

# **REFUGEE GROUPS SAY PA. FAILS TO HELP NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN A FEDERAL CIVIL-RIGHTS COMPLAINT, A COALITION SAYS MORE SERVICES AND TRANSLATORS ARE NEEDED FOR IMMIGRANTS.**

The Philadelphia Inquirer

JANUARY 11, 2001 Thursday SFCITY EDITION

Copyright 2001 Philadelphia Newspapers, LLC All Rights Reserved

**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

Found on Philly.com

**Section:** CITY & REGION; Pg. B03

**Length:** 556 words

**Byline:** Monica Rhor, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

## **Body**

---

The Pennsylvania Welfare Department has failed to adequately serve hundreds of refugees and other immigrants who speak little or no English, according to a civil-rights complaint filed yesterday.

The complaint was filed with the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on behalf of a coalition of eight organizations serving refugees and immigrants from Cambodia, Russia, China, Vietnam, Ethiopia and other countries.

In the complaint, the Refugee Communities Coalition of Philadelphia contends that the state Department of Welfare discriminates by failing to provide interpreters and bilingual caseworkers for non-English-speaking clients; failing to offer applications for assistance, food stamps and other benefits in languages other than English; and sending out correspondence only in English.

Such practices, the complaint says, violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requiring agencies to provide access to federally funded programs for people with limited English skills.

"Refugees and immigrants want the same things that all the rest of us want - jobs that will allow them to support their families, health care for their loved ones, education and training that will lead to brighter futures for their children," said Barbara Levin, of the Southeast Asian Mutual Aid Assistance Coalition, which coordinates the coalition of refugee groups. "The lack of language-appropriate services in welfare offices and welfare-to-work programs seriously hampers those goals."

Susan Asbey, a spokeswoman for the Welfare Department, said the agency had made an effort to better serve non-English speakers by hiring more bilingual employees and translating notices in several languages.

In the Philadelphia office, 10 percent of the workforce of 200 is bilingual or multilingual, Asbey said. In addition, notices informing clients of free interpreter services are posted in Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, Korean and Russian.

"We are certainly very responsive to the needs of our clients who have limited English proficiency," Asbey said.

## REFUGEE GROUPS SAY PA. FAILS TO HELP NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN A FEDERAL CIVIL-RIGHTS COMPLAINT, A COALITION SAYS MORE SERVICES AND TRANSLATORS ARE NEEDED FOR IMM...

Lawyers for the Community Legal **Services**, which is representing the **refugee groups**, **said** the department had not done enough. They have filed 10 other **civil-rights complaints** on the same issue in the last year. Those **complaints** were submitted on behalf of individuals who speak Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, Khmer, Arabic and Vietnamese. All complained of similar discriminatory practices in welfare offices and programs throughout the city.

Some clients **said** they had to bring children to serve as **translators** because the agency could not provide bilingual caseworkers or other interpreters. Others **said** they received letters in **English** - a language they could not understand - asking them to bring their own interpreters.

In filing yesterday's **complaint**, the **coalition** **said** it hoped to force the Welfare Department to do **more** to better serve **non-English speakers**, including hiring **more** bilingual staff, providing a wider range of interpreters, translating documents and notices into **more** languages, and offering training programs for **non-English speakers**.

The Office for **Civil Rights** will investigate the **complaint** and decide whether any corrective action is **needed**.

Monica Rhor's e-mail address is [mrhor@phillynews.com](mailto:mrhor@phillynews.com)

### Classification

---

Language: **ENGLISH**

**Subject:** WELFARE BENEFITS (91%); IMMIGRATION (90%); **CIVIL RIGHTS** (90%); HUMAN RIGHTS & CIVIL LIBERTIES LAW (90%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (90%); MULTILINGUALISM (89%); DISCRIMINATION (89%); CHILDREN (89%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (89%); PUBLIC HEALTH & WELFARE LAW (78%); FAMILY (78%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (78%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (76%); FOREIGN AID (75%); LAWYERS (74%); LABOR FORCE (73%); FOOD STAMPS (73%); PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (72%)

**Organization:** US DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN **SERVICES** (58%)

**Industry:** **TRANSLATORS** & INTERPRETERS (89%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (78%); LAWYERS (74%)

**Geographic:** PHILADELPHIA, PA, USA (88%); **PENNSYLVANIA**, USA (79%); CAMBODIA (92%); VIET NAM (79%); CHINA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); SOUTH-EASTERN ASIA (77%); ASIA (72%)

**Load-Date:** October 31, 2001