

Sample Testimony on English-Only Ordinances

Introduction

My name is.... I am a (job title or other title, example “concerned resident of....”). My organization is (name of your organization and what it does).

I appreciate the opportunity to testify at this hearing on English as the official language of the (name of town). It is important to discuss the role of English in our society and how we can ensure that everyone in the United States is English proficient.

To begin, I would like to state unequivocally that I believe English is critical to success in this nation and strongly support English language acquisition and the integration of immigrants. However, I do not believe English-only policies will help a single person learn English or integrate.

In my testimony today, I will focus on the need for “official language” or English-only policies. In addition, I will propose an alternative policy to help limited-English-proficient (LEP) adults and children learn English.

We Do Not Need English as the Official Language

At issue is whether or not there is a need for an English as the official language policy. By any rational or historical standard, the answer is “no.” The facts bear this out.

Supporters of English-only policies argue that English is under attack. The fact is, English is already the language of government. Studies by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) have consistently shown that the overwhelming majority of U.S. Government documents are printed in English only. In fact, only about 200 – or less than 1% – of U.S. Government documents are published in a language other than English

Supporters of English-only policies argue that too many people don’t speak English. The fact is, almost every American speaks English. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 92% of Americans have “no difficulty speaking English.” The vast majority of Americans (215,423,557 out of 262,375,152 – 82%) speak only English at home. In addition, second language speakers also speak English. According to the U.S. Census, most people who speak a language other than English also speak English “very well.”

Supporters of English-only policies argue that immigrants don’t want to learn English. The fact is, immigrants want to learn English, but are often denied the opportunity. A recent study by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Education Fund showed that 57.4% of the ESL providers they surveyed had waiting lists of LEP persons seeking ESL services. Other providers were at capacity but did not keep waiting lists. There should be no question of the desire LEP persons have to learn English. If the real issue is how we can achieve this, then the answer is an investment in new Americans so that they are prepared to

more rapidly learn English and successfully integrate. We should provide new immigrants with access to ESL.

Supporters of English-only policies argue that today's immigrants don't want to assimilate like previous immigrants. The fact is, today's immigrants learn English as quickly as previous groups. For example, a report on language assimilation by the Lewis Mumford Center at Albany found that the second generation is largely bilingual; 92% of the Hispanics speak English "well" as do 96% of the Asians, though most also speak another language at home.

This is remarkable given that there has been insufficient investment in English language acquisition programs. Since fiscal year (FY) 2004, Congressional funding for adult education programs has decreased by more than \$10 million, funding for k-12 English language acquisition programs has decreased by more than \$12 million, and the Even Start family literacy program has been decimated, with funding cuts of nearly \$148 million.

It is fair to expect immigrants to integrate into American society, and English language acquisition is a large part of that, but we should adopt policies that will make that happen. The U.S. Congress has not done enough to aid English language acquisition.

Impact of English as the Official Language on Health and Public Safety

English as the official language is particularly harmful in the area of health care. An article in the New England Journal of Medicine (Language Barriers to Health Care in the United States, available on line at <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/355/3/229>) notes that few hospitals are providing interpretation services for patients. As a result, practitioners sometimes misunderstand patients' symptoms and patients are placed a risk of misunderstanding doctors' instructions. According to the article, an interpreter incorrectly told the mother of a young child with an ear infection to put oral amoxicillin in the girl's ears. English as the official language could preclude federally funded hospitals and health clinics from effectively serving LEP patients.

English as the official language could weaken federal and local governments' ability to respond to natural or man-made emergencies. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that our nation must do a better job of responding to large-scale disasters. Effective communication in the face of an emergency is critical for LEP persons and English speakers alike. For example, according to a report by the National Council of La Raza (*In the Eye Of The Storm: How the Government and Private Response to Hurricane Katrina Failed Latinos*, available on line at <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/detail/36812/>):

"Approximately 70 to 80 Jamaican, Peruvian, and Brazilian immigrants who were employed as casino service workers in Gulfport, Mississippi, were left by their employer at the apartment complex where they resided. The workers reportedly had no access to transportation, and while local television stations advised residents to evacuate and directed them to shelters, none of these advisories were provided in Spanish or Portuguese. A few days later, a few Jamaican immigrants were searching under the debris where the apartments once stood looking for their co-workers who were missing and presumed dead."

Federal agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are critical in the case of a natural disaster, an Avian Flu pandemic, or an act of terrorism. If LEP persons do not understand instructions or written information from FEMA or the CDC, all Americans will be negatively impacted.

The lack of language services can also place proficient English speakers at risk in cases of local emergencies. For example, if an apartment building is on fire and the first person who sees it is LEP, and there are no 911 operators who can understand what he is reporting. The response from the fire department would be delayed and the lives of many would be at risk.

English as the official language would weaken law enforcement and criminal justice proceedings. For example, if a victim of domestic violence who does not speak English reports a crime to the police, he or she will receive a notice from the court or the prosecution as to when to come to trial. Failure to provide that notice in a second language could result in the victim not knowing when to come to court and the case could be dismissed.

Better Policy Options: An Effective Integration Agenda

Given the facts, English as the official language policies can only be viewed as counter productive and extremist. First, as noted above, translation of documents is not a burden on our government. Less than 1% of federal government documents are in languages other than English. Second, the English language is not “under attack.” Almost every American speaks English. In fact, at a time when we need more bilingualism to fight terrorism and compete in a global economy, more than 80% of Americans speak only English. Third, recent immigrants are learning English and those who do not are seeking the opportunity to learn English.

The statement that our nation is in danger of losing its identity or character because of the presence of LEP persons is unfounded. The premise that LEP persons will only learn English if they are not provided language services is faulty. These arguments lead to ineffective policies, and raise questions among Hispanics in particular about the spirit of English-only proposals.

We can do better. Rather than pursue policies to isolate LEP persons, many of whom are U.S. citizens, we should take affirmative steps to support an English language acquisition and immigrant integration agenda.

First, we must recognize the importance of English as the unifying language of the United States, and the importance of English fluency for individuals who want to succeed in American society.

Second, we must recognize that command of the English language is a critical component of the success and productivity of our Nation’s children, and should be encouraged at every age.

Third, we must recognize that a skilled labor force is crucial to United States competitiveness in a global economy, and the ability to speak one or more languages in addition to English is a significant skill.

Fourth, we must support and encourage Americans to master the English language plus other languages.

Fifth, we must support literacy programs, including programs designed to teach English.

Sixth, we must develop our Nation's linguistic resources by encouraging citizens of the United States to learn and maintain Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Korean, Vietnamese, Farsi, African languages, sign language, and the many other languages of the world, in addition to English.

Thank you for considering my views.