



CONTACT: [Shelby Iwatani Cramer](mailto:Shelby.Iwatani@kingcounty.gov), 206-848-0108

OLEO Welcomes U.S. Department of Justice Settlement with the King County Sheriff's Office to Improve Language Access

Last week, the U.S Department of Justice (DOJ) and the King County Sheriff's Office [announced a settlement](#) to address deficiencies in the Sheriff's Office language access policies and practices. [The agreement](#)—which stemmed from an allegation of discrimination against a community member with limited English proficiency (LEP) in November of 2021—outlines a two-year phased plan for the Sheriff's Office to develop and implement training and policy directives to improve language access and communication between Sheriff's Office deputies and LEP community members.

While OLEO applauds the Sheriff for entering into this agreement voluntarily, OLEO [has previously expressed concerns](#) about the Sheriff's Office language access policies and interactions with LEP individuals. OLEO sent [policy recommendations](#) to the Sheriff's Office to improve language access for hearing-impaired and LEP individuals in March 2023 with no response or action from the department to implement our recommendations.

OLEO's 2023 recommendations and the new agreement from the DOJ share significant overlap including: developing policies and directives on the use of interpreters; guidance and training for bilingual deputies; restricting reliance on the use of children, family members, and other bystanders for translation services; protocols for identifying an individual's primary language and appropriate language access services; and data collection and reporting on interactions with LEP individuals. In addition to those urgently needed actions outlined in the DOJ settlement, OLEO encourages the Sheriff's Office to incorporate best-practices for language access for ASL speakers and hearing-impaired individuals.

According to Census data, more than [1 in 10 residents](#) of King County could be considered LEP and [2.8%](#) have a hearing difficulty (ACS 2022). It is imperative that the Sheriff's Office take immediate steps to ensure that all residents, no matter their language proficiency or hearing abilities, have equal access to the King County Sheriff's Office. As a key stakeholder in the provision of fair and just policing in King County, OLEO looks forward to being a partner in supporting the work outlined in the DOJ agreement and invites anyone in the community to share their ideas for improving language access. Reach out to us at OLEO@kingcounty.gov.

Resources: [Read more about Language Access in King County](#).

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