

## Utah only offers driver exams in English for many immigrants. A proposed law would change that.

Driver tests in different languages are currently only reserved for refugees and those granted asylum. <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2022/02/02/utah-only-offers-driver>

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When Jesus Castello, 77, moved to Utah from Pennsylvania last year he visited the Driver License Division to figure out how to get a new driver license. Before living in Utah, Castello lived in New York and Pennsylvania and held a driver license in those states for a combined 50 years. In both states, Castello took his driver license tests in Spanish.

“I asked about taking the exam to get my license,” the Ecuador-native said in Spanish. “They told me they didn’t have in Spanish.”

Passing the state’s driver license exam in English, also known as the written knowledge test, is a requirement for those who have never held a license in Utah. But for many immigrants in the state, taking the test in English is a hurdle that could prevent them from obtaining a license.

That’s why state Rep. Gay Lynn Bennion, D-Cottonwood Heights, is sponsoring a bill to help people like Castello. Bennion’s bill, HB130, would require the Utah Department of Public Safety’s Driver License Division to offer driving exams in people’s native language under law.

“Other states around us offer driver license exams in multiple languages,” Bennion said. “We are a welcoming state, we welcome immigrants and refugees, and they’re a vital part of our workforce. But we’ve only offered the translation to refugees and asylees.”

The bill unanimously passed the House Transportation Committee on Monday.

### Utah’s Latino population is growing

Bennion’s bill comes at a time when Utah is experiencing rapid growth, particularly among diverse and Latino communities. In the last 10 years, Utah’s Latino communities grew by 38% and now account for 15% of the state population, last year’s census results showed.

Bennion added that many families and Utahns have expressed frustration to her that driver license exams aren’t offered in multiple languages. On average, she noted, it can take an adult years to learn English. Even some native-English speakers have trouble passing the written knowledge exam on the first try.

“I know of people who have passed the citizenship test, but have not been able to pass the driver license exam,” she said, “Part of that is because the citizenship test is about learning facts and the driver license



(Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Jesus Castello, 77, at his home in Lehi on Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022.

exam is also about reasoning, and doing that in another language, and with a vocabulary that can be complex, is just very hard in another language.”

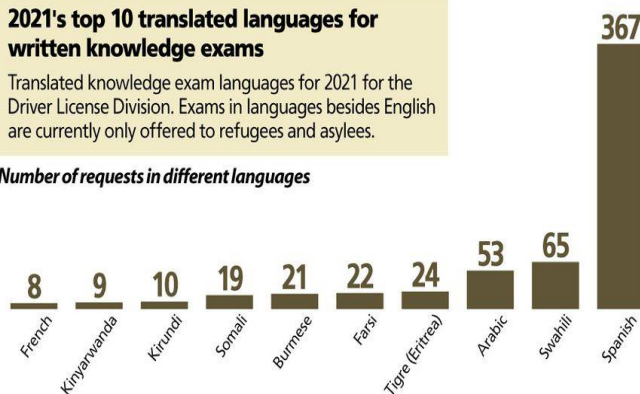
More than 45 states offer their driver license tests in multiple languages, including the nearby states of California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico and Idaho.

“We can clearly see that our neighboring states are offering (tests) in multiple languages,” Bennion said. “I don’t think it has been quite so clear until now how far behind we are.”

### 2021's top 10 translated languages for written knowledge exams

Translated knowledge exam languages for 2021 for the Driver License Division. Exams in languages besides English are currently only offered to refugees and asylees.

Number of requests in different languages



Source: Utah Department of Public Safety

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune

In Utah, the written knowledge test is offered in languages besides English only for refugees and those granted asylum, according to Joe Dougherty, director of public affairs for the Utah Department of Public Safety. Dougherty noted that the division provides the Utah driver handbook in Spanish and [offers it online](#).

Last year, 367 driver license tests were offered in Spanish. Other top translated languages include Swahili, Arabic, Tigre and Farsi, Burmese and Somali.

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

To obtain a Utah driver license, new residents who’d previously held a licenses in another state are required to take a 25-question, open-book test, [according to the Public Department of Public Safety](#). Those who have never been licensed in the U.S. are required to take a 50-question, closed-book test. Bennion’s proposed legislation would also allow a translator to be present in certain circumstances. The cost to implement the bill would cost the state about \$60,000 for fiscal year 2023, according to the fiscal analysis of the bill. Under the proposed legislation, if an exam is not offered in a person’s preferred language, it will be up to that individual to pay the cost of a certified translator approved by the driver license division, Bennion noted.

The legislation has also garnered support among immigrant activists, the Driver License Division and the Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City, which serves a large immigrant congregation, according to Bennion. “Exams like this are so important and critical to ensure that we’re all safe” said Mayra Cedano, executive director of Comunidades Unidas, a nonprofit that serves Latino communities. “It’s a right step in the right direction.”

Lauren Beheshti, an immigrants’ rights policy fellow at the [American Civil Liberties Union of Utah](#), backed the bill during Monday’s committee hearing, saying it reflects Utah’s growing diverse communities.

“As the diversity of Utah’s population continues to grow, it’s important that our laws reflect these changes to ensure that government serves the needs of all people in our state,” Beheshti said. “A logical response to the ongoing changes is to expand the categories of individuals who can take the exam for certain driver licenses in a language that they are most comfortable reading.”

### Increasing the state’s workforce

If the bill doesn't pass, Castello, who currently holds a valid Pennsylvania driver license, fears not being able to drive around his Lehi neighborhood once his current card expires. For Castello, who is currently retired, not having a license is a quality-of-life issue. He said it's critical for him to obtain a license in order to get to and from medical appointments and buy groceries.

Last year, Gov. Spencer Cox signed a bill that removed [an English-only provision in state law](#) that required all official government documents, transactions, proceedings, meetings and publications to be in English. The bill's author, Sen. Kirk Cullimore, R-Sandy, previously said the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the need for understandable communication between public officials and communities of color, [who were disproportionately impacted by the health crisis](#).

Bennion said the law has been introduced in the Utah Legislature for years and failed to pass. But unlike previous years, Bennion is confident that the bill could pass this year due to its low cost and because other surrounding Republican and Democratic states are offering tests in more than one language. Bennion also added that offering driver tests in multiple languages could boost Utah's workforce. "We've come to a point where now is very clear that for a very low cost we can open up opportunity and mobility to so many people and impact our workforce for the better and get more people in the economy working," she said. "We're going to find so many benefits by allowing more people to have the ability to drive."

During the committee hearing, Jeff Draper, owner of the Salt Lake City-based Source Construction Inc., said he often sees his workers and subcontractors needing to depend on rides to work from others. He added that finding construction workers is challenging for employees and it's essential for them to be able to drive to and from work sites.

"I work side-by-side with people from literally all over the world from Italy to Mexico and these are people that are vital to me to pull off our projects and get them done," he said. "I believe that this bill will open the door further and that's why I'm supportive of it for skilled individuals to join the workforce, and specifically in my field, ... because in 2022, we need it badly."