



Community Leaders' Guide to Language Access: A Summary



You Need to Know

Federal law prohibits discrimination in voting and guarantees every voter in the country who needs help because they cannot speak, read, or write in English or have a disability the right to choose someone (other than an employer or union officer) to help them vote. Many jurisdictions are also required by law to provide live assistance and election-related materials in languages other than English. Even where no legal requirements apply, officials and election administrators can, and should, make efforts to ensure that Americans who are not fully fluent in English can understand voting procedures and requirements, and can cast ballots knowledgeably.

Action Steps to Secure Language Assistance

- Build collaborative, supportive relationships with election officials
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of current programs, and inform officials of issues and proposed solutions you can assist with realizing
- Help elections officials develop plans to assess and meet voters' needs at all stages of the electoral process and in all types of elections
- Become a liaison between government officials and members of local communities in need of language assistance, ensuring through personal contact that these actors understand one another and feel comfortable working together to solve problems
- Describe and promote the benefits of providing assistance beyond the minimum required by law
- Advocate stronger legal requirements to ensure elections are accessible to all Americans regardless of linguistic ability

Engaging Election Officials to Facilitate Language Access: Best Practices

Successful language assistance programs include the following features, which advocates should request and help to implement:

Advisory Committees:

Urge local jurisdictions to form year-round Language Assistance Advisory Committees to institutionalize community engagement. Set up community-led committees if election officials do not set up an official one.

Recruitment & Training of Bilingual Coordinators:

Urge jurisdictions to employ at least one staff member fluent in each language in which there is local need for materials and assistance.

Bilingual Poll Worker Recruitment:

Encourage election officials to make hiring bilingual pollworkers a priority, and help with recruitment and placement of effective, in-language advertisements of openings.

Poll Worker Training:

Work with officials to ensure that all poll workers, both bilingual and monolingual, receive training in language assistance rights and responsibilities.

Bilingual Pollworker Training should include review of all voting materials for understanding, completeness, and clarity; and role-playing of common situations in-language.

Monolingual Pollworker Training should include explanation of voters' right to use assisters of their choice; and emphasis on the importance of equal treatment and cultural sensitivity.

Translations:

Advocate for manual instead of machine translation, and connect election officials to qualified translators. Advocates should urge jurisdictions to translate materials well in advance of elections to allow time for review; and can assist as capacity allows with testing or other quality control measures.

Targeting:

Collect and present to election officials relevant information, including Census data and survey results, that will help with placing pollworkers and in-language resources in locations where they are most needed.

Outreach and Education:

Help officials develop PSAs, pamphlets, and other materials to inform language-minority voters of election timing and procedures, and availability of materials and assistance. Invite election officials to attend and speak at community events.

Poll Monitoring and Exit Polls:

Use poll monitoring and exit polls to assess the effectiveness of language assistance services, with attention to both turnout and voters' evaluation of their experience; share results and findings with election officials. If and when necessary, your observations may become relevant evidence in enforcement litigation.

Legislative Advocacy to Strengthen Language Assistance

Enhancements to state and local law, including these proven innovations, can significantly improve election accessibility and voter turnout rates.

Cover additional languages:

Combat the gaps in federal language assistance coverage by requiring translation/interpretation in specified African, Caribbean, European, Middle Eastern, and other languages outside the scope of federal law.

Lower threshold for language coverage:

Ensure that assistance is available even where the limited-English proficient population is not large or homogenous enough to trigger federal protections.

Provide additional types of assistance:

Ensure the quality of language assistance by specifying election administrators' responsibilities to, for example, advertise bilingual pollworker positions through local schools, or to hold a minimum number of consultations with language-minority community representatives per year.

Work to overturn state rules that conflict with federal law:

Limits on voters' right to have anyone they choose help them vote discourage limited-English proficient voters, and also may violate federal law.

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