

Reps. Subeck, Zamarripa and Johnson: Democrats cry foul after anti-immigrant hearing; call for action on bill to address language and accessibility barriers to participation

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Democrats Cry Foul After Anti-Immigrant Hearing; Call for Action on Bill to Address Language and Accessibility Barriers to Participation

MADISON- Today, Representative Lisa Subeck (D-Madison), Representative JoCasta Zamarripa (D-Milwaukee), and Senator LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee) raised serious concerns after members of public had to step up to provide interpreter services for numerous individuals testifying at a public hearing held yesterday on SB 275 in the Senate Committee on Labor and Regulatory Reform. In response, the three Democrats have called for public hearings on Assembly Bill 344/Senate Bill 256. The bills would establish a process for individuals with special needs, including non-English speakers, those in need of sign language interpreters, and those who need materials in alternate formats to access the resources necessary to participate public hearings and other meetings.

Yesterday, the Senate Committee on Labor and Regulatory Reform held a hearing on SB 275, drawing hundreds of members of Wisconsin's Latino community to testify. English was not the primary language of many of those who wished to

speak, yet no plan was in place to provide interpreters. Fortunately, other members of the public attending the hearing assisted, but there was a clear barrier for non-English speakers to participate. A similar hearing was held during the last legislative session on AB 450 in the Assembly Committee on Urban and Local Affairs, and the same problem occurred.

“When members of the public – our constituents – make the effort to show up to a hearing to share their opinions with us, the least we could do is ensure they are able to do so, but that is not what happened yesterday,” said Rep. Subeck. “Fortunately, there were others in attendance who were able to step up and help, but it is incumbent on us to have a clear procedure in place for requesting interpreters or other accommodations to ensure all Wisconsinites can participate.”

The proposed bill would ensure translation and interpretation services needed by members of the public are provided at committee meetings of the State Legislature and would establish a clear process for requesting an interpreter or meeting materials in alternate formats. The bill would also require all legislative meeting notices to have a standardized statement in English, Spanish and Hmong regarding access to these services.

“Everyone should have barrier free access to their government,” added Sen. Johnson. “Our bill would break down those language barriers and accommodate people with disabilities to ensure that all voices are heard in the legislative process.”

“Whether materials need to be printed in an alternative format or you need an interpreter, it should not hinder you from participating in state government,” said Rep. Zamarripa. “As elected officials, it is our duty to engage as many people as possible on legislation and hear their ideas and concerns.”