

Testimony of Desta Yebassa  
Board President, Oromo Community Organization (OCO) of Washington DC Metro Area

Before the  
Committee of the Whole, Committee on the Judiciary and  
Committee on the Education

July 1, 2015

John A. Wilson Building, room 412  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Good morning,  
Chairman Phil Mendelson, committee of the Whole  
Councilmember Kenyan R. Mcduffie, Chairperson Committee on the Judiciary and  
Councilmember David Grosso, Chairperson Committee on the Education  
My name is Desta Yebassa, Board President of the Oromo Community Organization (OCO), and I'm honoured to testify before your Committee today as the Board President of the Oromo Community Organization (OCO) Washington DC Metro Area. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak in front of you today.

The Oromo people constitute well over 40% of Ethiopia's total population of 90 Million and are the largest majority ethnic group in Ethiopia and the second largest single nationality group in Africa. They have their own unique language Afaan Oromo, which is the fourth most spoken language in Africa.

Oromo Community Organization (OCO) was founded in July 1988 as a non-profit legal entity, under Section 501(c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code with main objective to provide a multifaceted social and community services to Oromo immigrants that have settled in and around the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area. There is an estimated of more than ten thousands Oromos live in the Washington metropolitan area. Our office is located at 6212 3<sup>rd</sup> St NW Washington DC 20011.

The primary mission of OCO is to play a central role in building cohesiveness and harmony among the Oromo Community members and other communities; to help its members to smoothly transition, integrate, and become productive citizens in America; and to promote the development of the Oromo language and culture through education.

The specific objectives and purposes of Oromo Community Organization are:

- developed Oromo cultures, historical heritages, and Oromo language (Afaan Oromo);
- promote self-help and social assistance among Oromos residing in the Washington DC Metro Area in order to strengthen individual's and family life,
- and to foster and maintain good relations with other communities and humanitarian organizations with common goals and aspirations and as well as other related social

services through providing information on OCO website, various seminars and workshops.

Many Oromos in District of Columbia have problems of English communication in requesting public service, reading and understanding written documents as they have limitations in English.

The Language Access (LA) Program exists to ensure District residents who are limited or non-English proficient are afforded equal access to information and services provided by the District. Residents who speak little English must be offered interpretation services and/or translated documents when obtaining government and school services, as required by the Language Access Act of 2004

However, in spite of the existence of the Language Access Act of 2004, most oromos residing in District of Columbia complained that they have encountered language access problems at D.C. government agencies as they attempt to access government benefits and services because (1) there is no Oromo assigned to interpret /or translate documents when Oromos are obtaining government services as required by the Language Access Act of 2004 (2) Some Oromos were unable to enroll their children in school because no one at the school spoke Oromo language affaan Oromo or oromiffa. This inhibits self-empowerment and development in our Oromo community. Generally, this experience lets me know that oromos residing in District of Columbia have a great problem in Language access, while they access government and school benefits and services, pursuant to federal and local law.

I believe that the Language Access for Education Amendment Act of 2015 will find a solution for this problem. Having a language access coordinator in each school and government agencies will ensure that oromos residing in District of Columbia can get the help that they need.

Given the importance of language access in D.C., on behalf of the Oromo Community Organization (OCO) Of Washington DC Metropolitan Area I am requesting the DC Council's, Committee of the Whole, Committee on the Judiciary and committee on the Education to find a solution for the problems indicated above, assign a trained Afaan Oromo interpreters and translator of documents for Oromos seeking school and other public services.

Thank you,

Desta Yebassa, PhD  
OCO Board president  
Oromo Community Organization  
6212 3rd St NW,  
Washington DC 20011  
Phone: (office):202-234-1151  
(Mobile): 202-422-8971