



PRESS RELEASE

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LANGUAGE RIGHTS ADVOCATES LAUD SFPD LANGUAGE ACCESS POLICY, CALL FOR INCREASED EDUCATION ON ITS PROVISIONS

SAN FRANCISCO – A broad coalition including civil rights organizations, legal services groups, and representatives from the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) highlighted the provisions of the SFPD’s Department General Order (DGO) 5.20, a comprehensive language access protocol, at a Community Briefing held today, and called for increased community education on the rights contained in the DGO.

In October of 2007, the San Francisco Police Commission unanimously voted to adopt DGO 5.20. A DGO is the highest order within the SFPD, and the protocol is amongst the strongest and most comprehensive language access policies of any police department in the U.S. However, many community groups felt that there needed to be increased outreach to English-learner communities on the provisions of the DGO, and the Community Briefing was one effort towards that end.

DGO 5.20, “Language Access Services for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Persons,” outlines a clear protocol to guide the SFPD in their interactions with the LEP residents they serve. Some hallmarks of the DGO include requiring officers to provide access to free language assistance to LEP individuals they encounter; requiring that interviews with LEP witnesses or victims be conducted by a bilingual officer or qualified civilian interpreter; ensuring that family members, neighbors, friends, and bystanders are not used as interpreters; and providing forms to witnesses or victims in their primary language.

Angela Chan, Staff Attorney for the Juvenile Justice Project at the Asian Law Caucus, has represented immigrant families whose interactions with the police has been exacerbated by language barriers, and supports the new policy. “The Asian Law Caucus is strongly encouraged by the adoption of the SFPD language access protocol,” she said. “This protocol starts the process of addressing an important need because often times, many of our city’s institutions fail our children and parents because of the lack of coordinated language access services and the lack of a clear and well thought-out language access protocol.”

The need for a strong language policy at the SFPD was particularly felt following some alarming incidents between LEP individuals and police officers, which were intensified by language barriers. In November

2003 and again in April 2004, there were cases of SFPD shootings of LEP men, both Chinese Americans, in San Francisco. Both men were in need of mental health services, and many advocates felt that a clear language protocol that addressed communication between the SFPD and LEP residents could have de-escalated the situations. These incidents happened in the backdrop of other cases involving police shootings of LEP individuals throughout the Bay Area, including the shooting death of a Vietnamese woman in San Jose in July 2003, and the shooting deaths of two Korean men in August 2005 in Dublin.

Ronnie Rhoe, Director of Community Development at Chinese for Affirmative Action, commended the SFPD on its new policy. "This DGO recognizes the reality of language diversity here in San Francisco, and provides clear guidance to SFPD members as they interact with our immigrant communities," he said. "However, the hard work of ensuring that the policy is sufficiently resourced and supported, and that community residents are aware of their rights under this new policy, lies ahead of us."

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