

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-lesson-learned-from-hawaii>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A few weeks ago I was on a What Works panel at the [2nd Annual Hawaii Conference on Language Access](#). In addition to feeling extremely lucky to have an opportunity to swim, snorkel, and surf, I was excited to learn about language access issues in a state whose linguistic norms are very different from the rest of the country's. (For example, Hawaii's Constitution recognizes Hawaiian as one of the state's official languages.)

My presentation, on Vera's national work on promising practices for overcoming language barriers in policing, followed a panel that focused on the issues and challenges faced by local jurisdictions and agencies after language access policies are put into practice. I was particularly struck by the contribution of two Hawaiians, who represented the Hawaii Department of Human Services and a family services agency from the Kōkua Kālihi Valley in Oahu. Their presentations offered a big lesson for us on the mainland.

Because Hawaii is innately multilingual, providing language access there means developing and implementing programs and services that work in several distinct languages, from native Hawaiian dialects to Samoan and Chukese. This is a good reminder for those of us on the mainland who restrict language access efforts to only one or two target languages. By being so narrowly focused, we are limiting our ability to adapt to new community needs. If programs and services are designed with many languages in mind (as in Hawaii), government will be better able to serve all limited English proficient individuals and provide real language access.

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