H-3445.1

SUBSTITUTE HOUSE BILL 2475

State of Washington 69th Legislature 2026 Regular Session

By House State Government & Tribal Relations (originally sponsored by Representatives Ortiz-Self, Mena, Fosse, Ryu, Santos, Simmons, Zahn, Parshley, Thai, Salahuddin, Ramel, Gregerson, Doglio, Cortes, Obras, Hill, Thomas, and Davis)

READ FIRST TIME 02/04/26.

AN ACT Relating to providing language accessible public programs, activities, and services conducted, operated, or administered by state agencies; and adding a new chapter to Title 43 RCW.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec. 1.** (1) The legislature finds that:

(a) Even before the founding of our state and country, multiple languages, including the languages of indigenous people, immigrants, people who were enslaved, and signed languages, were used by the people who lived on this land. These traditions and practices have continued through to the present day. As such, multilingualism is one of the oldest and most consistently practiced American traditions.

(b) The use of multiple languages and modalities of communication in government, business, and private affairs supports the state's effective competition in the global economy. The shared prosperity of Washingtonians can be attributed to the collective knowledge, innovation, ideas, connections, and perspectives carried out in all languages used in Washington. When language accessible programs, activities, and services are not provided, it has a negative impact on the state's economic prosperity, which is in part a result of the negative impact on small business.

(c) Washington has long recognized and enforced language access rights to ensure nondiscrimination in public programs, activities, and services in accordance with federal and state law. To this end, numerous language access laws have been enacted in Washington and upheld by courts in the areas of public assistance, legal proceedings, voting, education, emergency management, and other settings.

(d) Washington has long recognized language access as a vital public concern. The percentage of persons in the state age five and older living in households where languages other than English are spoken has increased significantly from 6.9 percent in 1980 to 21.1 percent in 2022. Failure to provide required language access services has critical personal and statewide impacts. The lack of language accessible communication and navigation services can contribute to worse outcomes for non-English language preferred individuals in our state and increase costs and government inefficiency. Decades of research has demonstrated major differences in health outcomes for patients whose preferred language is not English, from longer hospital stays to higher rates of mortality, when compared with English language-preferred patients. Language accessibility is also crucial for emergency management. Protecting all communities from disasters through warnings, weather forecasting, and emergency response through multilingual communications can mean the difference between life and death. Directly related to the state's provision of language access services, respecting and supporting the provider workforce that deliver language access services is key to increasing access.

(2) Therefore, the legislature intends to affirm long recognized and enforced protections that ensure all Washingtonians have full and equal access to public programs, activities, and services, regardless of national origin, language, disability, or other protected class.

NEW SECTION. **Sec. 2.** (1) The purpose of this chapter is to affirm protections against unlawful discrimination or denial of full and equal access to public programs, activities, and services; to facilitate the use of consistent practices by state agencies; and to eliminate conflicting or unclear agency interpretations of standards, thereby increasing unity and government efficiency.

(2) The policy of the state of Washington is to provide language accessible public programs, activities, and services to all persons

to the extent necessary to secure the rights, constitutional or otherwise, of persons whose primary language is not English, and to assure that they have fair access to benefits, programs, and activities regardless of their linguistic characteristics.

(3) This chapter does not create or expand rights, remedies, or protected classes that do not currently exist under state law. This chapter does not alter any otherwise applicable agency responsibility to provide meaningful language access to non-English language preferred individuals or individuals with limited English proficiency, including those speaking languages of lesser diffusion.

NEW SECTION. **Sec. 3.** (1) "Language accessible" means the delivery of oral, audio, written, tactile, or visual communication in an individual's primary language, including signed languages. This includes all modalities of communication including in-person, telephone, virtual, recorded, paper, and digital communications.

(2) "Linguistic characteristics" means an individual's language, dialect, language proficiency, or accent.

(3) "Non-English language preferred" means that an individual, whether or not they possess some degree of English proficiency, has indicated a preference to receive information, services, and communications in a language other than English.

(4) "Office" means the office of equity created in RCW 43.06D.020.

(5) "Primary language" means the language used most frequently by a person to communicate, including sign language or tactile sign language.

(6) "Public programs, activities, and services" means all programs, activities, and services conducted, operated, or administered by a state agency or receiving any financial assistance from a state agency.

(7) "State agency" means every state executive office, agency, department, board, council, or commission.

NEW SECTION. **Sec. 4.** (1) By December 1, 2027, the office shall develop uniform guidelines for state agencies to provide for consistent delivery of language accessible public programs, activities, and services in a manner that meets the needs of the individual using a public program, activity, or service. In developing the guidelines, the office shall consult with interested

parties including, but not limited to, state agencies, state commissions that support the participation of people from underrepresented populations in policy-making processes, impacted communities, and the organization that represents language access providers under RCW 41.56.157. The guidelines for providing language accessible programs, activities, and services shall include guidelines for the delivery of oral, audio, written, tactile, and visual communication in an individual's primary language, including signed languages, for all modalities of communication including in-person, telephone, virtual, recorded, paper, and digital communications. The office shall review and update the guidelines at least every three years from the date of initial publication and may review and update them sooner as it determines is necessary.

(2) The office shall work with interested parties, including state commissions that support the participation of people from underrepresented populations in policy-making processes and the organization that represents language access providers under RCW 41.56.157, to develop a proposal for addressing the statewide shortages of qualified spoken and sign language interpreters and translators in a manner that meets the needs of individuals using public programs, activities, and services, with an emphasis on languages of lesser diffusion and rural areas. This proposal shall be submitted to the appropriate standing committees of the legislature and the governor by December 1, 2027.

(3) State agencies shall report to the office and the office of financial management by June 30, 2028, on how the agency will implement the guidelines established pursuant to subsection (1) of this section, a timeline for doing so, and to what extent any additional resources are necessary to implement the guidelines.

NEW SECTION. **Sec. 5.** The provisions of this chapter and other implementing regulations shall be construed liberally for the accomplishment of the purposes thereof. Nothing in this chapter repeals, changes any provision of, or provides any remedy in addition to, any other law of this state relating to discrimination on the basis of national origin, language, disability, or other protected class.

NEW SECTION. **Sec. 6.** Sections 1 through 5 of this act constitute a new chapter in Title 43 RCW.

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