

June 16, 2008

The Honorable Harry Reid, Majority Leader
The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Letter in Support of the State Court Interpreters Grant Program Act, S. 702

Dear Majority Leader Reid and Minority Leader McConnell:

We, the undersigned organizations, strongly support the State Court Interpreters Grant Program Act, S. 702, introduced by Senator Herb Kohl (D-WI). This important legislation, which has been approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee, would create a grant program for state court interpreter services throughout the country.

Providing court interpreter services is a necessary component of the adjudicatory process. Without the support of certified interpreters, courts encounter difficulty in finding the facts and dispensing justice in cases involving limited English proficient parties or witnesses. Proper language support also serves public safety goals by ensuring that LEP witnesses are heard accurately in criminal matters.

Improving court interpreter programs around the country will help to ensure access to justice and fair trials for individuals with limited English proficiency. Likewise, failure to utilize qualified interpreters undermines respect for the courts by creating an appearance of unfairness when one party or one witness cannot fully participate in a proceeding. There have been numerous examples of state court judgments being overturned due to the lack of qualified court interpreters provided to litigants. S. 702 would assist state courts in dealing with this reality.

According to the Constitution, Federal law, Department of Justice regulations and guidance, and state requirements, states courts have an obligation to provide court interpreters to individuals with limited English proficiency. In the vast majority of these cases, state courts provide interpreter services out of their own limited budgets. Many courts struggle to carry the costs of court interpreting or have declined to provide them in certain types of cases, with unfortunate results. This legislation would go a long way to help state courts meet these obligations.

The growing diversity of the United States' population is reflected in the changing needs of people appearing in the state courts. Thus, courts increasingly serve people who lack fluency in the English language. For example, in the past five years, data from the federal courts show an average annual increase of 7.6% per year in the number of events requiring the use of interpreters. In addition, Census data also shows that individuals who speak a language other than English is projected to grow in the next 10-15 years.

We strongly support the State Court Interpreters Grant Program Act, which would create a grant program for state court interpreter services throughout the country. We urge you and the other members of Congress to pass S. 702.

Sincerely,

The Conference of Chief Justices
The Conference of State Court Administrators
Asian American Justice Center
Asian Pacific American Legal Center
Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law
Catholic Charities of Central Texas
Center for Civil Justice of Michigan
Chinese for Affirmative Action
Civil Rights for Immigrants Task Force (Pittsburgh Interfaith Network)
Coalition of Bar Associations of Color
Community Justice Project
Florida Equal Justice Center
Florida Legal Services
HIAS and Council Migration Service of Philadelphia
International Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants
International Community Corrections Association
Korean American Resource & Cultural Center of Chicago
Korean Resource Center of Los Angeles
Latino Catholic Community of the Diocese of Pittsburgh
Legal Aid Society of Lubbock
NAACP of Houston
Na Loio Immigrant Rights & Public Interest Legal Center (Hawaii)
National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association
National Association of IOLTA Programs
National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators
National Council of La Raza
National Disability Rights Network
National Health Law Program
National Immigration Law Center
National Juvenile Defender Center
National Korean American Service & Education Consortium
Orange County Asian American Bar Association
Organization of Chinese Americans of Orange County
Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project
Pennsylvania Advisory Commission on Asian American Affairs
Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition
Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project
Philadelphia Bar Association
Political Asylum Project of Austin

Pro Bono Net
Southern Disability Law Center
Texas Access to Justice Foundation
United Methodist Church, Gen. Board of Church & Society
Victim/Witness Services of South Philadelphia
Vietnamese American Bar Association of Southern California
YKASEC – Empowering the Korean American Community of Flushing