



## Mobilizing Cultural Capital for Community Well-Being: A Practical Proposal

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### OVERVIEW

As the United States becomes increasingly ethnically and linguistically diverse, there is a growing need for innovative and proactive strategies to overcome language barriers which hinder immigrants' access to key services and institutions.

The federal government, recognizing language access as an important facet of civil rights, recently outlined its expectations of agencies receiving federal funds in a webinar co-hosted by the Migration Policy Institute and the U.S. Department of Justice (May 8, 2012). The discussion highlighted federal efforts to assure equitable language access—via enforcement of provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 13166 as well as assistance to federal grantees in developing strategies to comply with funding agency guidelines.

This paper proposes a practical approach to develop and demonstrate “best practices” to advance this mission—a pilot project to prepare young Mexican and Guatemalan indigenous immigrants to move into careers as interpreters and translators. This type of local initiative can have powerful impacts—for the youth themselves, for their communities, and for institutions such as hospitals, primary health care providers, the court system, and the schools. This approach could subsequently be extended to other minority language populations.

The pilot initiative would demonstrate an approach to improve language access incorporating two complementary and directly-linked strands—development of county-level multi-agency consortia to efficiently use a small pool of interpreters for the primary indigenous language(s) in the local area and coupled with this, a multi-stage program providing interpreter training to local youth and young adults of indigenous origin. The initiative would include high school level “career academy” courses,

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orientation, and career exploration, and internships for students and lead to community-college technical/professional preparation.

A strategy of collaborative “bottom-up”/”top down” local efforts to enhance language access provide a cost-effective and flexible way to draw on immigrant communities’ own cultural capital. The strategy would powerfully underscore the message that communities can rely on immigrants themselves as resources for mutual adaptation, that mobilizing cultural capital can yield dramatic returns—through cost savings and improved effectiveness for service agencies in areas with concentrations of indigenous Mexican immigrants and by facilitating immigrant participation in a range of civic activities which benefit the community at large.

Initial funding from private philanthropists and foundations concerned about immigrant well-being would jumpstart progress on language access at a point when federal and state agencies and their grantees are under financial pressure and provide a solid experience base to build on when economic conditions improve.

## LATINO IMMIGRANT DIVERSITY AND THE LANGUAGE ACCESS PROBLEM

Latino immigrants to the United States are extremely diverse—in national origin, education, legal status, length of residence, and language. Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants make up more than two-thirds of the Hispanic immigrant population in the U.S. and a substantial number of them are of indigenous origin. About 19% of the foreign-born U.S farmworker population are indigenous and probably about 10% of Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants to urban areas are.

Although Spanish is the lingua franca of the U.S. workplace and of their home countries, many of these indigenous immigrants, especially women, are very limited in Spanish and speak no English at all—making reliable communication, even where Spanish is spoken, a serious problem. Moreover, the indigenous immigrants have extremely low levels of home-country schooling (less than half have completed more than 2-3 years of primary school); this exacerbates the difficulties they encounter in communicating with service providers and public agencies.

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The constantly-increasing proportions of Latino indigenous immigrants throughout the U.S.—but particularly in California, Oregon, Washington, and Florida—have challenged local community service agencies’ ability to effectively serve these populations for more than a decade now. Particular areas of stress are in the health care system and the court system because the consequences of mis-communication are so high.

For example, a young Mixtec immigrant was convicted of murder in Oregon due to mis-translation of key testimony; the errors were so serious his conviction was finally overturned after he had spent 4 years in prison. A Mixtec mother in Tennessee lost custody of her daughter in proceedings where mis-communication played a major role. Community health clinics’, hospitals, courts, law enforcement agencies in many areas with indigenous immigrant populations have reported, over a

number of years, persistent problems which are not this grave but which waste time, create constant frustration (on the part of both services providers and their clients) and compromise collaboration in areas which are crucial such as parents' involvement in working with teachers and schools in their children's education.

Language barriers are a chronic and especially serious source of difficulties in health care—as patients fail to understand and follow prescribed courses of treatment, and are unable to give bona fide informed consent in cases where patients' options involved significant tradeoffs. In a recent study of sexual harassment of farmworker women in Oregon, it was learned that many indigenous women who have been victimized cannot even explain to an employer what happened to them.

The language barriers give rise to serious gender disparities in health care, because more indigenous women than men are monolingual in their native language or extremely limited in Spanish (and without any English). Health care providers have tried to provide makeshift solutions—engaging women's children in translating for their mothers, seeking out telephone-based interpretation services, recruiting tri-lingual (e.g. Mixtec, Spanish, English speaking) community outreach workers. But none of these alternatives are satisfactory.

## **NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW DATA ON LANGUAGE ACCESS PROBLEMS, AND CHALLENGES**

The federal guidelines, while varying somewhat from agency to agency, generally require agencies to have well-designed plans to afford language access for any language group making up more than 5% of its' service population (or more than 5% of the population in its service area—since language barriers may preclude a disadvantaged group from getting service at all). Few agencies serving communities where indigenous immigrants have settled have found it easy to comply—in large measure, because of the scarcity of professional interpreters and the need to assure accurate translation, not just paraphrase or summary by a child or minimally-schooled adult.

New analyses of 2010 census data show that, even with a gross undercount of the most recently-arrived, most economically marginal indigenous migrants, there are now concentrations of indigenous immigrants well above the 5% federal guidelines in many rural U.S. communities, and possibly in some urban ones (e.g. San Francisco, Oakland). From 1-2% of the overall population in five rural California counties identified themselves as American Indian+Hispanic—an imperfect but useful indicator of actual numbers. This suggests that many rural communities are actually above the 5% guidelines which trigger federal requirements for compliance with language access provisions. For example, Monterey County's 2010 population is 57% Hispanic and 1.5% of its overall population is Hispanic+indigenous. Therefore, at least 2.6% of the population county-wide (including Carmel, Pacific Grove, Monterey, etc.) and, most probably, 5.2% of the entire county, are likely to be indigenous migrants—since the census undercount of indigenous-origin immigrants is believed to be extremely high.

The growth of the indigenous Mexican and Guatemalan immigrant population is likely to continue; the census data show a 50-60% growth in the indigenous immigrant population in these rural counties from 2000-2010. This is consistent with trends observed in the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) data and in community case studies in some known destinations for indigenous migrants (Woodburn, OR and Immokalee, FL).

## A STRAIGHTFORWARD SOLUTION AND A PRACTICAL PROPOSAL

A fundamental observation of research in linguistics over the past several decades is that there are critical periods in human development for language acquisition. Infants and children acquire any languages to which they are exposed as they grow up. What this implies in the context of the transnational life of indigenous migrants to the U.S. is that children who lived for a period of time in migrant-sending communities where an indigenous language was spoken and then came with their parents to the U.S. are a unique trilingual population. Programs designed to develop their skills as interpreters and certify their competency as professional interpreters can, essentially, make use of the “cultural capital” they have—both in language and knowledge of traditional cultures—to serve as intermediaries in meeting the challenge of language access.

We propose a pilot initiative in three to four communities with concentrated settlements of indigenous immigrants. The pilot initiative would implement and test a strategy consisting of two linked components: “bottom-up” training of local youth and young adults to become professional interpreters, and “top-down” collaboration at the county level to develop multi-agency Language Access consortia which can draw on the gradually growing pool of newly-trained interpreters.

Creation of county-level multi-agency Language Access Consortia provides a cost-effective approach to improve language access—because the cost of training interpreters can be spread across a broader base and because aggregate demand would be adequate to support a small but skilled cadre of professional interpreters in careers providing high-quality interpreter and translator services. California’s Institute for Local Government has already developed a guide providing local municipalities an over-arching perspective on responding to language access issues. It would be well-placed to lead development of this component.

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Developing professional interpreter programs provides a pathway for indigenous youth and young adults—who often have very limited career options—with a way to make a living serving their communities. Moreover, such programs offer them opportunities for careers where they can “give back to the community”—a mode of validation particularly valuable for the foreign-born youth who have grown up in the U.S., the DREAMers whose current career pathways require them to navigate the labor market by working as consultants or setting up their own small businesses.

Ideally, counties might start with developing “feeder programs”, career academies at high schools with high enrollment of indigenous immigrant youth where it will be easiest to identify and recruit potential trainees. Soon after, a local community college could be recruited to provide professional interpreter training—possibly via a career ladder of training opportunities starting with an intensive “crash course” offered during the summer which then fed “intermediate” interpreters into a full 2-year program including courses in professional ethics, cultural facilitation, strategies for interpreters to collaborate closely with service providers in gaining an understanding of the distinctive technical concepts within each service delivery system.

Strategically, it will be important for initiatives to improve language access to be locally designed and implemented. Although the indigenous Mexican and Guatemalan population is linguistically diverse, speaking more than 80 distinct languages, five or so languages (Mixteco Bajo, Mixteco Alto, Zapotec, Triqui, Kanjobal, Mam) are particularly prevalent. However, the predominant language varies greatly from community to community. For example, many rural communities of California and Oregon, Mixtec is the predominant language while in the urban San Francisco Bay area, Mam and Yucatec Mayan languages predominate. Language access programs need to be tailored to the specific linguistic profile of each community.

The benefits of the proposed dual-stranded approach of pooling agency demand for interpreter services, drawing on the indigenous immigrant community itself as part of efforts to solve the problem, provides an example of the value of collaborative approaches in responding to community cultural diversity and can become part of overall messaging about “best practices” in bringing communities together in addressing problems of mutual concern.

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*\* California communities where it would be feasible to rapidly recruit and begin training youth and young adults include Oxnard, Madera, (Mixtec), Greenfield (Triqui), Fresno (Zapotec, Mixtec), Oakland (Mam), and San Francisco (Yucatec).*

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