



**NEW  
SANCTUARY  
MOVEMENT**  
OF PHILADELPHIA

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**New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia**

Written Testimony Regarding House Bill 1506

Establishing English as the Official Language of Pennsylvania

House State Government Committee Public Hearing Scheduled September 21, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the House State Government Committee's September 21, 2015 hearing on House Bill 1506 establishing English as the official language of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia is an interfaith immigrant justice organization representing 19 religious congregations with immigrant and citizen members. We work to uphold the values of dignity, justice, and hospitality in public policy. The following comments are submitted on behalf of New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia.

New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia strongly opposes House Bill 1506 and any legislation that seeks to limit the full participation of immigrants in our state. The proposed legislation contradicts the teachings of the many communities of faith within Pennsylvania, which seek to treat all persons with dignity and respect, to welcome the stranger, and to love our neighbors. For this reason, New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia views this proposed legislation as immoral, unjust, and contradictory to the founding of the Commonwealth. Pennsylvania's founder William Penn was a person of faith who stated that "True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it." Instead of turning immigrant populations away from Pennsylvania, as HB 1506 would do, we have a moral obligation to welcome them, recognizing them as individuals worthy of dignity and respect.

House Bill 1506, and any other legislation seeking to establish English as the official language of Pennsylvania, also contradicts the values of our state, which has historically emphasized equality and encouraged diversity, even in times when other states actively rivaled such values. House Bill 1506 sends a very clear message that differences in language and ethnicity are unwelcome in Pennsylvania, and that diversity and equality are no longer valued by the Commonwealth. That message is not the one that we, as Pennsylvanians, should convey to the rest of the United States, or to the world.

House Bill 1506 will not promote English language learning nor will it address current language barriers among the immigrant population in Pennsylvania. New Sanctuary Movement immigrant members fully recognize the importance of English fluency and actively trying to learn the language despite the underfunding of programs to teach English to non-speakers. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, there are currently over 47,500 English language



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learners in the Commonwealth. Instead of criminalizing languages other than English, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should emphasize English language learning by investing in programs that afford immigrant populations the opportunity to learn English.

Our members are actively learning to speak English and do so while caring for their families, working, and navigating governmental and non-governmental institutions that predominantly speak English. A lack of multilingual services throughout the Commonwealth makes it extremely difficult for immigrants to navigate life in Pennsylvania. According to the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania, during the 2012 – 2013 school year, non-English-speaking parents received notices from their children’s schools almost entirely in English and were seldom offered translation or interpretation services at parent meetings or during other communications with schools. This is an injustice not only to non-English-speaking parents of school-aged children, but to the over 11,000 children in the school system from non-English-speaking homes. This is just one example of the Commonwealth’s lack of multilingual services. HB 1506 is a step in the wrong direction that would only make it more difficult for immigrants to integrate into American life. In order to fulfill our moral obligation to welcome the stranger, we must provide access to multilingual services to ensure that immigrants are given the same treatment as other Pennsylvanians.

New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia urges you to vote against House Bill 1506 and furthermore to support measures that afford immigrant populations in Pennsylvania the opportunity to integrate successfully into life as new Americans and Pennsylvanians.

Sincerely,

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