

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Equal Access Advocates Sue City of Oakland for
Failing Non-English Speaking Residents**

Four community groups—Family Bridges, Inc., Organization of Chinese Americans-East Bay Chapter, The Spanish Speaking Unity Council, and California ACORN—today filed a lawsuit against the City of Oakland for failing to fulfill its obligations under the “Equal Access to Services Ordinance,” a groundbreaking language access ordinance passed in 2001. Public Advocates Inc. and civil rights attorney Luz Buitrago represent the groups.

The ordinance, based on basic civil rights laws, requires translation of key documents and sufficient bilingual staff available in public contact positions for languages reaching a 10,000 threshold, currently including Spanish and Chinese. Bilingual staff are required to be hired only as position vacancies occur. In addition, the City Administrator, departments and agencies must develop and submit annual compliance plans that collect critical data and provide an assessment of the data in 16 key areas.

The lawsuit focuses on the City’s failure to comply with these mandatory obligations. The City has provided only three incomplete plans and has failed to provide four plans during the last seven years.

“I am disappointed that seven years after Ignacio de La Fuente and I sponsored this historic ordinance, we are compelled to participate in this lawsuit,” said former City Council member Danny Wan, now President of the local chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans. “The idea is important, but simple: Oakland residents should not be denied basic and potentially life-saving city services just because they are still learning to speak English and cannot yet communicate their needs in English.”

Corinne Jan, Family Bridges' Chief Executive Officer, agreed. "Despite their contributions to our community and substantial numbers—over 41% of Oakland's population of almost 350,000—limited English proficient Oaklanders continue to be denied equitable access to services."

Jan cites a recent example of a non-English speaking Cantonese couple who were robbed at gunpoint. Their attempts to get assistance through 9-1-1 were unsuccessful because they could not understand the automated English message. When they visited the police station to identify potential suspects, no staff member could help them in Cantonese. Another citizen in the station, also there to identify suspects, was asked to help interpret for the couple. The form they were asked to fill out reporting the crime was only available in English.

"This lawsuit will give Mayor Dellums the opportunity to remedy the failures of the prior City Administrator Deborah Edgerly to implement and enforce the ordinance," said attorney Luz Buitrago.

Gilda Gonzalez, CEO of The Spanish Speaking Unity Council, concurred. "We can no longer wait for the City to voluntarily comply with this ordinance. It is preventing these residents from being civically engaged, and is an unnecessary roadblock for those seeking to be responsible and law abiding citizens. Enough is enough."

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Family Bridges, Inc. is a forty-year old, health and social services nonprofit organization based in Oakland, focused on creating solutions for the challenges faced by some of the most vulnerable in our community by providing direct services to over 10,000 low-to moderate-income Asian limited English proficient immigrants, seniors and families each year. For more information, contact Corinne Jan, (510) 839-2270 x201, corinnej@fambridges.org

Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA)-East Bay is the local chapter of a national nonprofit organization consisting of over 80 chapters and affiliates, dedicated to advancing the social, political, and economic well-being of Asian Pacific Americans in the United States. OCA aims to embrace the hopes and aspirations of nearly 12 million Asian Pacific Americans in the United States. Contact Danny Wan, (510) 682-8305, wan.danny@gmail.com.

The Spanish Speaking Unity Council is a non-profit community development corporation committed to creating a healthier and safer community for families and residents by implementing and managing integrated programs addressing economic, social, and physical development. Contact Gilda Gonzales, (510) 535-6900, ggonzales@unitycouncil.org

California ACORN is an affiliate of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a national grassroots, community-based organization of low- and moderate-income families working together for social justice and stronger communities. California ACORN is composed of 40,000 member families in 23 cities throughout California. Contact Derecka Mehrens, (510) 535-9882, caacorn@acorn.org

Public Advocates Inc. is a non-profit law firm and advocacy organization that challenges the systemic causes of poverty and racial discrimination by strengthening community voices in public policy and achieving tangible legal victories advancing education, housing and transit equity. Contact Michelle Natividad Rodriguez, (415) 431-7430, x311, mrodriguez@publicadvocates.org

Luz Buitrago is a civil rights attorney in the East Bay. She works advocating for equal opportunities for all of our citizens, including those with limited English proficiency, and supported and has been advocating for implementation of the ordinance.. Contact her at (510) 524-6268, lbuitrago@earthlink.net