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Preliminary Injunction Mandates Spanish-Language Voter Access in 32 Counties Leading up to Florida Presidential Preference Primary

Orlando, FL – In the midst of early voting for the Florida Presidential Preference Primary, legal and community organizations are reminding voters and county representatives that Spanish-language ballots, signage, assistance and related materials are required in 32 counties because of U.S. District Court Chief Judge Mark Walker’s preliminary injunctive order in *Madera v. Lee*. The preliminary injunction is a result of the August 2018 lawsuit filed by LatinoJustice PRLDEF, Demos, SEIU and Altshuler Berzon LLP on behalf of civic engagement groups Faith in Florida, Hispanic Federation, Mi Familia Vota Education Fund, UnidosUS, and Vamos4PR, and individual voter Marta Rivera Madera, a Puerto Rican, Spanish-speaking voter.

During the November 2018 election, Judge Walker ordered these 32 counties to provide Spanish-language ballots that could be used as a reference when voting on official English ballots. Starting with the Presidential Preference Primary, however, the Court ordered the counties to provide official Spanish-language ballots, as well as robust Spanish-language materials and assistance, to protect Spanish-speaking voters’ rights to fully participate in the electoral process.

Community advocates brought the lawsuit to seek Spanish-language ballots, materials, and assistance to support displaced Puerto Ricans seeking to rebuild their communities and lives in Florida after Hurricane Maria. On April 25, 2019, Florida’s Secretary of State initiated a rule-making process in response to the lawsuit, requiring the provision of statewide Spanish-language ballots and updates to Florida’s Polling Place Procedures Manual that require statewide Spanish-language election-related materials and assistance in future elections. However, to-date no final rules have been published.

“We must use every tool available to ensure that Spanish-speaking voters have access to the materials and assistance needed to cast an informed vote. Anything less is a threat to the principles which are at the core of our democracy,” said Kira Romero-Craft, Managing Attorney for LatinoJustice PRLDEF’s Southeast Office.

"For many Puerto Ricans still rebuilding their lives following the devastation of Hurricane Maria, this election is a critical moment for them to make their voices heard by exercising their right to vote," said Miranda Galindo, counsel at Demos. "Equal access to the ballot for citizens who have already been through so much is something we should all be able to agree on."

“Whether it’s a presidential primary or a local union election, voter discrimination based on race cannot be tolerated in our state. We must continue to fight to make sure the state of Florida follows through on the Court’s order to provide Spanish-language assistance at our election sites, so that all American citizens can fully participate in our democracy,” said Martha Baker, RN, President of SEIU Florida State Council.

“In his ruling, Judge Walker stated that compliance with his order to provide Spanish-language ballots and materials is not optional. However, because the Secretary of State has not published the final rules that lay out the procedures, we must remain vigilant and make sure the state complies with the court decision,” said Yanidsi Velez, Hispanic Federation, Southeast Senior Director, Programs and Policy. “Puerto Ricans who were displaced by Hurricane Maria and are now living and voting in Florida and their voting rights must be protected.”

"In this incredibly important election year, it's crucial for new arrivals from Puerto Rico and all Spanish-speaking citizens to get full access to vote, including language access. Puerto Ricans who live on the island don't have the power to vote for the members of Congress who exercise immense control over their lives. Puerto Ricans now in Florida who have been forced to the island due to the public debt crisis, damages from Hurricane Maria and the recent earthquakes, should be able to take this vital opportunity at the ballot box, in the language they best understand. We are going to do everything we can to make sure every eligible voter in Florida is able to exercise their right to vote," said VAMOS4PR Florida Director Maria Revelles.

If anyone observes a lack of Spanish language assistance in the 32 designated counties, then we are asking you to call 321-250-2853 and leave a voicemail so someone from our team can follow-up.

The 32 counties are: Alachua County; Bay County; Brevard County; Charlotte County; Citrus County; Clay County; Columbia County; Duval County; Escambia County; Flagler County; Hernando County; Highlands County; Indian River County; Jackson County; Lake County; Leon County; Levy County; Manatee County; Marion County; Martin County; Monroe County; Okaloosa County; Okeechobee County; Pasco County; Putnam County; St. Johns County; St. Lucie County; Santa Rosa County; Sarasota County; Sumter County; Taylor County; and Wakulla County.