LONG BEACH needs better language access programs to serve diverse population, staff and activists say

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Nearly half of Long Beach’s population speaks a language other than English at home. But by the looks of the city’s signage, you wouldn’t know it.

Long Beach is seeking to change that and provide better access to city services to residents who don’t speak English, but the process has been slow-going. Community members and City Council members alike discussed the challenges those community members face — and what Long Beach can do about it — at the council’s Tuesday, Jan. 22, meeting.

Cindy De La Cruz-Brown, a community organizer with Long Beach Forward, told the council about focus groups that her and other organizations conducted to learn about non-English speakers’ experience.

“As someone who works with Long Beach residents, particularly parents, who speak a language other than English, I hear about their struggles to understand their bills,” she said. “I hear their stories about giving up on navigating city phone lines after being ping-ponged from person to person. I hear the frustration and discouragement.”

Long Beach first implemented a language access policy in 2013 to establish standards and procedures for improving residents’ ability to receive important information in their native language. But as city staff explained during Tuesday’s meeting, a recent comprehensive evaluation of the policy that Long Beach undertook — with the help of Cal State Long Beach’s Linguistic Anthropology Department — has revealed there is not enough staff to adequately serve the city’s diverse population.

While the evaluation is complete, city staff are currently synthesizing their findings and drawing up the report, which will be presented to the City Council by the end of March.

City data show that nearly 178,000 people in Long Beach speak Spanish, Khmer or Tagalog, and the city’s Equity Officer Katie Balderas said more and more people are beginning to use Long Beach’s language access services. There were 191 calls in nine different languages to the city’s Language Line in the 2018 fiscal year, which was a 44 percent increase compared to the previous year, Balderas said.

But Long Beach’s Director of Health and Human Services Kelly Colopy noted that the evaluation made it clear that more work needs to be done.

Juan Rosas, a graduate student at Cal State Long Beach who took part in compiling the city’s evaluation, took his criticism a step further.

“To put it frankly, what the students saw was disheartening,” he said.
He reported that students found that city staff had inconsistent knowledge of the language access policy, and sometimes resorted to using Google Translate or foreign language dictionaries to serve non-English speakers. He also said students found very little foreign language signage, and when they did, it was usually only in Spanish, despite the city’s large Khmer and Tagalog-speaking populations.

“The long and short of it, I think, is that Long Beach needs to do better,” Rosas said. “If the city wants to tout its diversity and wear it as a badge of honor, we need to recognize that behind that diversity, there is a linguistically diverse population, and we need to meet their needs, and I don't think we’re doing a good enough job.”

Activists have asked for more funding for the program and successfully pushed Long Beach to double the language access budget for this year. But that $160,000 budget is still far from the more than $1 million that local community groups believe would suffice.

For Colopy, the biggest challenge to providing more services is that Long Beach’s language access program coordinator is currently a part-time position, working 27 hours per week. She said a recommendation would come along with the report to make that a full-time position.

For council members, that sounded like a good first step.

“I think one of the most important aspects of this whole program is having a full-time employee,” Councilman Roberto Uranga said, “to handle the language access program, which will take care of some of the aspects that were raised here tonight, such as training or having liaisons in each department. I think to have a full-time employee to manage the language access program will be a very big step in doing that.”

Councilwoman Jeannine Pearce agreed, although she made clear this is just the beginning.

“I feel like we’re getting a step closer, and we still have a little bit more work to do,” she said, “but we’re getting there.”

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Hayley Munguia covers Long Beach City Hall for the Southern California News Group. She previously worked as a data reporter for FiveThirtyEight and has written for The Week, the Jerusalem Post and the Austin American-Statesman, among other publications. She's originally from Austin, graduated from NYU and will pet a dog any chance she gets.

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