**Testimony of Irfana Anwer, before the Committee on Public Safety and Judiciary, Access to Justice Program Performance Oversight Hearing**

Ayuda

March 14th, 2011

Good afternoon Committee and Council members. My name is Irfana Anwer. I am the Director of the Community Legal Interpreter Bank (the Bank) at Ayuda. Ayuda’s mission is to protect the rights of low-income immigrants in the DC metropolitan area and to improve the ability of clients to live safe, violence-free lives and become fully participating members of our communities. We are honored to have these responsibilities.

I would like to thank the Committee and Council members for their unwavering commitment to language access and to the provision of legal services to low-income individuals that has resulted in the appropriation of invaluable funds for these services. I also want to express my gratitude to the DC Access to Justice Commission and the DC Bar Foundation for their support and tireless efforts to ensure provision of services to low-income communities in the District.

Historically, low-income individuals that are Limited English Proficient (LEP) or Deaf and hard of hearing have not been able to effectively navigate the legal system. These individuals may have access to an interpreter at court; however that is often not enough, because they have no means of communicating and responding during the entire legal process before and after a court appearance. In fact, many attorneys and legal service organizations are not prepared to serve these populations, leaving these community members isolated and underserved while unscrupulous merchants, employers, landlords, and criminals take advantage of their plight. Concurrently, the US legal system is complex and daunting. The District of Columbia offers expansive rights and protections, but only to those who understand and are willing and able to act to protect those rights.

Ayuda has responded to this crisis by developing the Bank, a trail blazing national model that empowers and gives voice to low-income LEP and Deaf and hard of hearing communities in Washington DC. The overarching goal of the Bank is to allow low-income residents, who do not speak English, direct access to our system of justice and the legal advice needed to resolve their legal problems and improve their lives. The Bank is professionalizing the field of out-of-court legal interpreting by training interpreters and making them available to all civil legal service providers throughout Washington DC. Interpreters working for the Bank are highly qualified professionals that understand the complexities of the US legal system, the sensitive nature of the client-attorney relationship, and are dedicated to justice for LEP and Deaf and hard of hearing people. The Bank also provides telephonic interpretation and document translation services to the providers and has become the sole source for complete, competent, and ethical language access in the DC legal services community. Civil legal service providers do not need to expend valuable funds in order to fulfill the legal and ethical duties they owe their LEP and Deaf and hard of hearing clients. They do not need to seek out trained interpreters and duplicate efforts because the Bank provides them with all their language access needs. This is the most cost effective, efficient and strategic way of providing essential legal services to low-income individuals in the District.

During FY 2009/2010 we trained 72 interpreters that speak 29 different languages. We have a very wide range of languages represented in the Bank that include numerous African and Asian languages, as well as Spanish, French, ASL, and Certified Deaf Interpreters. We served 28 civil legal service providers in the District. We receive requests for a diverse spectrum of legal issues such as, family law and domestic violence, employment, housing, rights of the elderly, issues pertaining to children, access to medical care, rights of the homeless, to name a few. Approximately 1,724 people were impacted by the services that we provided.

The Bank has revolutionized the way civil legal services serve LEP and Deaf and hard of hearing clients. Providers are not only able to better serve familiar LEP and Deaf and hard of hearing communities, but are also expanding to serve new populations that were previously excluded. For example, before joining the Bank, attorneys at the DC Employment Justice Center (DCEJC) were not able to represent clients that spoke Tigrinya (a language spoken mainly in Ethiopia and Eritrea) and had to repeatedly turn them away. Finally, DCEJC represented a Tigrinya-speaking client through the services of the Bank, and since then has seen a rise in clients from that community. Additionally, they have expanded and improved their capacity to serve the Spanish-speaking communities of DC (the most commonly spoken language in DC, after English) by using professional interpreters from the Bank when bilingual staff members are not available. Previously they were forced to serve fewer Spanish-speaking clients when volunteer interpreters were not available.

The Committee and Council has clearly identified that the provision of civil legal services for low-income communities in the District is a priority. The Bank allows for civil legal service providers to not only be effective, but to also carry out the mission entrusted to them by the Committee and Council. By communicating and representing vulnerable LEP and Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, service providers are able to prevent tragic (and sometimes costly) situations such as homelessness and eviction, wrongful termination of employment, continued cycle of violence in homes and work places, the abuse of low-income elderly individuals, and the lack of access to medical care for children, to name a few examples. Access to legal services at the right time also decreases the burden on the courts. By investing in accurate interpretation services the first time an LEP or Deaf and hard of hearing client reaches out to legal services, service providers can avoid more costly situations such as the client ending up in court or requiring more hours of representation for a simple matter.

Without the services of the Bank, individual providers would have to develop their own internal language access systems, which would be costly, time consuming, and a duplication of efforts. This would not be sustainable or an effective use of funds. Otherwise, they would simply not be able to ethically represent clients that do not speak English.

Once again, I would like to thank the Committee and Council for its foresight and commitment to justice for all residents of the District, regardless of the language they speak. I would be more than happy to answer any questions that you have.