



Testimony on HB 1231 – Driver’s License Examinations
Submitted by Jennifer Rafanan, Executive Director, MIRA to the Senate Education Committee
February 10, 2010

Missouri Immigrant & Refugee Advocates strongly OPPOSES HB 1231, which would allow driver’s license examinations to be given in English only without the aid of an interpreter.

Missouri’s current law prohibits undocumented immigrants from obtaining a driver’s license. Thus, HB1231 **would only impact immigrants who are legally present in the United States** including, but not limited to, refugees, students, and legal permanent residents (green card holders).

HB 1231 purports to impose an English only requirement for licensing of ordinary motor vehicle operator licenses because it assumes a causal link between functional literacy in the English language and the ability to “understand highway traffic signs and safety warnings”. It further assumes that a person who cannot read and/or write in the English language sufficiently to take a written exam in the English language cannot understand or follow normal highway traffic signs and safety warnings. Quite to the contrary, in fact, **common experience demonstrates that one can understand traffic signs and safety warnings, even small phrases in English without being able to read and/or write English sufficiently to take a written exam in English.** Conversely, for example, a native Missouri driver traveling abroad may drive safely in a foreign country whose primary language is not English because traffic signs and safety warnings are simple to understand even in other languages.

Furthermore, many other states with much more ethnically diverse populations than the State of Missouri and higher proportions of lawfully present, newly arrived immigrants have considered the question of English only driver’s license tests and have rejected the concept. As the State of Missouri does currently, these states have generally implemented testing procedures that allow the applicant to take a written test in their native language or in English with the help of a translator. In order to assure that these applicants are able to “understand highway traffic signs and safety warnings” they implement a part of the test where the applicant views a sign, warning or short traffic related phrase and then must explain its meaning in their native language with the use of a translator. These states have concluded that *“fluency in the English language sufficient to take and pass a written exam in English is not indicative of the applicant’s ability to drive safely on the public roadways”*. There really does not exist any good research or data suggesting otherwise. (Robert Hagge, Research Analysis, California Department of Motor Vehicles, Research and Development Branch).

With opportunities to obtain an operator’s license restricted from individuals insufficiently fluent in the English language to take and pass an English language written test, such individuals will be left with public transportation to get to and from schools, employment, shopping and to carry out every other basic activity of living. However, according to the Missouri Department of Transportation, transportation in “small urban areas struggle to maintain service levels and do not provide service to their entire urban areas. Weekend and evening service is limited. Missouri’s small urban areas are Springfield, St. Joseph, Columbia, Jefferson City and Joplin.” Worse yet, “Access to public transportation is limited in rural areas. Because there are fewer mobility options for residents without access to automobiles, rural public transportation needs are growing. Few rural systems offer service to employment, schools, volunteer activities or community events.” (MODOT, http://www.modot.mo.gov/plansandprojects/long-range_plan/transit.htm). Therefore, it is clear that the result of HB 1231 will be that **many lawful rural Missouri residents will be cut out of basic participation in economic and social life of the communities where they live.** Missouri cannot afford to have a growing segment of its rural population restricted from participation in the labor force and economic activity of our state.

MIRA opposes HB1231 and urges this committee to vote against this proposed legislation.