

Testimony for S.310 in House Gov. Ops & Military Affairs regarding language access and disaster preparedness.

April 17th 2024

Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Alison Segar and I am the director of the Vermont Language Justice Project. The project was created on my kitchen table as the pandemic started to close the state and the country down in March 2020. I am a social worker by training and I worked with many refugees who had come to Chittenden County. I also have friends, colleagues and family members who have limited English access and I was extremely concerned about how they were going to keep themselves safe and healthy during covid when the only information coming out about how to do that was in English. I knew that many newcomers to Vermont do not read and write in their own language and so information translated and then put up on the internet would not be accessed or read.

So, I wrote a script about the basics of covid and my friend Mohamed Jafar created a video which he translated into Somali from my script. We posted it on youtube and sent it out through whatsapp and by word of mouth to everyone we knew throughout Vermont and indeed the country who spoke Somali so that they could have information about the deadly virus.

A task force of over 40 community partners was established over the coming weeks. We met twice a week and figured out with extremely limited funds how to get information out in more languages after the governor of Vermont would give his frequent press conferences where new and life saving information was being shared in English. By the

end of April we were working in 10 languages. Our translators at that point were translating very difficult medical information for \$50 a time and I was working for free in the every evening and all weekend to make the videos, upload them and distribute them. When we were about to run out of money, the Vermont Department of Health stepped in, early summer 2020, and agreed to pay the translators for their time. I still continued to work for free.

Fast forward to November 2021 and VDH received a health disparity grant from the CDC. The Vermont Language Justice Project was awarded \$300,000 I was able to quit my job at Howard and begin to work full time for the project. We were taken in by CCTV a cable access TV station in Burlington. Covid was still rampant and so I kept my head down, making videos to do with covid. We produced 6 different videos about the rapid antigen tests that were being given out to folks. Again, these tests being given out were only with English and Spanish instructions. We produced these videos in 18 languages again so folks could be safe, and keep their family safe and know what to do.

As covid has receded we began working on other health related issues, and then over the past 18 months have branched out into issues involving other aspects of public and emergency safety.

Last winter we produced videos in 18 languages on how to stay safe during cold weather and more recently a video on how to drive safely in bad weather. Last spring we did a video on how to stay safe in hot weather.

When the flooding happened in July 2023 we were able to respond within 24 hours to make videos on how to stay safe during flooding. Those videos included information for farmers, residents who had flood

damage and videos on scammers pretending to be FEMA workers. Over a period of two weeks we produced five videos for a total of 57 videos several in 18 unique languages. Those videos had over 7000 hits during that two week period.

These flood videos were made without being requested from anywhere within the State of Vermont although we did reach out to the Department of Emergency Management. The State was only responsive when I believe the Department of Racial Equity stepped in on our request, and we were able to ask for money to fund us. Only one of the videos was paid for by the State of Vermont. Three were paid out of our CDC funding and one through a community action organization in Rutland.

Most recently we were asked by Hello Burlington to make a video about eclipse safety. Eventually it was agreed that this video be paid for by the Vermont Tourist Board. These videos in 18 languages have received over 45000 hits, over 2700 of them in ASL and over 700 in English.

Three weeks ago we were talking about doing a video about earthquake safety. We haven't done that yet because we don't have the money to do so. Two days later there was an earthquake. What is the State of Vermont going to do to reach out to folks with language access needs who do not speak English if there is an earthquake?

Numbers..

Since the project began we have had over a quarter of a million hits on our channel with over 1500 subscribers. Our videos are viewed all over Vermont, the country and in fact the world. We are the only organization in the United States who is consistently doing this work in 18 languages.

The task force established at the beginning of covid still meets. Just yesterday we met. There were over twenty community partners present. This shows that this work continues to be relevant and important to community members.

Here's the thing. Like many nonprofits, we are about to fall off a funding cliff. It is projected our CDC funding will run out by August this year. We cannot survive fiscally with private contracts from non profits who have to fundraise to pay us.

If we are going to be a State that welcomes all peoples here to Vermont , we need to have an infrastructure that is able to adequately reach out to all peoples when there is an emergency that is life threatening. Our videos did that during covid and did that during the flooding. In this current time with climate change, we need to be ready for "what happens next" and be proactive, and there needs to be a budget whereby this can happen and it needs to go beyond written translation on websites that folks cannot access or indeed read.