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Contact Kate Ayers

kate@reestablishrichmond.org

804-339-5425

Lack of Language Access at the Virginia DMV Creates Roadblocks for Refugee and Immigrant Newcomers

RICHMOND, Virginia — ReEstablish Richmond has published a report addressing the lack of language access at the Virginia DMV and the harmful impact on refugee and immigrant communities working toward self-sufficiency. Based on years of experience with newcomers who have completed ReEstablish Richmond’s learner’s permit study course and months of comprehensive research, and in partnership with the Legal Aid Justice Center, this report describes the systemic barriers that frustrate, delay, and even prevent English language learners from earning a driver’s license in Virginia.

“While this report highlights the specific barriers that newcomers face in getting a driver’s license, I believe it also provides insight into the importance of addressing the inequities of language access across public life, including education, healthcare, employment, and beyond,” said Kate Ayers, Executive Director of ReEstablish Richmond.

Since 2010, Virginia has welcomed more than 10,000 refugees and nearly 10,000 special immigrants from Afghanistan and Iraq. Based on ReEstablish Richmond’s experience in teaching the rules of safe driving to over 600 newcomers from 25 countries, up to 79% of these 20,000+ people currently lack the language access they need at the DMV.

The DMV offers the learner’s permit test in 24 language translations, but study materials in these languages are not provided, except the Virginia driver’s manual in Spanish, and the quality of the translated exams doesn’t meet the needs of most refugee and immigrant newcomers. The DMV’s roster of language translations also does not address the primary languages of several of the top trending refugee populations. As a result, it takes most English language learners more than a year to pass the learner’s permit test and even longer to get a driver’s license.

A ReEstablish Richmond client from Bhutan, a single mother of three, failed the learner’s permit test twice when she tested in her primary language of Nepali. Because she is able to read and understand some English, on her third attempt she tested in English and passed the test. “When I take test in Nepali, I confused, and I don’t understand the words. It’s like a different language to me, the old Nepali language, I think,” she said.

This complaint is not unique to the clients of ReEstablish Richmond. Lack of language access at the DMV impacts newcomer communities across Virginia.

“Family members and refugees have had similar complaints with the Urdu language resources at the Virginia DMV,” said Aliya Farooq, Coordinator of the Refugee Committee at the Islamic Center of Virginia. “On the surface, it seems that the translated exams would help those who may not yet be proficient in English, but in fact they create more confusion and frustration due to the archaic and complicated language structure that is used.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these barriers for English language learners by prohibiting walk-in customers, imposing digital requirements to schedule DMV appointments, and restricting the number and type of available appointments at DMV locations, resulting in wait times of more than 90 days between learner’s permit testing attempts.

A ReEstablish Richmond client from Afghanistan, a single mother of four, took ReEstablish Richmond’s learner’s permit study course in January 2020. Since then, she has failed the learner’s permit test three times. After completing the required reexamination class at a DMV-certified driving school in January 2021 and scheduling the soonest available appointment, she is waiting to test again on April 22. The learner’s permit test is offered in her primary language of Dari, but she struggles to make sense of the translated wording. Without language access to review the DMV’s online practice questions from home, like many other newcomers with limited English proficiency, she uses her testing appointments as practice sessions.

“When I take the test, I try my best to fix the words in my mind, but by the next time I can go to the DMV, I forget them,” she said through an interpreter. “If I could see the words once or twice a week, I could remember and pass the test.”

The report outlines eight significant language access barriers that exist for newcomers working to get a driver’s license – from preparing for the learner’s permit test to navigating the learner’s permit and road skills testing process – and presents the specific, practical changes that are needed. Until these inequities are resolved by the DMV, transportation independence will continue to be an unnecessarily frustrating and unfair challenge that newcomers face in their first years of adjusting to life here in Virginia.

The full report, *Barriers and Burdens: Lack of Language Access at the Virginia DMV creates Roadblocks for Refugee and Immigrant Newcomers*, can be found on ReEstablish Richmond’s website:

<https://www.reestablishrichmond.org/educate-advocate>

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ReEstablish Richmond is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit non-governmental organization that connects refugee and immigrant newcomers in Richmond, Virginia to life-building tools and resources to ensure that their integration into the community is a positive and empowering experience. The Transportation Independence program has been developed in consultation with client communities and community partners to most effectively address the barriers that newcomers face at the Virginia DMV. Since 2013, ReEstablish Richmond’s learner’s permit study course has served more than 600 refugee and immigrant newcomers from 25 countries, providing the practical support they need during the driver’s license process.