

October 22, 2007

The Hon. Donald Carcieri
Governor
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Governor Carcieri:

We write to express our deep distress at comments attributed to you in a news story in the October 18, 2007 Providence Journal. The entire relevant text is included as a footnote to this letter, but in essence, you are quoted as criticizing the availability of state-employed language interpreters in the courts and other state agencies to help individuals who have difficulty speaking or comprehending English.* As organizations representing, and advocating for, a diverse array of the immigrant community in Rhode Island, we are appalled by the glib nature of your negative sentiments about the rights of new immigrants in the state to access the court system and other state services.

The immigrants coming to Rhode Island are, on the whole, no different from those who have come here in the past. They are eager to learn English and assimilate into society, as demonstrated by the enormous waiting lists for English as a second language courses at our community organizations. Your comments – which suggest both that immigrants in Rhode Island have no interest in learning English and that those who do not speak English somehow bear special responsibility for the state's fiscal crisis – are insulting and only feed into the xenophobic atmosphere that permeates the immigration debate in our state and has encouraged a palpable discriminatory attitude towards people of certain ethnicities and races.

In fact, some of the interpreter services that you have criticized are constitutionally mandated. For example, we have decided as a society that a non-English-speaking person should not have to fend for him- or herself in a courtroom when facing the loss of liberty and possible imprisonment. Of course, other interpreter services provided by the state – such as in medical care situations – also benefit all of us by making us safer.

We strongly urge you to retract these unfortunate and insensitive comments. At a time when immigrants in our state already face a mean-spirited environment, we would hope that the state's chief executive would not lend credence to that attitude.

* *Providence Journal* excerpt:

"Until yesterday, the governor would only say that his staff reduction plans would target 'back office' workers, like those who work in 'finance, accounting and a few lawyers.' But Carcieri provided an insight yesterday into the jobs he thinks the state can do without during an interview on WHJJ's Helen Glover morning radio talk show.

Asked by a caller why the state needs interpreters in the courts and other state agencies, Carcieri said: 'Amen to you, buddy.'

In the hunt for expendable jobs, Carcieri said he found one department with eight Spanish-speaking interpreters, and 'I said why are we, at taxpayer expense, providing interpreters for people who want benefits from us? It seems completely illogical to me because you're right,' he told the caller. 'My grandparents immigrated from Italy. My grandmother didn't speak English. She learned it...'

"But the point is if they needed somebody ... they got somebody, a friend or relative who spoke English, right? So why in God's name [are] we providing, at taxpayer expense, staff whose sole job is to interpret English for people who apparently have no friend and no relative that can speak English. I don't think we should be doing that."

Page Two

However unintentionally, your comments can only encourage further discrimination and poisoning of the public debate on the legitimate issues surrounding the presence of immigrants in Rhode Island and the important and positive role that these residents play in our society.

Matt McLaren
African Alliance of Rhode Island

Kate Brewster, Executive Director
The Poverty Institute

Miguel Sanchez-Hartwein, Executive Director
Center for Hispanic Policy and Advocacy

Ramon Martinez, Executive Director
Progreso Latino

Juan Garcia
Comite de Inmigrantes en Accion

Melba Depena, Executive Director
Providence Human Relations Commission

John Prince, Chairperson
Direct Action for Rights and Equality

Kohei Ishihara, Co-Founder
PrYSM

Pheamo Witcher, Director
The Genesis Center

Jim Vincent, President
RI Affirmative Action Professionals

Viviana Knowles
Immigrant Students in Action

Steven Brown, Executive Director
RI Affiliate, American Civil Liberties Union

Julie Nora, Director
International Charter School

Donna Fishman, Chairperson
RI Coalition for Affirmative Action

William Shuey, Executive Director
International Institute of Rhode Island

Sabina Matos
RILPAC/RILCF

Rachel Miller, Director
Jobs with Justice RI

Dr. Antonia Barajas, President
RI Mexican-American Association

Karen Malcolm, Executive Director
Ocean State Action

Vivian Weisman, Executive Director
RI Parents Information Network

Shannah Kurland
Olneyville Neighborhood Association

Dennis Langley, Executive Director
Urban League of Rhode Island