

**California Common Cause
Recommendations for Language Access
August 6, 2013**

Beginning in the mid- to late-1990s, county registrars in California began developing plans to provide language assistance in the languages required by Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act. In those days, Orange County developed a few practices that would slowly be adopted in other counties as well. Eventually, counties like Los Angeles would take bilingual assistance to a whole new level, but the early steps of outreach provide instructive guidance for other jurisdictions.

- 1) **Scheduling regular meetings with community groups serving the targeted language minority groups.** Today, several CA California counties schedule regular meetings (usually quarterly) to involve community leaders in shared problem solving, open communication about plans, and to encourage collaboration on specific projects. In the early days, the interactions with registrars and community leaders were often less congenial, and sometimes adversarial, because they centered on community leaders delivering reports of problems on election day (or before). In some counties, such as Los Angeles, the community meetings have grown to include groups representing voters with disabilities, those concerned with election integrity, those representing different parties, and groups engaged in poll watching, voter assistance, voter registration, or recruiting poll workers. The regular meetings have helped to increase trust, open channels of communications, and in many instances, identify solutions to address problems that have helped avoid or resolve litigation.
- 2) **Recruit bilingual staff tasked with outreaching to language minority groups.** In the late 90's, Los Angeles encountered difficulties recruiting bilingual poll workers. They had been trying to recruit bilingual poll workers by using the same methods they used for other poll workers – calling registered voters' households, and asking, in English, if people would volunteer, or relying on other usual channels for volunteers. When LA County eventually hired one, and eventually a team of people to outreach to non-profits, places of worship, libraries, and other places and events that regularly served the targeted minority language communities, they met with much more success in recruitment. These efforts also proved useful in distributing voter education materials, registering voters, and teaching new voters how to use the voting machines.
- 3) **Involve ethnic media.** One of the challenges of translation is figuring out how to use terms that will be familiar to the target language group. In some languages, this is made even more challenging because of the existence of multiple dialects (for Chinese and South Asian languages), or the use on non-alphabetic characters (eg: Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Khmer, South Asian languages, and Thai). Setting up early conversations with multiple media outlets to develop a glossary of commonly used terms can help ensure that the terms that are used by elections officials will synchronize with what these populations may be hearing/reading

through the media. Media may also be helpful in sorting through how to transliterate non-Asian language names into Asian characters/pronunciations.

- 4) **Work with community leaders to develop an acceptable targeting system for identifying poll sites and language needs.** It is helpful to work with community leaders to develop a methodology and to confirm which poll sites need what language assistance. For instance, using Census and voter registration data to identify certain precincts as needing language assistance can be confirmed or refined with the help of community input. For instance, knowing that a particular poll site is designated for Chinese, and working with the community to confirm that Cantonese or Mandarin or another dialect is most commonly spoken will ensure that the jurisdiction's recruitment and deployment of the correct bilingual poll worker will ensure their limited resources are wisely used.
- 5) **Training all poll workers to be prepared to assist voters with language needs.** Often, because of limited availability of bilingual poll workers or other reasons, a voter who has a language assistance need may arrive at a poll site where no one speaks his or her language. Well-trained poll workers who are prepared to serve and who care about the voters' dignity and right to vote, can use a variety of printed translated materials and hand gestures to assist the voter. All poll workers, not just the bilingual poll workers should be trained to be ready and willing to serve all voters. All poll workers should also be trained about the value of the bilingual poll worker as a member of the team.