

My name is Ray Coffey, and I am the Community Services Director for the City of Winooski, and have also served as an active member of the Vermont Language Justice Project. Through both roles, I've seen the importance of ensuring that residents have equitable access to information, especially during emergent situations, and I would strongly encourage that the Legislature retain an emphasis on "Language Assistance Services" as spelled out in Section 21. 20 V.S.A. § 4 of the draft S.310 Bill. Winooski is the most diverse community in the State, with upwards of 20 different languages spoken by our residents, the State's only majority-minority school district, and a poverty rate almost double the State average. This diversity is truly one of our community's strengths, but also requires creative and adaptive approaches to communication with residents. While we are currently working to develop a formal Language Access Plan for the City, our adopted Communication Procedure addresses some of the ways we currently conduct outreach to multilingual residents, and is a procedure that is also referenced clearly in our City's Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP). We've worked hard to cultivate relationships with partner agencies (i.e. Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV); USCRI; Winooski School District Multilingual Liaisons) and rely heavily on those partnerships to distribute information (both emergent and routine) to our multilingual residents. And while these systems have, to date, worked with decent effect, the presence of a more coordinated and consistent Statewide approach to multilingual communication, especially during emergencies, would be incredibly valuable. As the State continues to become more diverse, this will only become more important. The importance of multilingual communication was highlighted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when our City was threatened with burgeoning outbreaks within several of our New American communities. Through an active, ongoing partnership with the City of Burlington, the Department of Health, Vermont Language Justice Project, AALV, USCRI and others, we were able to respond quickly to the hot spots, ensure current and accurate information was shared in multiple languages and from trusted sources, and helped to stem these outbreaks with remarkable effect. It was truly life saving work. Our experience during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted not only the importance of multilingual communication strategies, but also the lack of resources available at the State level to ensure Vermonters with varying language needs had equitable access to information. In the face of large scale (or even local/regional) emergencies this remains important, and in the face of growing diversity Statewide, needs to be on the radar. This is not a Winooski/Burlington issue, it's an issue that impacts residents across our State. We encourage State officials to lean into this important, growing need, and are ready to support the work as a partner.

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