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New Jersey Leads on Historic Language Access Proposal

Advocates erupt in applause as Senator Ruiz's Language Access Bill (S2459) sails out of Senate Budget & Appropriations

Trenton, NJ [March 6, 2023] – Today, New Jerseyans witnessed history as Senator Ruiz's Language Access bill (S2459) passed out of the Senate Budget & Appropriations Committee, bringing the state one step closer to eliminating discriminatory language barriers for New Jersey's immensely diverse population.

*"We are a multilingual state and we are a diverse state. Because we have been overlooked for so long, our communities do not always receive the visibility we deserve. It then becomes more difficult for us to advocate for the programs and services we deserve because our voices are silenced. With the Language Access Bill this much closer to becoming law, our communities have hope that our voices can finally be heard," **said Erik Cruz Morales, Policy and Campaigns Manager with the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice.***

*"New Jersey is rich in our racial and linguistic diversity. One in three New Jersey households speak a language other than English, but without language justice, our communities are denied access to the programs and services they deserve," **said Kat Phan, Policy Associate with the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice New Jersey.** "New Jersey has made huge strides in expanding State programming that uplifts and empowers our diverse communities. But language access remains out of reach. With today's committee vote, New Jersey is one step closer to bridging that divide."*

The Language Access Bill (S2459) authored by Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, directs State agencies in the Executive Branch that provide direct services to provide written translation and interpretation in the top 15 languages. The bill also ensures that government entities providing language access are reporting on service provision and community requests for services.

*"Today's committee advancement of S2459 moves our state one step closer to ensuring language access across New Jersey. This legislation is an investment in equity, due process, and ensuring that all communities can access information and resources. When residents cannot communicate fully and accurately with state government agencies, they are denied fair and equal access to crucial services and opportunities. This bill, which goes for a full Senate vote next, has the power to make lives better. We urge New Jersey legislators to support S2459 and continue to build on the state's commitment to create a more welcoming and accessible state for all who call New Jersey home," **said ACLU-NJ Campaign Strategist Alejandra Sorto***

In a statement, CAIR-NJ Government Affairs Manager Madina P. Ouedraogo, MPA-PNP said, *"We commend the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for moving S2459 through the legislative process, and we look forward to seeing the bill eventually pass and be signed into law by the Governor. Three-quarters of American Muslims are immigrants or children of immigrants, according to Pew Research Center. This means that language could pose a barrier to Muslims seeking resources or other forms of support. Language access is crucial to our diverse state population. Not only is it a means to acquire information, but also a way of empowering New Jerseyans to make informed decisions about vital parts of their life."*

This historic step is not the first for Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, who opened the comments on the bill by sharing a personal story of her upbringing and her parents. Senator Ruiz first broke records as the first elected Puerto Rican American in the state legislature. In 2022, she was sworn in as the first Latina Majority Leader. The committee chamber erupted in applause as the final vote on the bill was secured.

"I've relied on my children for years now to navigate simple things such as paying rent, setting up accounts, securing appointments, state ID renewals, and much more. I haven't been able to find information about public services, and it's inefficient to have to ask my children for assistance every time. Now, my family and I are closer than we've ever been to having accessible translations, and I'm so much closer to no longer having to wait to be heard." ***said a member from New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children***

"We applaud the Senate Committee for making New Jersey stronger by advancing this legislation. This bill will help ensure that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), who have the highest rate of limited English proficiency of any racial/ethnic group, are both seen and heard. With tremendous disparities in access among New Jersey's 1+ million strong AAPI community, language access is essential to helping meet the needs of our communities." ***-Amber Reed, President, AAPI Montclair***

"We are thrilled to see the Language Access Bill advance through the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. We thank the committee members for their leadership and commitment. This bill strengthens our communities by recognizing language barriers to services and creating the framework to empower residents to seek the services regardless of the language they speak. We still have much to cover but are one step closer to making meaningful language access a reality for all immigrant children and families who call New Jersey home" ***said Lady Jimenez Torres, Policy Director of New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children***

Several amendments were made to the bill, ensuring that government entities covered under the Executive Branch would have the time, resources, and guidance to thoughtfully implement their Language Access Plans and gather data on requests and usage of language assistance services. The Language Access Bill was introduced in spring 2022. The bill is authored by Senate <u>Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz</u> and Sponsored by Assemblymember Sadaf Jaffer, Ellen Park, and Sterley Stanley in the <u>Assembly</u>.