access. The hearing on February 15 demonstrated what we have known for a long time: a critical need for language assistance exists in Philadelphia and meeting that need will encourage civic participation and increase voter turnout. Because of this, **we ask that you include at least an additional \$500,000 with your proposed budget for the Philadelphia City Commissioners' Office specifically targeted to expand language access beyond Spanish and Chinese.**

During that hearing, Commissioner Deeley expressed her firm support for expanding language access to additional languages beyond those that are federally mandated. Currently, the City is required to provide voting information and materials in Spanish, Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese. We are heartened by Commissioner Deeley's support, and we recognize that implementation will require additional time, staff and, most importantly, funding. We have begun

the process of working with the Commissioners' Office to develop an implementation plan for our proposed language access expansion.

We would like to share a few takeaways from the City Council Committee hearing, the Panel Discussion at Fels that featured your opening remarks of support, and our own research that demonstrate why expanding language access advances your administration's goals on diversity, equity and inclusion and encourages voter turnout and participation:

- Language barriers to civic participation are real and the lived experience of tens of thousands of Philadelphia citizens.
- 42,780 to 84,973 Philadelphians still need language access to the ballot even after Philadelphia meets its federal mandate to provide voting materials to Spanish and Chinese speakers under the Voting Rights Act. The top language speaking communities who would benefit from expanded language accommodation speak Vietnamese, Arabic, Haitian, French, Russian and Korean.<sup>1</sup>
- Increasing the availability of voting materials in the most prevalent spoken languages will increase turnout, based on the experience of other large cities and counties.
- The thresholds for mandatory ballot language access assume that populations cluster in certain patterns when, in reality, the distribution of voters with language needs may occur in a more diffuse pattern.
- Other large metropolitan areas like Cook County and Los Angeles have successfully enfranchised minority language communities by going beyond federal requirements to expand language accessibility in their jurisdictions and Philadelphia can do the same.
- Cook County Clerk Karen Yarborough committed to helping Philadelphia with implementing language access expansion in voting and agreed to share any materials, templates, or expertise that may be helpful for our communities.
- Partnerships between city government and community groups are essential for numerous reasons, among them:
  - to correctly identify language needs;
  - assess the scale of necessary resources;
  - evaluate the quality of written translation;
  - assist in the dissemination of information; and
  - identify and recruit bi-lingual poll workers and interpreters.

Philadelphia can lead other cities in expanding language accessibility beyond federal requirements and forge a strong path forward towards equalizing access to voting. Now is the time to ensure that complete and accurate information reaches as many voters as possible, including the tens of thousands who are limited English proficient. We need to invest our resources to achieve equity and increase access for those who face barriers. We also recognize that our democracy is being tested and the foundation of it, voting, is especially vulnerable. Please see our previous letter below that describes the need and the reasons for language access expansion in more detail.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census ACS 5-year Estimates Table B16001 and U.S. Census ACS 5-year Estimates Table S1601

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please do not hesitate to reach out directly if we may assist in any way.

Respectfully,

**Citizens for Language Access**

*ACLU-PA*

*AFRICOM*

*All Voting is Local*

*Asian Americans United*

*Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania*

*Asian Pacific Islander Political Alliance (API PA)*

*CAIR-Philadelphia*

*Ceiba*

*Committee of Seventy*

*Fair Elections Center*

*Keystone Votes*

*PCDC*

*PICC*

*SEAMAAC*

*United Voices*

*VietLead*

*Woori Center*

# CITIZENS FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS

*More languages on the ballot, more voices in the process*

**Feb 1, 2021**

**Hon. James F. Kenney**  
Mayor, City of Philadelphia  
City Hall, Office 215  
Philadelphia, PA 19107

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

Dear 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup>US Census Bureau 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Estimate (Table C16001)

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.

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**

*AAPIP - Philadelphia*

*ACLU of Pennsylvania*

*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 Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania*

*Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) Philly*

*Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote*

*Bella Vista Neighbors Association*

*Better Civics*

*CAIR-Philadelphia*

*CASA Dominicana, Inc.*  
*Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia*  
*Casa San Jose*  
*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*  
*Emgage Pennsylvania*  
*Fair Elections Center*  
*Federally Employed Women, Inc*  
*Haitian Americans United for Change*  
*Hispanic Bar Association of Pennsylvania*  
*Hope Network Foundation*  
*Institute for the Development of African American Youth (IDAAY)*  
*Japanese American Citizens League – Phila Chapter*  
*Justice for Our Neighbors - Delaware Valley*  
*Keystone Votes*  
*Kiths Integrated and Targeted Human Services*  
*Korean American Association of Greater Philadelphia*  
*Korean American Association of Greater Philadelphia, KAAGP*  
*Korean Americans for Civic Participation*  
*Korean-American Chamber of Commerce for PHL (KCCP)*  
*League of Women Voters of Philadelphia*  
*Mothers of Incarcerated Sons*  
*NAACP - Philadelphia*  
*New Pennsylvania Project*  
*Northeast Philadelphia Chinese Association (NEPCA)*  
*Northeast Philadelphia Development Corporation,*  
*Organization of Chinese Americans – Greater Philadelphia*  
*Orma*  
*PA Youth Vote*  
*POWER*  
*Penn Asian Senior Services*  
*Penn Leads the Vote*  
*Pennsylvania Council of Churches*

*Pennsylvania Immigrant and Citizenship Coalition*  
*Philadelphia 3.0*  
*Philadelphia Arab-American Development Corps*  
*Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation*  
*Philadelphia Chinese Chamber of Commerce*  
*Philadelphia Praise Center*  
*Philly Youth Vote*  
*Radio Haiti of Philadelphia*  
*SEAMAAC*  
*Stand Up America*  
*The Public Interest Law Center*  
*The Welcoming Center*  
*United Voices for Philadelphia*  
*VietLead*  
*We The People - PA*  
*Woori Center*  
*Youth United for Change*

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