



**SHAMANN WALTON**  
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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**\*\*\*PRESS RELEASE: RALLY AND HEARING TO STRENGTHEN LANGUAGE ACCESS IN  
SAN FRANCISCO\*\*\***

**SAN FRANCISCO, CA** – On Monday morning, community advocates and Supervisor Shamann Walton gathered in front of City Hall to announce additional amendments to strengthen San Francisco’s Language Access Ordinance before holding a hearing on language access at the Board of Supervisors Rules Committee. The additional changes include lowering the City’s official language threshold to 6,000 Limited English Proficiency (LEP) persons, which will make Vietnamese an official certified language for the City and County of San Francisco in two years. The Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs will also have expanded responsibilities to help City Departments build their language access capacities. 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. These new amendments represent a continued commitment from the City to deliver quality services to communities that speak a language other than English.

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. 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.

Last year, the California State Legislature amended the Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act of 1973 to require translation services in emergency situations, involving an immediate threat of serious harm or mass casualties, including conditions of natural disaster or conditions posing extreme peril to the safety of persons and property. The Legislature’s amendments were in response to critical incidents like the mass shootings in Half Moon Bay and Monterey Park as well as the broken levee in Monterey County, which severely impacted communities with significant LEP persons. Various news media documented the local



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agencies' failure to provide language services to communicate vital information on safety and access to recovery with impacted communities.

Since the introduction of the Language Access Ordinance amendments last year, Supervisor Walton has been working closely with community partners and OCEIA to create additional community-driven amendments that would strengthen the existing Language Access Ordinance to 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 and made it clear that city departments need to prioritize language access services during health-related emergencies, disaster-related activities, and all other public safety crises through a community-focused approach that can effectively communicate with residents who speak or are more comfortable in their native language. Since the last update to the Language Access Ordinance, digital services, web-based content, and online mediums for providing vital information about City programs and services have also increased significantly.

Despite the City's progress in providing language access services, according to findings in OCEIA's most recent [Annual Language Access Report](#), 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.

"Our immigrant communities contribute to the cultural fabric and economy of San Francisco so we need 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 process between our office, Supervisor Chan, the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs, the Immigrant Rights Commission, the Language Access Network, and community advocates. We will continue to work with all of our city departments to make sure we deliver quality language access services once we pass this legislation."

"Nearly one in five San Francisco residents identifies as Limited English Proficient. This means that access to information and services for many depends on our ability to communicate in multiple languages," said Jorge Rivas, director of the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs. "These amendments will help ensure equal access to City services and vital information for all San Franciscans, making our city safer, healthier, and more just for all."

"The Immigrant Rights Commission has fought for language justice since its founding over 25 years ago," said Celine Kennelly, chair of the Immigrant Rights Commission. "We advocated for the first iteration of the Language Access Ordinance in 2001 to ensure equal access to City services for all San Franciscans."



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Today, the Immigrant Rights Commission is pleased to join with City leaders in taking another step forward in improving language access."

"Language access is a cornerstone of democracy and social justice," said Anisha Hingorani, Policy Manager of Chinese for Affirmative Action, an organization part of the Language Access Network. "In a city as diverse as San Francisco, linguistic inclusivity isn't just a goal – it is an obligation. By breaking down barriers, we not only enhance communication but also uphold the values of fairness, dignity and opportunity for all."

"The new amendments will broaden language access for our immigrant community members, including expanding telephonic interpretation and written translation for all languages," said Vanessa Bohm, Director of CARECEN SF's Family Wellness and Health Promotion Program. "This is extremely important as we see more newly arrived immigrant families, including from parts of Mexico and Central America, where many speak a Mayan language as their native language and would more comfortably and effectively access services being able to speak their native language."

"That's why we applaud the efforts of everyone here today and their leadership to strengthen the Language Access Ordinance with amendments like the right to telephonic interpretation and written translation for all languages," said PJ Eugenio, SOMCAN's Workforce Counselor. "We look forward to the Board resolution that will continue our collective effort with OCEIA to work with the community on addressing key equity concerns."

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.

### **Additional amendments to the City's Language Access Ordinance include:**

- Implementing updated provisions of the Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act for emergency and disaster translation services.
- Updating findings on language access in San Francisco.
- Including Public Service Announcements and vital information in multiple languages.
- Lowering the language threshold requirement from 10,000 to 6,000 residents, now including Vietnamese, effective two years from the passage of the ordinance.
- Requiring city departments to maintain lists of bilingual employees and their languages.



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- Providing written materials in requested languages for LEP persons within 48 hours, with good faith efforts for translation within a reasonable amount of time.
- Establishing a streamlined complaint process through OCEIA for language access service difficulties while informing the public about complaint procedures and feedback mechanisms.
- Creating a multilingual know-your-rights brochure.
- Developing standardized vocabulary lists for required languages.
- Prominently displaying language access service availability in city buildings.
- Clarifying interpretation vs. translation throughout in the ordinance.
- Strengthening OCEIA's role in enforcing compliance, providing guidance, and helping build capacity for city departments.
- Expanding language access for digital services and social media.
- Memorializing required languages: Chinese-Cantonese, Spanish, and Filipino.
- Mandating translation of signage.
- Codifying language access protocols for first responders.
- Requiring quarterly publication of complaints and annual Language Access Summary Report to be sent to the Board of Supervisors.
- Emphasizing departmental responsibility for language access budget and bilingual staff.

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.

The Rules Committee unanimously passed the amendments to the Language Access Ordinance and the ordinance will sit for a second reading at the Committee before it appears at the full Board of Supervisors Meetings. Public comment for the Language Access Ordinance amendments may be emailed to [board.of.supervisors@sfgov.org](mailto:board.of.supervisors@sfgov.org).

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