

Testimony for S.311 Senate Committee on Government Operations regarding Language Access for Critical Services

April 2025

Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Alison Segar and I am the Director of the Vermont Language Justice Project. On April 17th 2024 I gave testimony for S.310 in the House Government . Operations & Military Affairs committee regarding language access and disaster preparedness. Today I am here to provide testimony for the bill S.111 a bill providing language access for critical services

I launched the Vermont Language Justice Project five years ago in response to the COVID pandemic when it became very clear that emergency communication and accurate health information was not reaching communities of people with language access needs, who I saw as some of the most vulnerable and most isolated people in Vermont . I worked for free producing over 50 videos each in at least 10 languages about all things covid that we as English speakers and readers had easy access to. Videos about travel restrictions, masks, hygiene, vaccinations, about how and where you could get tested for covid always sharing the videos out to the community with the help of community partners and community leaders. We always ensured that our translators were compensated for their work.

In October 2021 because of a CDC disparities grant, through the Vermont Department of Health, twenty months after the pandemic began I was able to give up my full time job as a social worker and begin to expand the project outside of Chittenden County and work in 8 extra languages that our community partners told us we needed to accomodate.

Because of the CDC grant we were able to respond quickly to issues of health and safety in our communities. When the flooding swamped Vermont 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 warning people about folks posing as FEMA workers who were scamming people out of their private information. Over a period of two weeks we produced five different subject matter videos for a total of 57 videos several in 18 unique languages. Those videos had over 7000 hits during that two week period.

We have produced videos on how to stay safe during cold weather, how to drive safely in bad weather, how to stay safe in hot weather. We have made a video on car seats and their importance, fire safety in the home and the impact of smoke from forest fires. Last summer when the Triple E virus hit Vermont we were able to produce a video on Mosquito Bite Prevention over the labor day weekend because we knew how critical it was to get the information out in a timely manner.

These videos were all paid for by our CDC grant. That grant ended abruptly on March 23rd.

To date we have had over 320,000 views of our videos on our youtube channel and over 2220 subscribers. Our videos are watched in Vermont primarily but also throughout the USA and in fact the world.

Let me tell you what I have learned and what keeps me up at night.

As 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 and during the Triple E threat. We have learned that written translations on websites on crucial issues of health and safety are not enough as so many people cannot find those documents and more importantly cannot read in their native language.

We have learnt that everyone watches videos. Videos are able to communicate complex information quickly. Videos can also be shared easily with family members and friends and can consolidate knowledge over a period of time when watched and rewatched.

It is more important than ever at this moment in history that factual information is shared by community leaders who folks trust. We do this and we are repeatedly told that we have saved lives.

VLJP is evidence based. The work is supported by a task force of over 100 community partners of which anywhere from 10-25 meet bi weekly to advise on topics of concern to the Vermonters they work with and live among.

This work is supported with grants and contracts from the state, local governments and nonprofits plus philanthropic support. Continued funding is required as the needs have not diminished.

What keeps me up at night. Bird Flu keeps me up at night. Our new administration keeps me up at night knowing that they are no longer supportive of so many health initiatives particularly that VDH has been so proactive in the past to share with the citizens of Vermont around vaccinations. In fact we lost four proposed contracts last week when the Vermont Department of Health CDC funding abruptly ended. Earthquakes and chemical spills keep me up at night as well.

How will the state of Vermont communicate with its 7000 plus residents who have language access needs?

When the floods happened we had the luxury of being able to communicate with folks who have language access needs by producing those videos as we had a CDC grant. That ended on March 23rd thanks to the new administration.

VLJP has fallen over its funding cliff and will no longer be able to pivot at times of extreme need to produce crucial lifesaving information in multiple languages to the residents of Vermont.

The S.311 bill will provide money to the Vermont Department of Emergency Management and the Vermont Department of Health so they can proactively make media available to people with language access needs educating those people so they can be informed AHEAD of the emergencies that we can all predict are on the horizon in the near future.

We know what happens if we are not prepared. The most vulnerable among us which includes people with language access needs will get sick, or get hurt and will possibly die.

I founded the Vermont Language Justice Project because I knew it was a privilege to have access to information through a multitude of mediums that I could understand. I know that Vermonters who work on our farms, in manufacturing, take care of our children, our students, patients at the hospitals, our elderly, and work in hospitality who have language access needs, do not have that privilege.

If we are to keep ALL Vermont residents safe and healthy in emergencies, we need to ensure that people who speak languages other than English, have access to factual information in the language that they speak in a format that is accessible.

Thank you for your consideration and for moving S.111 forward. I am available to answer any questions at your convenience.

