



### **Testimony of Cheryl Wertz**

#### **Director of Government Access, New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE) Before the Campaign Finance Board at Public Hearings on December 12, 2005**

Thank you to the members of the Campaign Finance Board for being present for this critical hearing today. My name is Cheryl Wertz and I am the Director of Government Access at New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE). NICE is a cross-cultural, grass-roots organization in Jackson Heights that uses organizing, advocacy and public education to ensure that new immigrants are active, informed and influential in civic, governmental, and public affairs. Although we work with individuals from all over the City, most of our community members live and work in Jackson Heights, Corona, Flushing, Long Island City and Astoria.

In all of its program areas NICE stresses that neighborhoods, and New York City generally, will only be improved when community members and residents get involved. We, as individuals, and as communities, must stand up when government agencies or employees make choices that negatively impact our lives and neighborhoods.

But the reverse is equally true. When government agencies do the right thing and help to ensure that all New Yorkers, particularly English Language Learners, have full access to the political process we must recognize that positive contribution. I am here today to say thank you for producing the Queens Voter Guide in English, Spanish, Chinese and Korean.

While most U.S. citizen immigrants speak basic English, full English-language competency is often an allusive goal. English language classes at private institutions are extremely expensive and the opportunity cost of not working can be very high. According to the New York Immigration Coalition, only five percent of the need for community English classes is being met.

Further complicating things is the fact that the language of politics and campaigns is extremely nuanced and subtle. Understanding words or phrases like "quality of life" and "public accountability" requires a significant cultural context. Thousands of people in New York City read the news and have sophisticated conversations about City politics in their own language. For Spanish, Korean and Chinese readers, these nuanced and culturally complex phrases from daily conversation and political news are repeated in the Voter Guide, helping them to make the best choices.

Unfortunately, for hundreds of thousands of other New Yorkers this is not the case. For the more than 330,000 Eastern European or 200,000 South Asian individuals who have attained U.S. citizenship, there are no publicly produced, non-partisan voter education materials available in their language. They must continue to struggle to translate the language of political conversation into complex English terminology. While I realize that the Campaign Finance Board is not required by law to produce the Voter Guide in languages other than English, Spanish, Chinese and Korean, it certainly can and should. If New York City aims to achieve full democratic participation, the Voter Guide should also be produced in Russian, Polish, French, Bangladeshi, Hindi, Urdu and Haitian-Kreyol.

In conclusion, thank you. By printing the Queens Voter Guide in English, Spanish, Korean and Chinese, you have upheld Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, and made the process of civic engagement more open and inviting to hundreds of thousands of citizen immigrants. Maybe next year I will be here again to thank you for producing it in even more languages.