

GOVERNMENT

African Communities Warn Language Issues Could Shut Them Out of Redistricting

by [Maya Srikrishnan](#)
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From left to right: Nur Aden, Hindia Tahiro, Saliyo Usman, Karima Tura and her son are advocating for more language access in the redistricting process. / Photo by Adriana Heldiz

Redistricting – the once-a-decade process of redrawing political boundaries – is a complex undertaking, laden with jargon and acronyms that can confuse even most political observers. But some African

residents in San Diego are worried they will be further shut out of the process this year because of language access barriers.

Nearly a dozen Somali- and Oromo-speaking residents from San Diego called into a recent state redistricting commission meeting to ask commissioners for additional translation measures to ensure that they can participate in the process.

“There are big Oromo communities in the state,” one caller said in Oromo, a language spoken in Ethiopia. “We don’t have any translators. The big issue when we go to the DMV, any public places – school, welfare – is translation. We have been suffering a lot, so we need people to work with us, with our language translated for us.”

Other callers detailed how scary it is to even go to the hospital in the times of COVID-19, when someone trusted to help translate can’t come along. Others described how they have to take their children with them everywhere they go to interpret for them.

The Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, a San Diego nonprofit that works with immigrants and refugees in the region, has been working to mobilize these communities and others both for the Census and redistricting.

“We work hard with those communities to activate them in civic life to participate in the Census, local campaigns and now to educate them about redistricting,” said Rahmo Abdi, an organizer with Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans. “We are looking forward to being part of the redistricting process, but it’s challenging if it isn’t in their language.”

It’s particularly important for these communities to be able to participate in the redistricting process to ensure they aren’t split between voting districts, said Jeanine Erikat, a community organizer for PANA. African immigrants and refugees often are grouped with African Americans in

data, although those communities may have different needs and characteristics.

Redistricting involves redrawing city council, state legislative and congressional districts. While much of the process involves looking at Census data to ensure districts are balanced, communities who think they should remain together in one district can participate in the redistricting process by advocating that their community remain united through public comments, drawing their own maps of potential districts and offering other means of public input to their local redistricting body.

“People can’t show up to the Census office and demand they be seen, but we can show up to redistricting commission meetings and make sure these communities stay together,” Erikat said. “They need to be able to draw their own maps, so they don’t get split. Almost all the Somali community in San Diego at this point are citizens who can vote, but unfortunately a lot of the African communities have been disenfranchised and had their vote diluted. They want to be a part of this process.”

The state commission decided to accommodate the state’s top 12 non-English languages, which include Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Cambodian/Khmer, Japanese, Korean, Persian/Farsi, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese. That means the commission’s Frequently Asked Questions, fliers and fact sheets will be translated into those languages. Non-English written public comments and online public input tools will be translated. Interpretation services will be provided for any of those 12 languages for people who want to call in to provide public input, as long as the commission is notified at least five working days before the meeting.

For languages that don’t fall into the top 12, the commission will still try to provide interpretation for public comment, though it may end up relying on community-based organizations like PANA to assist with the translation.

“It’s difficult because California is so diverse,” said Julia Marks, a voting rights attorney with Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus. “Our position and framework is the commission should make plans to meet the needs of both sizeable groups and additionally smaller language groups where there is organizing happening to take part, but language will be a barrier.”

Marks and the organizers from PANA say the state commission has already improved its language access, since several organizations statewide [sent it a letter](#) in late January asking to expand language assistance.

While Somali and Oromo may not be among the most-spoken languages in the state – or even the county – there are many residents who speak those languages in San Diego, home to the largest populations of those groups in the state. There are almost 20,000 Somalis in the county, said Erikat.

While everyone is still waiting on Census data to tell us what districts and communities may be shifting this year, there are already some examples of where these communities’ voices could be particularly important, Erikat said. El Cajon, which has a growing African immigrant population, is split between two congressional districts, for example.

Those communities may, for instance, want to advocate to the state commission that they want the entire city to be part of one congressional district.

The recent state commission meeting previewed how some of the translation issues might cause problems.

It started out rough, with several calls being dropped before everyone realized that even phone directions for public comment needed to be translated before people start providing public comments.

Commissioners also needed help identifying whether a caller spoke Somali or Oromo before they could bring in the right translator.

But Saliyo Usman, the Oromo translator from San Diego who translated the Oromo calls during the meeting, said people ended up bringing up important questions about why they have such difficulty accessing translation and how it has impacted their communities.

“We need those people who are in the community to describe the situation in their communities,” Usman said.

The Somali and Oromo callers were also unable to listen to the meeting, since it wasn’t translated for them.

“The community should at least know what’s happening in those meetings,” Abdi said.

Marks agreed.

“It’s our position that being able to participate in a hearing as a public commenter means to also hear the content of the hearing, too,” she said. “I was surprised that they weren’t translating the content as well.”

Marks, Abdi and Erikat also emphasized that community-based organizations need funding and compensation for taking on the work of translating written materials or providing translation during meetings.

“It’s really the responsibility of the redistricting bodies to provide translation themselves and not burden [community-based organizations] like PANA,” Erikat said. “Rahmo [Abdi] was able to get so many people out because she spent days and hours on it. She wouldn’t have been able to do that if she has to interpret people’s comments or written materials at the same time.”

Fredy Ceja, the communications director of the state's redistricting commission, said the grant program for community organizations is still being developed. The commission will work with, community organizations, tribal organizations, ethnic media and other institutions on outreach and engagement, development and distribution of culturally appropriate and language accessible material, independent review of translated documents and interpretation of public meetings, Ceja said.

"Compensation for translation for organizations is also under consideration," Ceja said in an e-mail.

Abdi also emphasized the need for professional translators, not just community members trying to translate meetings.

"Redistricting has a lot of technical language," Abdi said. "Imagine having a friend or family member trying to translate, and information falls through the cracks."

While advocates have focused on at the state level, PANA is also waiting on further information about language access at the county and city of San Diego redistricting commissions.

David Bame, the chair of the county's independent redistricting commission, said in an e-mail that agendas and simultaneous meeting translation will be provided in Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Tagalog, Arabic, Japanese, Korean and Laotian. If translation is needed in another language, the commission will provide it if it gets 24 hours' advanced notice. Written public comments can also be submitted in any language.

The city of San Diego redistricting commission did not respond to requests from Voice of San Diego about its plans for language assistance. Agendas have [only been posted in English](#) so far on the commission's website.

Adriana Heldiz contributed to this story.

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