



VA AAPI CAUCUS

Virginia Asian American & Pacific Islander Caucus

July 12, 2021

The Honorable Ralph Northam Governor of Virginia
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Governor Northam:

Thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic that prioritized the public health and safety of all Virginians. In rebuilding the Commonwealth, we have a unique opportunity to address systemic barriers to public health and economic opportunities that Virginia's Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities and other immigrant communities have long faced.

As members of the Virginia AAPI Caucus, we write to request \$65 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to improve language access and services to Virginia's AAPI communities and other immigrant communities.

Language Access is Critical to Public Health and Economic Well-Being

This spring, the Virginia AAPI Caucus held listening sessions with community leaders and AAPI-serving organizations as well as attended community discussions with you and members of your Administration. From organizations helping individuals with applying for unemployment benefits and rental assistance to AAPI small business owners and business associations that need support, we heard clearly: *Language access remains a top issue to ensuring the health and economic well-being of AAPI communities.*

It has been well documented that people with limited English-proficiency experience suboptimal health outcomes compared to the general population. This has also been true during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open* published a study that found racial minorities with limited English proficiency experienced significantly higher COVID-19 incidence and mortality.¹

In Virginia, the pandemic has spotlighted the critical importance that language access has in ensuring that everyone is able to meaningfully obtain key information and state services. For example: • Due to poor translation, Spanish readers were initially told the vaccine was “not necessary” instead of “not required” on the Virginia Department of Health’s website.²

¹ Karmaker, M.; Lantz, P.; Tipireni, R. (2021, January 29). Association of social and demographic factors with COVID-19 incidence and death rates in the US. *JAMA Network Open*. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2775732>

² Spanish translation on Virginia website says vaccine 'Not necessary.' (2021, January 29). Kaiser Health News. <https://khn.org/morning-breakout/spanish-translation-on-virginia-website-says-vaccine-not-necessary/>

- At points during the pandemic, individuals applying for unemployment insurance through Virginia Employment Commission phone lines were hung up on if they requested any interpretations beyond English and Spanish.³
- Many Virginians who do not speak English or Spanish are still unable to complete the unemployment insurance application due to language barriers.⁴
- Some Latinx parents in Richmond Public Schools did not realize that schools started virtual learning⁵ and did not know about the availability of free school computers for their children due to language barriers.⁶

We must intentionally prioritize language access to ensure that our recovery is equitable.

ARPA Is Intended to Help Address Long-Standing Inequities Exacerbated by COVID The Biden Administration has made clear that ARPA funds can and should be directed toward communities that have been “most disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.”⁷ Furthermore, the Administration is explicit that ARPA funds can be used to respond to more immediate, urgent needs resulting from the pandemic *as well as* long-term, systemic challenges that must be addressed for sustained recovery.

The US Department of Treasury’s ARPA guidance notes, “The Fiscal Recovery Funds provide resources to not only respond to the immediate harms of the pandemic but also to mitigate its longer-term impact in compounding the systemic public health and economic challenges of disproportionately impacted populations.”⁸

Funding Requests

We request \$65 million to address the immediate and long-term health and economic needs of limited English-proficient Virginians in the Commonwealth’s AAPI community and other immigrant communities.

1. \$38 million to hire language access coordinators for state agencies and ensure accurate translation of information related to public health and economic recovery.

We support the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’s request for funding to ensure our state government is equipped to respond to the needs of Virginians who are limited English proficient. The funds would allow ODEI to transparently track and measure the state agencies’ progress to meeting the Commonwealth’s language access needs. It would also support placement of language access coordinators at selected, public-facing agencies providing health, social services, economic relief, consumer protection, and other key services. Additionally, the

³ Demand VEC to expand language access to all Virginians! NAKASEC Virginia. Retrieved July 8, 2021 from <https://nakasecva.com/vecpetition/> ⁴ Riddle, N. (2021, June 25). NAKASEC fights for language access in Virginia. *Fairfax County Times*. https://www.fairfaxtimes.com/articles/nakasec-fights-for-language-access-in-virginia/article_448b8af6-d523-11eb-8810-3fca10f83b16.html

⁵ Moreno, S. (2021, January 14). Virginia uses Google translate for COVID vaccine information. Here’s how that magnifies language barriers, misinformation. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. https://richmond.com/news/local/virginia-uses-google-translate-for-covid-vaccine-information-heres-how-that-magnifies-language-barriers-misinformation/article_715cb81a-d880-5c98-aac5-6b30b378bbd3.html.

⁶ Moreno, S. (2020, August 21). As Latino families in Richmond grapple with a pandemic another fear. Will school re-opening leave their kids behind? *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. https://richmond.com/news/as-latino-families-in-richmond-grapple-with-a-pandemic-another-fear-will-school-re-opening/article_49225dad-b4f3-5f6b-b3b1-f8b96c48c05c.html

⁷ U.S. Department of Treasury. (2021, May 17). Coronavirus state and local fiscal recovery funds; Interim Final Rule. 86 *Federal Register* pg. 26788. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-05-17/pdf/2021-10283.pdf>

⁸ *ibid* (pg.26796)

funds would support the accurate, timely translation of state services available to assist Virginians during this challenge. This proposal meets the goals of ARPA to strengthen the infrastructure of public health programs and address the complex, multi-faceted factors that affect the economic recovery of impacted communities.

2. \$2 million to ensure access and proactive outreach and training to immigrant business owners for Rebuild! Virginia grant program and other small business relief opportunities.

Small businesses are an essential driver of Virginia's economy. While immigrants comprise about 13% of the Commonwealth's population, in 2018, they accounted for 21% of Virginia's small business owners.⁹ This funding would address the urgent need to make information about Virginia's COVID-19 business relief programs available in multiple languages and to conduct targeted outreach and training to immigrant small business owners so they are aware of and positioned to apply for these opportunities. The Biden Administration encourages the use of ARPA funds to provide "technical assistance, counseling, or other services to assist with business planning needs."¹⁰ Outreach and training to immigrant businesses to increase their capacity to apply for these opportunities would meet this intent.

3. \$7 million for the Virginia Employment Commission to strengthen language access through the translation of the unemployment insurance application forms available online as well as ensure availability of bilingual Unemployment Insurance Navigators, Call Center staff, and staff to review and adjudicate claims.

Individuals who speak languages other than English and Spanish experience great difficulty in applying for unemployment insurance benefits. The economic challenges these individuals and their families face have been exacerbated as a result. Improving the infrastructure and staffing capacity of the unemployment insurance program to include language access is critical for an equitable economic recovery. This request is consistent with ARPA funds intended for the US Department of Labor to, among other things, "promote equitable access."¹¹ A portion of Virginia's allocation to improve our unemployment insurance program administration could be used for these purposes.

4. \$8 million for the Office of New Americans to pilot a grant program that provides "public benefit navigators" to assist limited English-proficient Virginians with applying for social services to address acute public health and economic challenges experienced as a result of the pandemic.

The pandemic amplified the health and economic disparities that exist among low-income and limited English-proficient Virginians. These individuals face additional hurdles when applying for public services. This pilot would provide low-income, Virginians who are limited English proficient with help from a "public benefit navigators" to access critical services to relieve acute impacts of the pandemic on their health and economic stability, such as lack of health care, reliable transportation, and housing and food insecurity. The Biden Administration identified

⁹*Immigrants in Virginia: Fact sheet.* (2020, August 6). American Immigration Council. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-virginia>.

¹⁰U.S. Department of Treasury (pg. 26795)

¹¹ *Unemployment insurance provisions in the American rescue plan act of 2021*. (2021, March 17). Congressional Research Service. [Unemployment Insurance Provisions in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 \(congress.gov\)](https://www.congress.gov/resources/library/publications/2021/R46001)

“public benefit navigators” as an allowable strategy to assist impacted communities in navigating and applying for public benefits or services.¹² This funding would provide for one time grants to be competitively issued to immigrant-serving organizations, an evaluation of the pilot, and two time-limited staff positions to oversee implementation of the program.

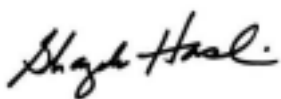
5. \$10 million for the Office of New Americans to pilot a grant program that provides Two Generation/Whole Family services to limited English-proficient Virginians to address multi generational poverty.

Children who are English language learners experienced unique stresses and setbacks as schools implemented remote learning to address public health concerns.¹³ And, because of the pandemic, their families are likely in more vulnerable situations and face greater housing, food, and financial insecurity. The “Whole Family/Two Generation” strategy is an evidence-based holistic approach to addressing multi-generational poverty and improving long-term outcomes for children and the adults in their lives.

This pilot would help disrupt the cycle of poverty for low-income, limited English-proficient families by providing them with ongoing coaching and connections to employment specialists, school liaisons, youth mentors, and health educators. This proposal is in line with the Biden Administration’s guidance, which “encourages recipients to consider [ARPA] funding uses that foster a strong, inclusive, and equitable recovery, especially uses with long-term benefits for health and economic outcomes.”¹⁴ This funding would provide for one-time grants to be competitively issued to immigrant-serving organizations, an evaluation of the pilot, and two time-limited staff positions to oversee implementation of the program.


We appreciate your consideration and look forward to further discussing these proposals with you.

Sincerely,



Kathy KL Tran Mark Keam

Ghazala Hashmi Delegate, 42nd District Delegate, 35th District Senator, 10th District



Kelly Convirs-Fowler Suhas Subramanyam
Delegate, 21st District Delegate, 85th District

¹²U.S. Department of Treasury, page 26791.

¹³Sugarman, J. and Lazarin, M. (2020, September). *Educating English learners during the COVID-19 pandemic: Policy ideas for states and school districts*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-english-learners-covid-19-final.pdf>

¹⁴U.S. Department of Treasury, page 26796.