WASHINGTON — Congressman Gillis Long Wednesday introduced legislation that guarantees equal access to the judicial system through interpreters for persons who do not speak English.

Long said the Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, guarantees criminal defendants the right to attorneys who speak their language. His measure, Long explained, would enlarge that right by amending the law to provide a statutory guarantee of an interpreter for non-English speaking persons before federal courts.

Main Impact
He noted that the measure, which is being jointly sponsored by Congressman John Breaux of the Seventh District, would have its main impact in civil proceedings. The legislation proposed by Long could affect as many as a half million persons in Louisiana. There are presently 643,000 persons in the state who speak a language other than English. Of this total, 572,685 are French-speaking.

One Per Cent
For a federal court district to be declared bilingual and eligible for interpreter services, one per cent of the population or 10,000 persons from that district must be non-English speaking.

Under provisions of Long's legislation, persons using the services of court interpreters would bear the costs. Indigent persons would receive these services without cost.

Long, who is a member of the influential House Rules Committee, represents the Eighth District which takes in much of South Louisiana’s French-speaking population.