

H.3084 / S.1990 – Language Access Bill: An Act relative to language access and inclusion

Sponsors: Rep. Adrian Madaro, Rep. Carlos Gonzalez, Sen. Sal DiDomenico

Summary:

This bill requires state agencies to take steps to provide culturally competent language services, including oral interpretation and written translation, in a timely fashion, and develop language access plans to ensure equitable language protocols and practices.

What this bill does:

- Ensure that state agencies effectively communicate with a diverse Commonwealth: this bill would require all public-facing agencies, and the outside service providers they rely on, to offer interpretation services and translate vital documents for non-English speakers.
- Standardize and enforce robust language access plans. Existing language access plans, policies, and protocols vary widely from agency to agency, and many are not implemented. This bill would provide minimum standards for such plans and give them the force of law. It would also require regular data collection so that state agencies know the linguistic needs of the populations they serve.
- Ensure adequate staffing to meet language access needs: the bill requires public-facing agencies to employ state-wide and regional language access coordinators whose only responsibilities would be to develop, implement, and train staff regarding agency language access plans and protocols.
- Create a stakeholder advisory board to assist state agencies in compliance, including representatives of non-English speaking communities, the deaf or hard-of-hearing community, community groups and more.
- Create mechanisms for phased-in implementation. This bill would initially apply to nine essential public-facing state agencies that provide services such as healthcare, housing, education, and childcare, before expanding to include other executive offices.

Why this bill matters:

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare our Commonwealth's inability to provide desperately needed information and services in languages other than English. With one of the most linguistically diverse states in the country, Massachusetts must build the capacity of public-facing state agencies to meet the language access needs of an increasingly diverse population. Non-English speaking residents must have equal access to public health information, education, unemployment assistance, healthcare, housing, and other crucial services.