

International Institute of Erie
Written Testimony on House Bill (HB) 1506
Establishing English as the Official Language of Pennsylvania
House State Government Committee
October 8, 2015

On behalf of The International Institute of Erie (IIE), I submit this written testimony for the record to the House State Government opposing HB 1506. The IIE is located in Erie, Pennsylvania and provides services to more than 400 clients annually as we are dedicated to advancing the full participation of migrants in community life. For the reasons set forth below, the IIE adamantly urges the members of the Committee to vote against HB 1506.

HB 1506 (the Official Language Act) would establish English as the official language of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and require all official acts to be made in English.¹ It would further prohibit the Commonwealth from “expressing a preference” for any language other than English.² HB 1506 is unnecessary and goes against our values as a nation of the vulnerable and persecuted and will cost taxpayers money. Enacting HB 1506 does not send a welcoming message to refugees or immigrants, but instead expresses hostile and anti-immigrant attitudes toward immigrants, negatively impacts economic growth, necessitates costly training, and will likely entangle in the Commonwealth in burdensome litigation.

I. Unnecessary

My organization works with immigrants and refugees and has seen firsthand the efforts made by them in the Commonwealth to integrate into their communities and learn English. There is no evidence that the English language is under threat in the Commonwealth, in fact the number of non-English households in the Commonwealth is ten percent below the national average. Through our citizenship program we see how eager our clients are to learn about naturalization process and preparing for citizenship. So far in 2015 we have helped over 400 people become U.S. Citizens which includes learning English. Organizations like mine, help refugees and immigrants gain personal independence and economic self-sufficiency by hosting trainings and workshops that assist refugees and immigrants to become full participants in all aspects of American life. Notably some workshops and trainings are taught by former clients! Moreover, although HB 1506 takes as its premise the idea that English is “our strongest bond”³ and that the Commonwealth has “a responsibility to ensure that citizens have opportunities to learn English,”⁴ the bill provides no avenues through which to fulfill this responsibility. If the Commonwealth wishes to promote the English language, it should do so through the advancement of language programs and funding for English Language Learner (ELL) courses.

¹ HB 1506 § 5.

² *Id.* at § 6.

³ HB 1506 § 2(5).

⁴ *Id.* at § 2(8).

II. Goes against our values as a nation

HB 1506 is a direct contradiction to our nation's long-standing policy of welcoming immigrants. This bill sends a clearly negative and discriminatory message to anyone for whom English is not their first language that they are not welcome. Furthermore this law would have a tremendous impact on the rights to public information of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents who are not completely fluent in English.

Our network stands ready to help newcomers learn English, and integrate into mainstream American society just as we have done for all immigrant groups for many years. The solution is to offer more English language classes so that all people who want to learn English are given the opportunity instead of ostracized.

III. Cost the Taxpayers Money

Enacting HB 1506 will require costly personnel training, waste government resources, and generate burdensome litigation. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,⁵ the Voting Rights Act of 1965,⁶ and Executive Order 13166⁷ all require provisions to be made for individuals with limited English, meaning that a law like HB 1506 would be in clear violation of federal law. As a result litigation will likely be brought challenging the various interpretations of the bill. In fact, supporters of HB 1506 have conceded that a similar ordinance has already led to litigation in Hazelton, PA. The legal battles that would result from enacting HB 1506 would no doubt be fought at significant cost to the Commonwealth and its tax payers.

Given the Commonwealth's current demographics and concerns for economic growth, this is not a risk we can afford to take. The Commonwealth's population is aging. Estimates based on U.S. Census Data show that 16.7% of Pennsylvania's population is 65 or older, compared to the national average of 14.5%. Moreover, Pennsylvania's population of individuals 18 or younger is two percent below the national average. The Congressional Budget Office in 2007 found that: "Over the past two decades, most efforts to estimate immigration in the United States have concluded that, in aggregate and over the long term, tax revenues of all types generated by immigrants—both legal and unauthorized—exceed the cost of the services they use." In order to support future economic growth in the state, the legislature should be facilitating immigration.

For the reasons set forth above, the House State Government Committee should vote to defeat HB 1506. Thank you for your attention to this important matter. For any questions please contact

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⁵ 42 U.S.C. § 2000d, *et seq.*

⁶ See *About Language Minority Voting Rights*, Dept. of Justice (Aug. 8, 2015), <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about-language-minority-voting-rights#coverage>.

⁷ Executive Order 13166: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency (Aug. 11, 2000), *available at* <http://www.justice.gov/crt/federal-coordination-and-compliance-section-180>.