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Press Release

Immigrant Advocates Celebrate Introduction of Erie County Language Access Act, Demand Swift Passage

Erie County, NY—Today, the Language Access Working Group and Erie County Legislators gathered at the Legislature to celebrate the introduction of the Erie County Language Access Act in the Erie County Legislature. This bill would require all Erie County departments and agencies to adopt a language access plan which shall include language services in the top six languages spoken in Erie County, a community advisory council to give community groups representation and power over the planning and implementation, live interpretation, a specific timeline for the translation of vital documents, and more. Advocates demanded swift passage of this bill to provide equitable language access across Erie County government agencies, so that all Erie County residents have equal access to services regardless of their language proficiency. The Language Access Working Group is composed of representatives from the New York Immigration Coalition, Partnership for the Public Good, Buffalo Immigrant and Refugee Leadership Team, Burmese Community Services, ACCESS of WNY, UB School of Social Work, International Institute of Buffalo, Journey's End Refugee Services and Deaf Access Services.

“This bill recognizes the growth in diversity in Buffalo and Erie County over the past decades as our residents speak and understand more languages than ever. The 2020 Census resulted in population growth in Buffalo for the first time in over 60 years and the primary reason for that growth is the City’s foreign-born communities. As you travel across Buffalo, you hear Somali, Karen, Spanish, Bengali, and many others. This bill ensures you will hear those same languages in County offices,” said **Chairwoman April Baskin, 2nd District**.

“The children of new migrants often bear the brunt of translation for their elders. While this is understandable, since these young people often pick up English sooner thanks to school, we should not require them to bear the brunt of the responsibility. Children should not have to miss school or other activities to accompany their parents or elders to meetings. This bill will ensure that Erie County is able to provide the services these new residents need with a minimum of difficulty,” said **Legislator Howard Johnson, 1st District**.



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“Amherst is growing in part due to a thriving immigrant community. People come from all over the world to Amherst to work, study at UB or to work at great institutions such as Roswell and ECC. Having access to language helps the entire family and is one reason why those who come to Amherst and Erie County can become active members in our community. They are able to start businesses and advocate for staying in Western New York. Supporting this not only increases the quality of life for those families but increases all our quality of life by increasing participation. Erie County has challenges and all of us need to be able to work together to solve problems, we can only do that if we can communicate and if everyone is able to participate,” said **Legislator Jeanne Vinal, 5th District**.

“Language access is one of the most critical tools to ensure every New Yorker is included and can fully participate in civic life,” said **Dejia James, Manager of Organizing and Strategy WNY, New York Immigration Coalition**. “No one should be prevented from accessing emergency services or critical public safety information simply because of the language they speak. As immigrants and refugees from across the world continue to make Erie County home, the Erie County Language Access Act is a monumental step forward in championing equity, signaling a deep commitment to inclusion and strengthening community life. We thank Legislator April Baskin for introducing this landmark bill, which will open up the doors of local government services to all, and call for its swift passage in the Erie County Legislature.”

"Language Access is a vital resource for New Yorkers that removes unnecessary barriers for families that tend to create more challenges that impact education, social services, health care, and judicial matters. It's imperative we have a swift passage of this historic bill," said **Talib Abdullah MSW, Executive Director of ACCESS of WNY**.

“That really was the emphasis to pass the language access law in our County, this will help as a bridge between our communities and the government agencies, public health care providers, and all services providers, especially for non-English speakers,” said **Steven Sanyu, President, Burmese Community Services**.

“For over 100 years, the International Institute of Buffalo has been helping members of our community communicate with each other. Since people whose first language is not English are a significant and growing part of our county’s population, it makes sense to require this language access to facilitate providing services to all of our residents, not only those who are native English speakers,” said **Jennifer Rizzo-Choi, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo**.

"Having a Language Access Law is one of the most vital steps to ensure that immigrants and refugees are welcomed and fully integrated in our county," said **Grace Karambizi, Executive Director of The Buffalo Immigrant Leadership Team**.

“Immigrants and refugees have played pivotal roles in Erie County’s economic prosperity and cultural richness. Despite a rapid increase in immigrants and refugees (7.2% of the county population), their access to government services is limited because of limited



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language services. While jeopardizing immigrant and refugee families' economic and social integration, limited language access deters their children's academic, social, and psychological development: They are often the only ones who can assist their parents communicate with government agencies. An increasing number of studies show the negative impacts of "language brokering" on children: They often miss their school; and doing "adultlike" work places heavy psychological burdens on them. The Language Access Act will protect all children from unjust burden," said **Yunju Nam, an Associate Professor at UB School of Social Work**

"The staff of Deaf Access Services, an affiliate of People Inc, are very grateful to see the issue of language access being brought before the Erie County Legislature. Combining sign language and foreign language standards into the same solution ensures equitable access to county services for all people in our community. As the only non-profit sign language interpreting service and Deaf advocacy organization in Erie County, we see regular barriers to civic engagement and mainstream services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. The Language Access Bill helps to clarify the issues and set standards that can hopefully be replicated by other communities in our region," said **Pam Bos Kefi, Executive Director, Deaf Access Services.**