

ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE ACCESS PLAN

Ensuring language access begins with a comprehensive department-wide plan that focuses on the specific needs of limited-English proficient (LEP) individuals. While departments should customize their language services to meet their particular needs, there are certain key elements to every language access plan. The following are guidelines to consider when developing a department-wide language access plan.

1. Conduct ongoing and accurate assessment of your clients' language needs

Departments should conduct annual assessments of language needs by city, neighborhood and service area. Departments should utilize the most recent US Census data to identify service areas with high numbers of limited-English proficient residents. In addition to determining the languages spoken by limited-English proficient residents, Departments should track the numbers of linguistically isolated households in each area.¹ Furthermore, departments should survey local service areas to determine the number of LEP residents seeking language assistance and the number of requests for language assistance by department staff.

2. Implement ongoing and accurate assessment of staffing capacity by language and service area/unit

Departments should assess the language capabilities of their staff with a focus on and individuals who interact with the public. Assessments should be structured to inform departments of both languages spoken and the levels of proficiency amongst their staff. Staff language assessments should be used to identify areas of strength and improvement for the departments' ability to deliver in-language services. Language assessments should also be consulted when determining where bilingual staff are being stationed. The department should have a tracking system that monitors each unit's language capacity.

3. Assign bilingual staff to programs with a high number of LEP residents

Language needs and staff capacity assessments should be used strategically to assign bilingual staff to program areas where there is an identifiable need for in-language services. Bilingual staff should be compensated for their language skills and willingness to relocate to a program with high language needs if necessary.

4. Develop a recruitment and retention plan to increase bilingual staffing in all areas of the department

The most efficient way to deliver meaningful services to LEP residents is through bilingual staff. Drawing on their language needs and staffing capacity assessments, each department should develop a plan to increase bilingual staff in all areas of the department. Increasing bilingual staffing capacity can include, but is not limited to: targeted recruitment of new bilingual staff; offering language classes to bilingual staff who are proficient in a language other than English, but need to improve their skills to become fully bilingual; providing increased compensation for bilingual staff willing to apply their language skills.

¹ Linguistically isolated households are those where, according to the US Census, no one over the age of 14 indicated they speak English "well" or "very well."

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5. Develop a plan to identify and translate key documents

All residents rely heavily on written communication from public agencies to understand how to access services, know their rights, be informed of important community concerns, and participate in the myriad community programs offered by public agencies. Translated documents are critical to ensure LEP residents are aware of services, due process rights, and can fully access and participate in community programs.

a. *Develop a systemic process for identifying documents for translation* — Departments should develop clear guidelines and procedures for surveying all existing English and in-language forms, correspondence and resources. Translation priority should be given to documents conveying critical information related to due process and civil rights. Some other factors to consider when prioritizing documents for translation include, but are not limited to frequency of use, language needs, targeted communities, and nature of the information conveyed.

b. *Ensure quality of translation and interpreters* — The quality of translation should be monitored to ensure accuracy and readability. Drawing on focus groups comprised of community members proficient in the languages of translation can provide effective quality control and create mechanisms to involve LEP residents in the process. Agencies also often have second readers review each translated document for accuracy and accessibility.

c. *Ensure adequate funding for language services* — Departments should account for the cost of translations, interpreters, and other language service costs in each annual budget. Departments should also coordinate and pool translation resources with other local agencies to leverage resources. Documents that can be used on a department-wide basis should be translated and disseminated in a centralized manner to avoid duplicative efforts by local offices. There should also be a readily accessible centralized pool of translators.

d. *Create a plan to disseminate in-language forms and resources* — Finally, departments should develop proactive plans to disseminate and utilize translated documents. Departments should reach out to community groups, schools, social service providers and other agencies working with LEP communities to publicize the availability of in-language documents. Where relevant, staff should conduct additional outreach to specific target communities in need of in-language resources.

Dissemination plans should also be targeted within the department to ensure all translated forms are actually utilized. Trainings should be conducted to inform staff of the availability of translated forms and the proper protocol for working with LEP residents in need of in-language documents or interpretation.

6. Provide staff with the skills and tools necessary to effectively serve LEP residents

At minimum, all staff should be required to attend regular trainings that inform them of available language service resources. Such resources include translated documents and guides, forms, interpreters and bilingual staff. Trainings should emphasize not only existing resources, but clearly outline procedures for when and how to call upon interpreters. Trainings should be clear about guidelines regarding the use of family members, children,

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witnesses, and victims as interpreters. Use of such parties as interpreters presents ethical and other complications that can have tragic consequences. Departments should develop and communicate clear protocol for staff in need of neutral interpreters.

In addition to generalized language access and cultural competency trainings, departments should develop trainings and resources for specific units that deliver critical services or work closely with LEP communities.

7. Develop an outreach plan to build relationships with LEP communities and inform individuals of available language services

LEP residents regularly face obstacles to fully accessing community services and programs due to language barriers. To effectively serve and reach out to LEP residents, departments should develop strategic outreach and community education plans targeting LEP communities. Departments should nurture relationships with community groups, social service providers, and ethnic media outlets serving LEP communities. Ideally, presentations and outreach should be conducted in the primary languages of the target communities.

8. Create an on-going Language Access Taskforce to assist the department in monitoring and implementing the language access plan

Ensuring LEP residents have meaningful access to services requires creating concrete mechanisms to communicate the department's language access initiatives and to receive feedback from LEP residents. Departments should convene regular Language Access Taskforce meetings that bring together various stakeholders including but not limited to, key officers charged with implementing the language access plan, community leaders and service providers working with LEP residents, translators and interpreters.

9. Establish mechanisms to monitor implementation of language access plan

The Department Director or senior manager reporting directly to the Director should be responsible for monitoring and implementing the language access plan. The plan should be reviewed and evaluated annually to reflect changing language and resource needs. As part of this monitoring process, Department should have a clearly articulated reporting mechanism that enables individuals seeking services to register formal complaints regarding language barriers. New goals should be established and a full assessment of costs should also occur on an annual basis. Community input through the aforementioned Task Force or a focus group should be used to inform regular evaluations. Finally, there should also be a publicly accessible annual report of the department's overall compliance with applicable federal, state and local laws and the language access plan in particular.