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FACT SHEET: English-Only Talking Points

There is a movement in this country to pass and implement national, state and local laws that would limit the use of languages other than English and that would make English the "official" language. Proponents of the English-only movement claim that the unity of our nation is threatened because of the use of foreign languages. They say that our country is becoming divided along ethnic and language lines and that English-only laws will force people to learn English.

These claims are unfounded. First, our country is already united by the English language. According to the 1990 Census, 97% of all U.S. residents speak English and studies show that immigrants are learning English at the same or faster rates than in previous times in history. When English-only laws have been introduced, the result is more divisiveness and ethnic tension rather than unity.

What are some examples of English-only laws?

A city passes an ordinance that prohibits or restricts the amount of non-English languages on business signs. A county passes an ordinance that prohibits the county from funding activities involving a language other than English. Bilingual services at the county hospital and direction signs in the public transit system are eliminated. A state passes a law making English the "official" language and prohibits government employees from providing bilingual services. Congress proposes a federal bill that would require all federal business to be conducted in English and terminates federal bilingual education support.

Shouldn't everyone learn English? Why do we need bilingual services?

Everyone who lives in the U.S. should learn English. But for those who haven't mastered English yet, there are many obstacles. Many immigrants are elderly and/or disabled and unable to acquire English skills. Some immigrants do not have access to English as a Second Language classes because public schools are overcrowded. Some immigrants are struggling to make a living and do not have the time to attend classes. Because of concerns like these, it is crucial that limited-proficient English individuals have access to certain bilingual services and the opportunity to communicate with government offices.

How would English-only laws affect government services?

Some English-only or "official" English laws can have devastating consequences. For instance, a proposal to make English the "official" language could prohibit bilingual drivers' license exams and medical services such as AIDS counseling or immunization notices. If translations are prohibited in court and administrative proceedings, a government benefit recipient would be unable to defend her case in a hearing and her benefits may be unjustly terminated. Social welfare services, education, job training and law enforcement services for limited-English proficient residents could also be curtailed.

Bilingual services help the government operate MORE not less efficiently. Written and verbal translations provide for critical health and safety services. Without them, everyone's health, safety and rights are compromised.

How would an English-only law affect our democratic system?

Congress passed Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act because it recognized the strong link between limited-English proficiency and low voter participation. For certain jurisdictions with large language minority populations, Section 203 has mandated written and verbal language assistance that many voters rely upon to understand complex ballot issues and candidate statements. A federal English-only law could prohibit translated ballots and interpreters that have enabled thousands

of Asian voters to make informed election choices. With an English-only law, elected officials and their staff could also be prevented from communicating to their limited-English proficient constituents at town hall meetings, through phone communications or newsletters.

English-only laws punish and restrict the rights of individuals who are limited English speaking and do not promote our country's longstanding principles of tolerance and equal access. Not only are English-only laws unnecessary, they are also motivated by intolerance and bigotry. Throughout history, immigrants have been scapegoats in times of economic insecurity. In the past few years, anti-immigrant sentiment has been evident in laws that have cut government benefits to legal immigrants and proposed immigrant restrictions that would prevent family sponsorship of relatives from other countries. English-only laws are just another means by which anti-immigrant proponents are shaping the public perception of immigrants as costly and unable to assimilate.

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants that values cultural and linguistic diversity. Transitional bilingual government services are essential to ensure that language minorities are integrated rather than disenfranchised from government institutions and services. Instead of English-only laws, we should support more federal and state funds for English as a Second Language classes. We should support more access - not more restrictions.