

Utah could scrap its English-only law

A state lawmaker wants to delete the language restrictions approved by voters in 2000.

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As Utah's population grows more diverse, an effort is under way at the Capitol to purge state law of a controversial English-only provision that passed at the ballot box a couple decades ago.

Initiative A, which drew a lawsuit after voters approved it in 2000, declares English as the official language of Utah government and restricts the way state and local leaders can communicate with the public. But those provisions no longer fit Utah's values or its practical needs, said Sen. Kirk Cullimore, who's sponsoring the repeal bill.

"We're not the same state, we're not the same country that we were when this initiative passed over 20 years ago," Cullimore, R-Sandy, said during a Wednesday afternoon bill hearing. "We have grown, and I think our law should reflect this."

The Senate Business and Labor Committee unanimously approved the bill, which now moves to the full Senate for consideration.

The bill, [SB214](#), would leave in place a provision that designates English as Utah's official language. But it scraps a couple of pages of text that direct state and local governments to use English for all official documents, meetings or publications, except in specific exempt cases.

SB214 deletes a provision that agencies must return any state funds spent on translating or printing materials or providing services and information in a language other than English.

The problems with the law's approach became particularly clear during the pandemic, with the paramount need for clear communication between officials and the public and the emergence of glaring disparities impacting the state's ethnic and racial minority communities, Cullimore said. Former Gov. Gary Herbert suspended the English-only provisions within his coronavirus orders, but those emergency rules won't last forever, he added.

The senator also noted that the current law contains an exemption that enables the use of non-English languages to inform international tourists about the state's historical, recreational or scenic sites.

"The clear message from our current statute is that we value tourists more than we value our own citizens," he said.

Cullimore also wants to strike a legal mandate that state education officials must promote the idea that Utahns who don't speak English should "become able to read, write and understand" the language as quickly as possible.

The deleted wording states that these education leaders should encourage foreign language instruction and English as a Second Language programs and that public schools should try to communicate clearly with non-English-speaking children and parents while also encouraging them to learn the language.

Ciriac Alvarez Valle, a policy analyst with [Voices for Utah Children](#), testified that Cullimore's proposed change will benefit the state's young people.

"We recognize that changing this law is an important step to ensure that all children in our state feel that they belong no matter the language they speak," she said. "This bill is a great step and will allow local control of language access to help reduce barriers for kids to access programs and services they need."

And Jaycee Skinner, executive vice president of public policy and general council for the Salt Lake Chamber, told lawmakers that a repeal would clear away communication barriers between the government and Utah entrepreneurs. During the pandemic, she said, "it became really clear that one of our greatest obstacles was making sure that we could communicate effectively, both for health reasons and for economic reasons, with citizens across the state."

A representative of Salt Lake City said Cullimore's bill would give local officials greater freedom to provide permitting, business licensing and safety information in different languages and to share critical updates on COVID-19 safety and vaccines. And a representative of Gov. Spencer Cox said he was also supportive of Cullimore's proposed changes.

Cullimore said Utah voters approved Initiative A after the state Legislature rejected a similar English-only bill in 1998. The [ACLU of Utah sued over the law](#), arguing that it denied non-English speakers "fair and equal access to their government," but the law remained on the books.

Pamela Silberman, a Utah resident who lobbied against Initiative A decades ago, said she welcomes the elimination of a law she opposed from the start.

"I just really want to appreciate your realization 25 years later that this is not good policy for our state," she said.