



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

# REGISTRAR-RECORDER/COUNTY CLERK

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CONNOR B. McCORMACK  
REGISTRAR-RECORDER/COUNTY CLERK

December 24, 2003

TO: EACH SUPERVISOR

FROM: Conny B. McCormack, Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

## **EXPANDING ELECTION SERVICES TO ARMENIAN-SPEAKING VOTERS**

This report responds to Supervisor Antonovich's motion of October 28, 2003 instructing the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk (RR/CC) to investigate the need and cost of providing voting materials in the Armenian language.

Staff of the 5<sup>th</sup> Supervisorial District organized a meeting on November 14<sup>th</sup> to facilitate gathering information to assist with preparation of this report. The meeting was attended by a number of Armenian community leaders, staff members of the Speaker of the State Assembly and Attorney General, 5<sup>th</sup> District staff, RR/CC and ISD staffs (list of attendees at Attachment A). Armenian community leaders stated there is a heavy concentration of Armenian-speaking voters in the Glendale area and described the need to provide election services in the Armenian language. Statistical data supporting a large number of Armenian-Americans in that geographic area was provided by a representative of the Assembly Speaker's office with expertise in demography. The community leaders advocated in favor of full translation services of written materials including the statewide ballot propositions, local ballot measures and candidate statements as well as for more widespread oral language assistance at the voting precincts.

The RR/CC provided background information to the attendees regarding the County's legal requirements with regard to compliance with the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA). Under the VRA and U.S. Department of Justice federal regulations, Los Angeles County is required to provide translations of County-produced election materials (list of materials at Attachment B) and bilingual oral assistance in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese languages. The costs associated with providing these services averages \$400,000+ per language for each major election. Most of these costs result from the translation and production of sample ballot booklets.

These costs do not include the significant additional expenses associated with translating and printing the state ballot pamphlets (containing statewide ballot propositions, arguments and rebuttals and other key election information) or

voter registration forms as provision of these materials is the responsibility of the Secretary of State (SOS). Currently the SOS translates, prints and distributes the state ballot pamphlets in the same six languages covered by the VRA. The RR/CC noted that a key request of the Armenian community leaders involved written translation of statewide ballot propositions which is outside of the purview of the County. The Registrar suggested that the community leaders correspond with the SOS with regard to translation of future state ballot pamphlets in Armenian. Additionally, the City of Glendale conducts their own city elections and does not provide translations of their sample ballot booklet in Armenian.

RR/CC staff further explained that federal law does not require provision of translated election materials to voters beyond the federally mandated six languages noted above. The VRA specifies the definition of the term “language minority group” and sets a numerical threshold that triggers the language requirements. The threshold is re-established each decade based on extrapolations from the latest U.S. census statistics. Political jurisdictions reach the established threshold when either a raw number of 10,000 or 5% of citizens of voting age respond on their census forms that they do not speak English or that they do not speak English very well (at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency level). The VRA definition of “language minority group” also is narrowly defined as “persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives, or of Spanish Heritage (Section 203 (e)).” This definition specifically excludes other European languages.

Additionally, expanding the VRA definition of “language minority group” was broached during the development of the 2002 federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) but ultimately such expansion was purposely excluded in HAVA. This was due to the recognition that a revised/expanded definition would undoubtedly require Los Angeles and other large urban counties to provide translation services in dozens of languages resulting in a huge financial and administrative burden. The number of Russian and Cambodian-speaking Americans in the County, for example, is estimated to be as large or possibly larger than Armenian-speaking Americans.

#### AGREEMENT REACHED

While it was explained and understood by all attendees at the November 14<sup>th</sup> meeting that translation and printing of all County-produced election materials (including sample ballot booklets) in the Armenian language would require a change in policy by the Board of Supervisors and a significant increase to the RR/CC’s budget allocation, the RR/CC agreed to make the following enhancements to the multilingual election assistance program without budget augmentation:

- RR/CC agreed to expand Armenian-speaking pollworker recruitment in those precincts in the Glendale area identified by the Armenian community as needing oral assistance at the polls;
- RR/CC agreed to track Armenian-speaking pollworkers in the Department's computer system and to report the number who served at each election;
- RR/CC agreed to provide language badges in every precinct's election supplies so that pollworkers who speak languages other than the six languages designated by the federal VRA may indicate their fluency and availability to voters for language assistance in any language;
- The Armenian community leaders agreed to provide the RR/CC with a list of Armenian-language media. The RR/CC agreed to check the Department's current media mailing list and add any media outlets not already on our list for the widest possible dissemination of election information press releases;
- The Armenian community leaders agreed to provide translations of basic, static election materials and brochures. The RR/CC agreed to print these basic brochures in Armenian, similar to those printed in the six required VRA languages and to provide similar information on the Department's website. Topics include How to Register to Vote, How to Cast an Absentee/Mail ballot, How to navigate the "Where do I Vote?" portion of the RR/CC website, etc.
- The RR/CC agreed to work with the Internal Services Department (ISD) in conjunction with their ongoing Request for Proposal (RFP) for vendor-provided phone assistance in multiple languages. This service may have applicability and be useful to pollworkers by providing them with a designated number to call to avail voters of oral/phone translation assistance.

We also anticipate offering these same services (noted above) to other minority language groups with identified large populations. Our goal remains providing all voters with the best services possible within our budgetary capabilities. We believe providing these enhanced services in preparation for the March 2, 2004 Primary Election and subsequent elections will meet that goal.

If you have additional questions or comments, please contact me.

c: CAO  
County Counsel  
Secretary of State  
Glendale City Clerk  
Armenian community leaders (participants at Nov. 14<sup>th</sup> meeting)

Attachments