

## **April 2007 Public Meeting – Edgardo Cortés Testimony**

Thank you Commissioners. As you know, I have been with the EAC since July of 2005. It is my pleasure to be here with you today to present what we believe will quickly become an invaluable tool to election officials around the country.

Sections 241(b)(5) and 241(b)(14) of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 charge the Election Assistance Commission with studying and promoting methods of ensuring the accessibility of voting, registration, polling places, and voting equipment to all voters, including Native American and Alaska Native citizens and voters with limited proficiency in the English language. These provisions also charge the EAC with examining the technical feasibility of providing voting materials in eight or more languages for voters who speak those languages and who have limited English proficiency.

Executive Order 13166 requires all agencies that provide federal financial assistance to issue guidance on how recipients of that assistance can take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to people with limited English proficiency. In order to meet these mandates, the EAC established its Language Accessibility Program, or LAP, in the summer of 2005. The LAP consists of working groups comprised of local election officials, Congressional staff members, national advocacy groups, and research and public policy organizations designed to give the EAC feedback and ideas to help us meet our language accessibility mandates. In addition, the LAP will provide resources in multiple languages to election officials, voters, and advocacy organizations including the glossary that we are presenting today, the National Mail In Voter Registration Form, the EAC's website, and future projects designed to help make the process of elections open to all citizens regardless of their native language. To focus our work in

meeting these responsibilities regarding language accessibility, EAC has limited its activities to languages covered under sections 203 and 404 of the Voting Rights Act.

The EAC convened the first meeting of the Spanish Language Working Group to discuss a variety of issues impacting Spanish-speaking voters with limited English proficiency in August of 2005. The agenda included a wide range of issues from the impact of provisional voting on Spanish speaking voters to the readability and usability of the National Mail-In Voter Registration Form. The group had wide representation including the National Council of La Raza, the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, IFES, the William C. Velazquez Institute, VotoLatino, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute, the Los Angeles County Clerk and Recorder's Office, and staff from the offices of Senator Mel Martinez and Representative Charles Gonzalez. Our reason for dealing with Spanish-language issues first was very practical – Spanish is the second most prevalent language spoken in the United States. Given our agency's limited resources, we wanted to prioritize languages based on the proportion of the population that would potentially benefit from our projects.

Our second language working group was convened in May 2006 and focused on the five Asian languages covered under the Voting Rights Act – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. This working group focused on shared concerns of the Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) communities, as well as the different concerns impacting specific ethnic communities under the APIA umbrella. The group consisted of local election officials, local and national advocacy groups, and research and public policy organizations including the Los

Angeles County California Clerk and Recorder's Office; the King County, Washington Elections Office; APIA Vote, and others. The meeting included extensive discussion on the National Voter Registration Act and the availability of voter registration forms in Asian languages; the treatment APIA voters during the implementation of statewide voter registration databases required under HAVA; and obstacles to providing election-related materials in multiple Asian languages.

My coworker, Laiza Otero, will now present the first finished project to be released under the EAC Language Accessibility Program as a direct result of input from our language working groups. In addition, Laiza will also talk about several other language accessibility projects that EAC will release before the end of this year in order to provide the greatest assistance to election officials as they prepare for the 2008 Presidential elections.