

Lost in translation? NJ teen helps nonprofits convert English documents to other languages

2-minute read

Ricardo Kaulessar

NorthJersey.com

Published June 22, 2023

Edward Kim saw his parents' struggles to understand elections both nationwide and in his hometown of Tenafly.

"I remember they were pretty involved in politics back when we used to live in Korea, and then when we moved to Canada and then the United States, I would ask them, 'Why aren't you guys involved in politics anymore?' and they said, 'How are we supposed to be involved when we can't understand'," Kim said of his parents, who are not fluent in English.

That prompted the Tenafly High School student last year to form ThruTranslation, a nonprofit that translates documents such as flyers or questionnaires for other nonprofit organizations at no cost. Other services include providing subtitles for accurate translations of videos. The languages offered for translation are Korean, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish.

Kim, 17, reached out to other teen friends and acquaintances across the country and in Canada who helped build this enterprise. There are now 10 teenagers working with Kim at ThruTranslation, with eight, including Kim, serving as translators while the other three deal with outreach and social media.

ThruTranslation started by sending emails to representatives in the U.S. House and Senate as well as political offices in various states offering to translate documents, Kim said, but the group initially found little interest. That changed when the nonprofit reached out to other nonprofit groups.

Kim's group contacted "anyone ranging from senior centers to organizations dealing with literacy rates to LGBTQ centers. They are great resources, but I realized that they were not successful in different languages," he said. "Some of the stuff that was available in Spanish, the translations were very awkwardly put, obviously done through Google Translate, and some of it didn't make sense. So, we thought we could work from that."

Nonprofits that require translation services can reach out to ThruTranslation and then meet over Zoom to explain what needs to be interpreted and into what language. Usually, the translation takes one to two weeks.

Eight governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations have either retained ThruTranslation's services or plan to do so in the future, Kim said, including the Bergen County Sheriff's Office; the Women's Daytime Drop-In Center, a program for homeless women and children in Berkeley, California; and the Foundry, a youth health center in Vancouver, Canada. So far, the organization has translated 30 documents.

Kim said his organization hopes to raise money to acquire digital translation devices, bring on another member who speaks Russian, and find more agencies seeking translation help.

He said is proud of creating this service to help nonprofits reach their clients who struggle with English like his parents.

"They are impressed," he said of his parents. "They walk into my room and ask what I am working on, and I tell them I'm translating this into Korean. They think what I am doing is meaningful," Kim said.

Email: kaulessar@northjersey.com

Twitter: [@ricardokaul](https://twitter.com/ricardokaul)