

WASHINGTON -- A multi-year study on bilingual election services was released by the Federal Election Commission today at a briefing for Congressional staff, the Department of Justice, the Civil Rights Commission and interested minority language groups.

The study, conducted by the University of New Mexico under contract with the FEC National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, analyzes the problems encountered in providing bilingual voter services in more than 300 local jurisdictions in some 30 different States.

In releasing the three volume study, FEC Chairman Robert O. Tiernan noted that: "This project represents a significant milestone in helping assure access to the ballot on behalf of minority language citizens. To the best of our knowledge, this project represents the first substantial effort by any organization, public or private, to assist state and local elections officials in planning and providing minority language registration and election services.

"Our study demonstrates that while a number of state and local elections officials have made earnest and sincere efforts, there is still a long way to go in providing adequate bilingual registration and voting services."

The central purpose of the FEC study, according to Chairman Tiernan, is to provide state and local elections officials with a handbook of ideas and suggestions for improving bilingual registration and election services. In preparing that handbook the project staff conducted a detailed analysis of how bilingual election services have been planned and executed since the passage of the bilingual provisions of the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1975.

According to Dr. Alan Hudson-Edwards, Director of the project, this analysis reveals that in the area of registration:

- There have been insufficient efforts to register members of linguistic minorities who are eligible to vote. Thus, the most substantial barrier to the political participation of language minority citizens has been largely ignored.
- While bilingual registration efforts of some kind were widespread, they were from universal and, in many cases, of questionable value.

- Coordination with local community groups for the purposes of providing bilingual registration services is the exception rather than the rule.

In the area of bilingual oral assistance at the polls, the analysis further reveals:

- Although bilingual oral assistance at the polls is widely available, the selection of bilingual polling place personnel, the screening of their linguistic competencies, their training and their deployment are too often a matter of chance rather than careful planning.

In the area of bilingual printed materials, the study shows:

- Virtually all affected administrators reported that printed materials were available in the minority language as well as in English. However, faulty translations, poor distribution methods, and inadequate publicity concerning the availability of these materials limited their effectiveness.

The study goes on to say that most local election officials determined the need for bilingual services in their jurisdictions very casually. Few used Census or other population figures to guide them; and even fewer consulted with their language minority populations.

Dr. Gary Greenhalgh, Director of the National Clearinghouse, indicated that copies of the report will be distributed to all those state and local election officials subject to the provisions of the Voting Rights Act amendments as well as to those with substantial minority language populations.

The study was advised by a board of election officials and language minority representatives that included:

Mr. Leonard Panish, Registrar-Recorder of Los Angeles County, California; Mrs. Joyce Dieffenderfer, Director of the Dade County (Florida) Election Department and Mr. James Shumway, Director of the Elections Department of Tucson, Arizona. Representatives of minority language interests serving on the Panel included Mr. Al Perez, Associate Counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Ms. Lida Taracido of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, Mr. Andres Hernandez of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, Mr. Peter Weiner of the California Rural Legal Assistance Association, Mr. Henry Der of the Chinese for Affirmative Action and Mr. George Korbel of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.