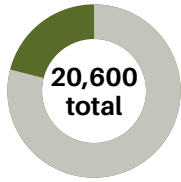# ReEstablish RICHMOND

BARRIERS AND BURDENS:
Lack of Language Access at the Virginia DMV Creates Roadblocks for Refugee and Immigrant Newcomers

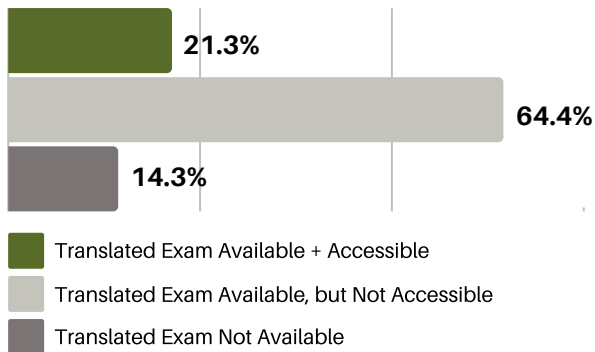Read the full report: *www.reestablishrichmond.org/language-access*

20,600 total

Up to 79% of refugees and SIVs (Special Immigrant Visa) **lack meaningful language access at the DMV,** based on populations that arrived since 2010 and ReEstablish Richmond client communities.

Getting a driver's license is a privilege granted by the state of Virginia, but **having meaningful language access** is a legally protected human right under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 13166 (2000).

The Virginia DMV specifically includes limited English proficiency among the list of protections outlined in their nondiscrimination policy. Advocating for improved language access at the DMV is not an issue of *policy* but of *practice*.

The learner's permit test is available in 26 languages, including English and ASL, but study materials are lacking. **The Virginia driver's manual is only available in English and Spanish, and the online practice questions are available in English alone.**
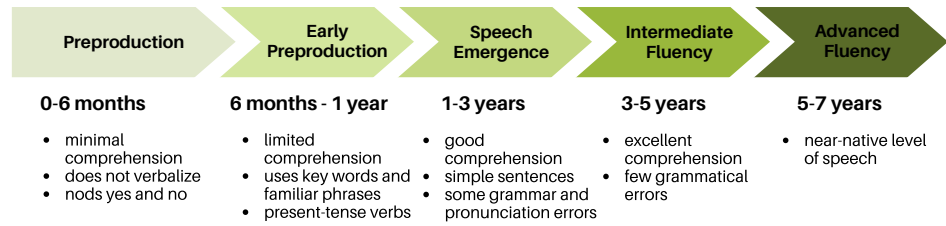
Refugee and SIV Language Access at the DMV

21.3%	Translated Exam Available + Accessible
64.4%	Translated Exam Available, but Not Accessible
14.3%	Translated Exam Not Available

Poorly Translated Exams are Not Accessible

ReEstablish Richmond clients report that DMV Knowledge Exam translations are confusing, contain overly formal language, or were translated by machine, word-for-word. **Without clear and effective Exam translations,** test takers with limited English proficiency are tested on their ability to decipher an inaccessible translation rather than their actual understanding of traffic rules and regulations.

Without DMV-provided translations of study materials, future drivers are prevented from becoming familiar with vocabulary used on the Exam. Many languages do not contain equivalent terms for certain driving concepts covered by the test, like:

tailgating   *blind spot*   *overcorrecting*

BARRIERS AND BURDENS was published in partnership with

LEGAL AID JUSTICE CENTER

How Long Does It Take to Learn a Second Language?

Preproduction	Early Preproduction	Speech Emergence	Intermediate Fluency	Advanced Fluency
0-6 months	**6 months - 1 year**	**1-3 years**	**3-5 years**	**5-7 years**
• minimal comprehension • does not verbalize • nods yes and no	• limited comprehension • uses key words and familiar phrases • present-tense verbs	• good comprehension • simple sentences • some grammar and pronunciation errors	• excellent comprehension • few grammatical errors	• near-native level of speech

Language Barriers Experienced by Newcomers at the Virginia DMV

⚠️ Translated study materials are not provided

⚠️ Exam translations are confusing, use antiquated language, and are difficult to understand

⚠️ Exam translations do not prioritize primary languages of high trending refugee populations

⚠️ No chance to practice the Exam interface prior to taking the test

⚠️ Paper test is not provided in color, only black + white

⚠️ Interpreters are not allowed inside the car during the road skills test

How Long Does It Take Newcomers to Pass the Learner's Permit Test?

The answer to this question varies according to the number of DMV-provided resources that are available and accessible in their primary language.

Length of Time to Get Learner's Permit	Exam + Manual + Online Questions	Exam + Manual	Exam Only	No Resources Available
3 months	**80%**	28%	12%	0%
6 months	15%	12%	17%	8%
12 months	5%	4%	22%	23%
12+ months	0%	0%	23%	0%
No Permit Still	0%	56%	26%	**69%**
*Data reflects the progress of ReEstablish Richmond clients who completed the learner's permit study course	*English*	*Spanish*	*Arabic, Dari, Nepali, Pashto*	*Burmese, Kinyarwanda, Somali, Swahili, Tigrinya*

Compounded Effect:
Until these systemic inequities are eliminated, newcomers with limited English proficiency are set up to fail at the DMV

- Without DMV-provided study materials and reliable Exam translations, each test-taking experience becomes a practice session for English language learners.
- Repeated, avoidable Exam failures create unnecessary frustration, delay, and unfair financial burdens for newcomers working toward self-sufficiency.
- Repeat test takers cause increased DMV traffic.
- Refugee and immigrant newcomers are prevented from exercising their full capabilities as providers, parents, and community members.

For years, ReEstablish Richmond has educated and empowered our newest neighbors in their pursuit of transportation independence.

Learn more: *www.reestablishrichmond.org/our-programs*

Language Access Barriers Experienced by Newcomers at the DMV

1. Studying the Virginia Driver's Manual
2. Reviewing the Online Practice Questions
3. Understanding the Knowledge Exam Translation
4. Navigating the Computer-Based Exam Interface
5. Taking the Knowledge Exam on Paper
6. Needing Oral Language Assistance to Access the Exam
7. Failing the Knowledge Exam, Retesting, and Failing Again
8. Understanding the Asks of the Road Skills Test Examiner

Top 10 Primary Languages of Refugee and SIV Newcomers 2010 - 2020

Country	Language		Country	Language
Afghanistan	**Dari, Pashto**		**Myanmar**	**Burmese**
Iraq	Arabic		Eritrea	Tigrinya
Bhutan	Nepali		Syria	Arabic
DR Congo	**Swahili, Kinyarwanda**		Somalia	Somali
Iran	Farsi		**Sudan**	**Arabic**

Legend:
- Available + accessible at DMV
- Available but not accessible due to issues of translation quality or language dialect
- Not currently addressed by DMV

Populations in bold represent high and/or rising trends in global displacement according to UNHCR
www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics | *www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/globaltrends2019*

Steps to Improve Language Access for Refugee and Immigrant Newcomers Pursuing a Driver's License in Virginia

1 Conduct quality assurance audit of all current text and audio translations of the Knowledge Exam and Driver's Manual

2 Translate the Online Practice Questions into all languages that are available for the Exam

3 Translate the Virginia Driver's Manual into all languages that are available for the Exam

4 Add practice questions and an optional tutorial to the Knowledge Exam interface at DMV

5 Add Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Burmese, Tigrinya, and Somali, simplified Modern Standard Arabic, and Juba Arabic to the list of available Exam languages and study materials

6 Provide an optional resource on how to use Scantrons and ensure paper copies of the Exam are available in color for all languages

7 Allow paper testing and/or interpreters to provide oral language accommodation in the Knowledge Exam as an option, regardless of availability of language translation

8 Allow interpreters to be present during the Road Skills Test and accompany drivers inside their vehicles