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Tanya M. González

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The Case for Meaningful Language Access

TANYA M. GONZÁLEZ, M.P.A.
Executive Director, Sacred Heart Center



Through my work in the Richmond area for the last twenty years, I have dedicated my career to welcoming immigrant families, starting at Refugee and Immigration Services, then through the City of Richmond Office of Multicultural Affairs, and for the last five years, through Sacred Heart Center, where we connect Latino families with tools to thrive and flourish. I have seen first-hand the growth of the immigrant community in the Richmond area, and have been an integral part of the services in place intended to assist families in their adjustment to their new home. My key point that I am sharing is simply this: **the Richmond metropolitan area needs a comprehensive immigration integration policy that centers language access services and that is implemented by localities, nonprofits, and other human service providers to begin to move towards racial equity for immigrant families.** This essay presents a case through the lens of public policy for developing such a policy. However, in considering our shared humanity, and the moral case for providing meaningful language access service, I also offer the following paraphrased sentiment, attributed to Nelson Mandela: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”¹

Migration Trends

In general, migration around the world is a constant, and the United Nations estimates that in 2005, “191 million people lived outside their country of birth, a figure that has doubled since 1975 and continues to rise.”² At the beginning of the twenty-first century, about one in eight residents in the United States, or 13%, were foreign born.² This growth in the foreign-born population has implications for families through second and further generations. Children residing with at least one immigrant parent accounted for 24% of children under age 18 in 2010.³ This growing diversity brings with it many benefits, as well as challenges, as is exemplified by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in *Beyond the Melting Pot* where it was stated, “The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen.”⁴ In other words, diverse immigrants to the U.S. do not all assimilate and create one cohesive “American” identity.

Another key migration trend that has impacted our community here locally is that we have seen more immigrants moving to states that have historically not had the experience or infrastructure to promote integration. This has been the case in Virginia, and, more specifically, in the Richmond metropolitan area. Over the last two decades, the foreign born population in Virginia and in the metropolitan Richmond area has increased exponentially, going from 1 in 100 people in 1970 to 1 in 9 in 2012, based on University of Virginia research.⁵ In considering the possible barriers that exist in accessing services by these diverse immigrant groups in localities that have not traditionally had the infrastructure to serve them, language proficiency is a prominent hurdle. Of the foreign-born population in each locality, a large portion has limited English proficiency. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Henrico County has 16,400 Limited English Proficient (LEP) people, or 5.8% of its total population, and the primary languages spoken in descending order are Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi. Chesterfield County has 12,700 LEP people, or 4.3% of its total population, and the primary languages spoken in descending order are Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The city of Richmond has 8,800 LEP people, or 4.6% of its total population, and the primary language spoken is Spanish.⁶ While language access services have been slowly improving here in the

The Case for Meaningful Language Access

Richmond area since I first began working with immigrant families in 2000, I believe that we have a ways to go to truly achieve racial equity in this area, as available services through different localities and nonprofits in the area are disparate and sometimes nonexistent.

Immigrant Integration

Once immigrants are in the U.S., regardless if services are adequate or not, the complicated process of immigrant integration, which is multifaceted and multilayered, begins to occur. Because immigration integration policies around the U.S., as well as locally here in the Richmond area, are more ad hoc and piecemeal, disparities emerge, in terms of access to services by immigrant families. Children that live in Richmond City, for example, may have different access to English language instruction and supports than in Chesterfield or Henrico. Families that live in Henrico may have less access to interpreters than in Richmond City or Chesterfield, when accessing health and human services. These disparities directly impact medical care, education, and many other critical aspects of daily life. In addition, immigrant integration should involve both the arriving communities and the receiving communities working together in dynamic ways to engage and transform all community members. When immigrant integration does not occur as a two-way process, immigrant communities can be isolated, segregated, and disparities increase. Communities are pitted against each other and may even compete for what are seemingly limited resources.

Where there is a language barrier, there is no information and no service provision, effectively isolating individuals in the community and obliterating the possibility of racial equity.

Language Access

Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act states that, “no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”⁶ The Supreme Court decided in the 1974 court case *Lau v. Nichols* that a federal fund recipient’s denial of an education to a group of non-English speakers violated Title VI and resulted in discrimination.⁷ The Supreme Court thus interpreted Title VI to include “discrimination based on language as equivalent to national origin discrimination”⁸. In short, legally, because of Title VI, all entities that receive federal funding must provide meaningful language access services.

Where there is a language barrier, there is no information and no service provision, effectively isolating individuals in the community and obliterating the possibility of racial equity. An example of this effect of communities being isolated, in my opinion, was shown through the disparate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Latinx families in the Richmond area, with translated information being delayed or sometimes not available during the first few months of the pandemic. This lack of language access services, in addition to other reasons, has resulted in the devastating impact of COVID-19 on area Latinx families. Ultimately, providing meaningful access to services for all people, regardless of the language spoken, will improve racial equity by allowing “immigrants to participate in society at the same level as native citizens.”⁹

Some of the general components of language access services include: hiring bilingual employees; providing translation (written) and interpretation (verbal) services; providing the translation of important applications and websites; and establishing language access offices.¹⁰ Having bilingual staff allows agencies to communicate with their constituents in a more direct manner.¹⁰ When bilingual employees are limited or not an option, providing quality translation and interpretation services allow agencies to communicate with their constituents in spite of the limited bilingual staff.¹⁰ However, care must be used in selecting interpreters and translators as these are skills that require

The Case for Meaningful Language Access

several highly specialized competencies, in addition to language competence in both languages, so as to ensure that the communication is accurate.⁹

Creating a Comprehensive Plan for Immigrant Integration in Richmond

In the metropolitan Richmond area, where some disparate language access services exist at the local level, but no comprehensive immigrant integration policies currently exist, a first important recommendation for area localities is to develop a comprehensive immigrant integration plan at the executive level of each municipality, particularly where none exists. Ideally, local Richmond area governments would collaborate together on the components and on the implementation of their plans.

Guiding Principles

Several guiding principles can frame the development of that policy for immigrant families and the receiving communities.

- Promoting the social and economic mobility of immigrant families; most notably vulnerable groups such as refugees and limited English speakers;
- Advancing antidiscrimination principles that treat immigrant family members on a par with citizen family members;
- Promoting intergovernmental fiscal equity regarding collecting taxes from, and providing support to, newcomer populations;
- Leveraging the capacity and support of the private sector; and
- Acknowledging that integration is a bidirectional process involving both the immigrant family and receiving community adaptations.¹¹

Recommendations

With these guiding principles that have as their undercurrent racial equity for immigrant populations in mind, several concrete strategies can be recommended to localities in the Richmond area, using national models as input. Many of these recommendations could also be implemented by area nonprofit and other public service organizations.

- Create a language access policy and implementation plan that outlines procedures and protocol, monitor and ensure Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is adhered to at the customer service level in all local departments.
- Commit to staff training on immigrant eligibility for services, working with interpreters and translators, and cultural awareness training for the populations that have larger percentages represented in each locality.
- Commit to bilingual staff training for all staff members that are currently performing the role of interpreter or translator in addition to their other regularly assigned duties.
- Develop and implement a plan, if one does not already exist, to effectively notify LEP clients of their eligibility for benefits, programs, and language access services that are available to them.
- Use technology to facilitate language access service delivery through telephonic systems, such as language line, and other tools.
- Implement an evaluation system in order to monitor progress, along with a timeline for adjusting the services and programs according to the outcomes.

The Case for Meaningful Language Access

An immigrant integration policy adopted by all area localities, along with a robust language access service program will assist both the service providers and the immigrant community here in the Richmond area to better understand and access available services and programs. In addition, ensuring effective access to available services will improve the overall health of immigrant families and, ultimately, of the entire community. The benefits that the local language access policies can bring to the community are apparent, recognizing that contributing to the health and safety of immigrant families, results in advancing racial equity for a segment of the population that can sometimes be isolated and excluded by the very systems that should be welcoming newcomers to their new home.

While several area localities are doing some language access services, I believe that there is still a missed opportunity to implement a more comprehensive and strategic immigration integration approach. Even after twenty years of work, I think that language access continues to be an uncultivated public policy issue in the Richmond area. Unless real racial equity gains are advanced in this area, we may continue to ask, as James Baldwin did many years ago, "How much time do you want for your progress?"¹²

Tanya M. González

Tanya M. González holds a Bachelor's Degree in Latin American Studies from Brown University and a Master's in Public Administration from Virginia Commonwealth University. Ms. González joined the Sacred Heart Center as the Executive Director in July 2016. She grew up on the Texas-Mexican border and has lived in Richmond for twenty-six years. She has almost 20 years' experience in working with and for Richmond's Latino community. Ms. González is a graduate of Leadership Metro Richmond and the Connecting Communities Fellowship Program, as well as the Minority Political Leadership Institute. She was previously the recipient of the Ohtli award, given by the Mexican government to recognize individuals for their service to the Mexican community in the United States. Ms. González was also recognized as one of "Richmond's Top 40 under 40" by Style Magazine in 2005 and received the Leadership Metro Richmond Ukrop Community Vision Award in 2015. In 2018, she received the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities Humanitarian Award, and in 2020, she was recognized as a Richmond History Maker by the Valentine Museum. In her free time, Ms. González coordinates a dance group at the Sacred Heart Center that performs traditional Latin American and Spanish dance in the Richmond area.

The Case for Meaningful Language Access

Endnotes

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