

Written by Mike Honda

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The 2010 Census, which is hitting mailboxes all across America this month, may well surprise you with its findings — specifically how increasingly diverse our country is becoming. Accompanying this trend is another one equally significant, which is the use of non-English languages to communicate. According to a 2008 Census report, more than 19 percent of all people living in the United States, or 55 million, speak a language other than English at home.

This has important implications for America’s ability to effectively deliver government services to our citizens and ensure our national security. To achieve either task, we must be able to retain a federal work force that is capable of communicating with an increasingly diverse constituency, both within our borders and beyond. We need to be able to recruit and retain a bi- and multilingual skilled federal work force, while improving services for people with limited English proficiency who require translation.

That is why, earlier this month, I introduced the One America, Many Voices Act. Known as the Bilingual Pay Act, the bill provides a 5 percent increase to the base pay of federal employees whose position requires the use of bi- or multilingual skills, but who currently receive the same pay as workers in the same job without the same skill requirement. There are two critical reasons for doing so.

First, instituting a standard for bilingual pay for federal employees brings the federal government up to par with more than two decades of human resource policies by local and state governments and the private sector to retain and compensate staff whose jobs require an ongoing fluency of a foreign language. Local officials have long recognized the importance of rewarding bi- and multilingual expertise in providing quality public safety and other public services. A 2001 report by the San Francisco Legislative Analyst Office found that within the five U.S. cities with the largest percentage of residents speaking a language other than English at home, two of the most effective ways to attract bilingual police officers were to institute a bilingual pay differential to those who met written and verbal requirements and to recruit in ethnic news media.

The private sector, similarly, has been leading the way on bilingual pay since the 1990s, after two major labor agreements — between Verizon Wireless and the Communications Workers of America and between Kaiser Permanente and the Service Employees International Union — established a bilingual pay boost for employees whose jobs require more than one language. It is high time for the federal government to catch up to these developments in local government and the private sector.

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Second, in America’s ongoing security-related efforts to build positive relationships in conflict zones around the world, we need professionals who possess a high level of fluency in languages that are critical to our national security, such as Chinese, Arabic, Urdu, Russian and Hindi. According to a 2009 report by USA Today, only 13 percent of CIA employees speak a foreign language. This finding comes almost five years after the 9/11 commission’s recommendation to increase the capacity of bilingual operatives and analysts in preventing potential attacks and six years after then-President George W. Bush issued a mandate for the CIA to increase its bilingual work force by 50 percent.

A recent report by University of Maryland professors Frederick Johnson and Margaret Malone at the Center for Applied Linguistics, furthermore, points out that the federal government’s need for speakers of critical foreign languages has been addressed inconsistently over the past 50 years and reaffirmed primarily during the height of diplomatic or military conflicts. The professors note that while the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks spurred a series of federal agency steps to entice more Americans into foreign language programs, these foreign language experts are now isolated and lack central coordination and accountability. In response, the One America, Many Voices Act provides much-needed leadership, standardization and consistency throughout federal agencies, thus strengthening our national security apparatus.

Our federal government needs to be more capable of communicating with our multilingual citizenry, foreign businesses and diplomatic communities. The One America, Many Voices Act moves America closer to this goal by building on our civil rights tradition of making government more open and democratic and on Congress’ efforts to include stronger bilingual provisions as part of reauthorization of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. As the findings of the 2010 Census become evident, it is my hope that we recognize our country’s increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity as an asset, not a threat. Many voices make us more versatile in a globalized economy, more able to deal with national security concerns and more effective in delivering government services. It is high time we recognize this in Congress.

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