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PRESS RELEASE: STRENGTHENING LANGUAGE ACCESS IN SAN FRANCISCO

SAN FRANCISCO, CA – On Wednesday afternoon, community advocates, along with Supervisor Shamann Walton and Supervisor Connie Chan gathered to announce legislation to strengthen San Francisco Language Access Ordinance. These amendments will build upon the existing Language Access Ordinance to ensure that the City can deliver quality services to communities that speak a language other than English. San Francisco is home to many diverse immigrant communities and is a national leader in providing language access services with one of the strongest and most comprehensive local language access laws.

In 1973, the California State Legislature adopted the Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act, which required state and local agencies to provide language services to Limited English Proficiency (LEP) persons and in 1999, the California State Auditor conducted a study that found that some state entities were not in compliance with the Dymally-Alatorre Act. In response to this finding, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors enacted the Equal Access to Services Ordinance in 2001, which required major departments to provide language access services to LEP persons comprising 5% or more of the total city population. In 2009, improvements led by former Supervisor David Chiu, now City Attorney, renamed the Equal Access to Services Ordinance to the Language Access Ordinance, expanded the scope to cover more city departments, and created the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs (OCEIA). The Language Access Ordinance was last strengthened in 2015, led by former Supervisor Katy Tang.

Over the last few years, Supervisor Walton has been working closely with community partners, the Immigrant Rights Commission, and OCEIA to create new amendments that would strengthen the existing Language Access Ordinance, update terminology, and address gaps in delivering language access in city services. The COVID-19 pandemic and health emergency highlighted the barriers to language access and inequities for many LEP persons. The pandemic made it clear that city departments need to prioritize language access services during health-related emergencies, disaster-related activities, and all other public safety crisis situations through a community-focused approach that can effectively communicate with residents who speak or are more comfortable in a language other than English. Since the last update to the Language Access Ordinance, digital services, web-based content, and online mediums for providing information about City programs and services have also increased significantly.



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Despite the City's progress in providing language access services, as of 2023, there are still gaps in language services affecting the City's ability to serve all of its residents and provide timely access to information to enable full participation in City services and programs. Through findings in OCEIA's most recent [Annual Language Access Report](#), not all city departments have reported their compliance with the Language Access Ordinance or have completed mandatory Language Access Ordinance training.

While the City remains a national leader in language access, the City must continue to make every effort to ensure that all city departments that have public interactions or share information with the public comply with the Language Access Ordinance. The proposed amendments aim to remove barriers to participation in city processes by encouraging departments to increase bilingual staffing levels and language services, improve accessibility through continued digital and telephonic language services, and increase language services planning and coordination for public health crises, disasters, and emergencies.

"Our immigrant communities contribute to the cultural fabric and economy of San Francisco so it is important for us to continue to expand and strengthen our language access services to ensure that everyone can participate in city processes," said Supervisor Shamann Walton of District 10, "These amendments to the Language Access Ordinance came from a collaborative community process between our office, Supervisor Chan, OCEIA, the Immigrant Rights Commission, the Language Access Network, and community advocates. We are going to continue to work with all of our city departments to make sure we deliver quality language access services."

"Language and cultural competency are critical to providing equitable city services," said Supervisor Connie Chan of District 1. "I thank Supervisor Walton for putting this important legislation forward and extending access to non-English and limited-English speakers."

"Like so many immigrant families that sought to grow roots in a new country, my family arrived speaking very little English. Communication and access to information we needed was always a struggle," said City Administrator Carmen Chu. "All San Franciscans deserve access to our essential services, including those from our immigrant community. I look forward to advancing this work with Supervisor Walton, Supervisor Chan, OCEIA, the Immigrant Rights Commission, and community partners."

"Nearly one in five San Francisco residents identifies as Limited English Proficient. This means that access to information and services for many San Franciscans depends on our ability to communicate in multiple languages," said Jorge Rivas, Director of the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs. "As a culturally vibrant and inclusive city, it is our responsibility to reach communities in the languages they speak to ensure equal access, belonging, and full civic participation. The updates to the Language



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Access Ordinance will further empower our communities to utilize city services, access vital information, and report an emergency in their language, making our city safer, healthier, and more just for all.”

"Even if the language access amendments pass, existing gaps and problems cannot be improved or mitigated when city departments do not implement and enforce the law," said Christina Ouyang, a member of Chinese for Affirmative Action, a resident of District 9 and a single parent with her 9-year old daughter. "I really hope all city departments will do their due diligence to ensure their services are available in different languages.

“Language access is a human right, but how can we exercise this right without true strategies involving the community and city agencies?” said a Tingrinya community member of the African Advocacy Network, who wishes to remain anonymous. “I am worried and scared every time I visit a city agency because I am never sure that I’ll get the right language support. It shouldn’t be like that! I hope this ordinance is passed and our language services are strengthened.”

“Language access in San Francisco is limited. As an advocate for the Arab community trying to access essential services, many times I find myself having to do the job of city workers. I have needed to stay on the line with community members as an interpreter to ensure that they receive adequate language access, even if the language line is limited,” said Bushra Alabsi, community leader of District 5 and partner of the Arab Resource and Organizing Center. “Care and cultural competency is just as crucial as adequate language access. I’m hopeful that the city moves to strengthen the language access ordinance and are aware of the quality of the language access support provided.”

“Despite Filipino being a certified threshold language in San Francisco, oftentimes our community members have called City Departments to be met with delayed or no response to not having proper translation materials. We have provided translation and interpretation for many limited English proficient community members” said a representative from the Filipino Community Center (FCC).

“Language access is critical because it promotes dignity and respect as it reflects the City’s values and helps ensure non-English native residents and immigrants are treated with dignity and respect. I’m reminded of clients that are experiencing food insecurity and sometimes come across barriers in accessing food assistance whether it be unfair instructions or delayed services. We owe it to them to be better” said a representative from CARECEN.

“The Immigrant Rights Commission is pleased to join with City leaders in taking another step forward in improving language access,” said Celine Kennelly, Chair of the Immigrant Rights Commission. “The



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Immigrant Rights Commission has fought for language justice since its founding over 25 years ago, and we will continue advocating to ensure equal access to City services for all San Franciscans.”

Some of the key amendments to the city’s Language Access Ordinance include:

- Adding findings to ensure a safe, inclusive, and equitable environment for providing city services and programs and equal access to city information.
- Clarifying interpretation, which is spoken, versus translation, which is written, and making sure this definition is uniform throughout the Language Access Ordinance.
- Clarifying the role, increasing supportive and enforcement procedures for the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs (OCEIA) to provide guidance and remedies for city departments that are not complying with the Language Access Ordinance.
- Adding language access processes and strategies for health-related emergencies or disasters as experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expanding language access for digital services and social media, mediums that have experienced tremendous growth since the last time the Language Access Ordinance was amended in 2014/2015.
- Memorializing the three required languages: Chinese-Cantonese, Spanish, and Filipino, regardless of population changes.
- Require city departments to translate signage.
- Codifying language access strategies for first responders in crisis situations.
- Require city departments to inform members of the public their right to file a complaint, and of a process for providing feedback on the department’s language access services.
- Further defining the complaint process for Language Access Ordinance violations and requiring complaints on departments to be published quarterly on the OCEIA website, to the Immigrant Rights Commission, and the Board of Supervisors for accountability.
- Impose requirements for the annual Language Access Summary Report.
- Require departments to post notice of the availability of language access services and a know-your-rights brochure to access language services.
- Adding language emphasizes departments’ responsibility for the budget and encourages increased bilingual staff for Language Access Ordinance needs.

The Language Access Ordinance only applies to services and information provided by the City and County of San Francisco, however, businesses, health providers, and organizations that work with populations who are limited English proficient or are more comfortable speaking in their native language should also make good faith efforts to provide language access to their services in the respective languages for the communities that they serve.



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The amendments to the Language Access Ordinance was introduced on Tuesday, July 25, 2023, the last Board of Supervisors meeting before the August recess. The legislation will sit for 30 days and will be heard in committee in the fall where the public will have an opportunity to comment. Public comment for the Language Access Ordinance amendments may also be emailed to board.of.supervisors@sfgov.org or mailed to the Board of Supervisors at City Hall, 1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place, Room 244, San Francisco, CA 94102.

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