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Bilingual ballot now a reality for Hub's Viet, Chinese voters

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Jul. 16, 2014



Flanked by advocates including DOT-I's Huong Phan and Mayor Walsh, Gov. Deval Patrick signs the Bilingual Ballot Bill in Chinatown.

Ballots in Vietnamese and Chinese will be made permanently available in certain parts of Boston beginning with this fall's primary and general elections, thanks in part to the work of Dorchester's community activists and elected officials.

"This issue is personal to me, as I have many family members who naturalized, are limited English-proficient, and who need these ballots to fully participate in the democratic process. My family's story is only just one of the thousands of similar stories that stem from the Vietnamese American community in Boston," said Huong Phan, a Dorchester resident and steering committee member of the Dorchester Organizing and Training Initiative (DOT-I).

Over the last two years, DOT-I and other groups, including Viet-AID, the Vietnamese American Community of Massachusetts, and the Vietnamese American Civic Association, have mobilized to ensure that Vietnamese-English ballots become a reality for the more than 2,600 primarily Vietnamese-speaking eligible voters.

Under the new law, signed by Gov. Deval Patrick in Chinatown on Wednesday, Chinese and Vietnamese bilingual ballots must be provided in each polling place in Boston where

more than five percent of the voting age in the precinct is made of members of the language minority and are limited-English proficient.

The law also requires transliteration of relevant Chinese characters to their phonetic equivalent in English for candidates' names. Candidates will be given a copy of the proposed transliteration and will have seven days to review and change the transliteration.

"This bill means so much more to our democracy because now more voters can understand what they're voting for," Mayor Martin J. Walsh said at the bill signing. That comprehension will be especially important this fall with the four ballot questions in front of voters, "especially the question on gas tax indexing," he added. Walsh supported bilingual ballot legislation when he was a state representative.

Bilingual ballots were temporarily available in Boston elections from 2006 to 2008 and again from 2010 to 2013, but this legislation makes the accommodation permanent. The home rule bill had a broad base of support from Dorchester's elected officials, including City Councillors Tito Jackson and Ayanna Pressley, state Sens. Sonia Chang-Diaz and Linda Dorcena Forry, and state Rep. Dan Hunt.

"This historic campaign brought together Boston's Vietnamese and Chinese-American communities to fight for a right that belongs to all United States citizens and to ensure that these people have a loud and clear voice in their community and city," said Phi Tran, DOT-I program coordinator and Dorchester resident. "Our communities are only going to continue be more active and this is just one step moving to that direction."

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