

Dear Conference Attendees,

Thank you for the opportunity to send a brief message of support as you discuss the important issue of language barriers to healthcare for refugee communities. While I apologize for not being able to address you in person, you can rest assured I am busy in Sacramento continuing the struggle for increased language access through the legislative process.

Having come to this country as a young boy, I have faced many of the same stigmas, stereotypes and barriers that today's refugees experience in American society. While it is safe to say we have made progress in making this country more hospitable and welcoming, there are many problems left unsolved, hence the reason for this conference. I have found that some of the simplest things, such as ensuring a healthy population or protecting against discrimination in a business establishment, are often the ones that face obstacles by those same unwelcoming forces that greeted me when I first arrived in America.

The story of my legislation last year to protect non-English speakers against discrimination from a business is illustrative of the fight that lies ahead: In 2008, the Ladies Professional Golf Association infamously decided to require all players to pass an "English proficiency test" in order to participate on the tour. The move was clearly aimed at curbing the success of women golfers from Korea. Although the LPGA later changed their mind, this example brought up a deficiency in the law and prompted me to introduce legislation to correct it. As Senate Bill 242 worked its way through the process, we heard all the old, tired rhetoric like "love it or leave it!" and "get out of my country!" My office even got death threats from people who hated the thought of our country being as diverse as it is.

Despite the Governor's immigrant background and subsequent success-story, he did not look favorably on the bill and subsequently vetoed it. But, as with most major efforts, not all was lost. Important connections and coalitions were established and will be brought to bear in future language access fights. It is hard to imagine a more important endeavor than ensuring refugee communities break down the barriers to health care, and when that fight comes, you can be sure I'll be there for you.

My best wishes and good luck to you all.