



ACCESSING AND PROVIDING:

FRONTLINE VOICES ON LANGUAGE ACCESS

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The purpose of this project is to identify concrete recommendations for how DC government agencies can improve their services for non-English speaking clients. For a period of about a year, the Office on Latino Affairs conducted face-to-face interviews and surveys with both non-profit and government employees who work directly with limited and non-English proficient (LEP/NEP) clients and on-site observations of government service centers. Through a comparison of feedback collected from interviews with both frontline non-profit and government employees, and follow-up meetings with OLA, this project strives to identify Language Access issues and solutions to then work collaboratively with the agencies to implement concrete changes. The data were collected from:

- Sixty-eight (68) face-to-face interviews with frontline employees across twenty-nine (29) Latino LEP/NEP serving DC non-profits (primarily OLA grantees during fiscal year 2012), from June to October of 2012. Please note that forty-nine (49) of these interviews were conducted during FY2012, and nineteen (19) interviews were conducted during FY2013.
- Fifty-one (51) face-to-face interviews with frontline employees and twenty-eight (28) site visits at seventeen (17) service centers across five (5) DC government agencies, prioritized according to the non-profit interviewees' feedback, from April to September of FY2013: Department of Human Services (DHS), DC Housing Authority (DCHA), Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), Department of Mental Health (DMH), and the Department of Employment Services (DOES). All five agencies are among the thirty-four agencies named under the DC Language Access Act of 2004.

Important Note:

Please note that the information presented in this report was generated from the perspective of one hundred nineteen (119) public-serving employees at non-profits and DC government, each interviewed and surveyed from FY 2012 to FY 2013 by the Office on Latino Affairs. Interviewees were not requested to provide extensive evidence to back up claims. All non-profit interviewees' feedback was implicitly focused upon services provided to Spanish-speaking LEP/NEP clients, unless otherwise noted.

Additional information used for this report was compiled through observations during twenty-eight (28) site visits to seventeen (17) centers across five (5) prioritized DC government agencies.

Findings:

- The recommendations most supported from the DC government employees overlap with the areas of improvement most identified by the non-profit employees, for Language Access at the thirty-four DC government agencies named under the Act.

- The four main areas of improvement identified by non-profit interviewees are: lack of bilingual staff, language services by frontline staff (e.g. discriminatory remarks related to constituents' national origin, difficulties receiving language services), translated documents and information, and navigation of the office and its services.
- The five recommendations most supported by DC government interviewees are for agencies to: make website more accessible in different languages, provide more Language Access training, translate more documents / information, post more multilingual signage, and hire more bilingual frontline staff.

OLA's Recommendations:

1. Hire more bilingual frontline staff and create more certified bilingual positions.

- a. Hiring more bilingual staff cuts down costs of extensive telephonic interpretation use (e.g. Language Line) and decreases the time to serve each client, with more staff on hand to serve both English and other language speakers.
- b. According to feedback from interviewees, direct communication through bilingual staff, rather than relying upon an interpreter, is also more likely to relay clearer information and develop more trust-building relationships with LEP/NEP clients.
- c. Establishing more certified bilingual positions, with a slight pay grade increase, will encourage more competitive bilingual job-seekers to apply. This bilingual certification opportunity may also encourage bilingual employees to maintain a longer term of employment, and ensure accountability and quality consistency when providing language services. Some DC government agencies already have successful programs in place, which could be replicated across those agencies named under the Language Access Act.

2. Provide all frontline employees with more Language Access training, infrastructure and resources.

- a. More training on Language Access protocols – covering the areas of compliance under the Act, the agency-specific protocols and resources, and how to use the telephonic interpretation services (e.g. Language Line) – assures that employees are prepared and knowledgeable when serving LEP/NEP clients.
- b. More communication and regular discussion of Language Access issues between frontline and management employees, and regular check-ins by senior level management at the centers, would help track problems as they arise and keep management informed of any needed improvements.
- c. Agencies could also be more proactive in identifying language needs of clients. For many agencies, requiring a separate “language preference for services” question during the beginning of the intake at the first point of contact is an effective way to catch language preference up front. Then each case can be tagged with that language preference so that future employees working with the client are aware and prepared for his/her language needs.
- d. Also, dual handset phones are a great resource for employees, to limit noise and privacy concerns when communicating with their clients through an interpreter via speaker phone, and to limit time and germ-sharing concerns when communicating with an interpreter facilitating a telephonic interpretation by passing one handset back/forth with the client.

3. Prioritize new translations for legally binding forms, mailed notices requiring an immediate response and overall service/resource guides; and make already translated materials easier to find in print and online.

- a. By translating written information into additional languages most often spoken by LEP/NEP clients, and conducting trustworthy quality control of all translations (including uniformity of translated legal terms and document names), the agency safeguards itself from misinterpretation of information if the conveying from one language to another is done in the moment by a bilingual individual or interpreter without having any quality control.

- b. When deciding what to translate, agencies should prioritize information-packed overall service/resource guides, documents that are legally binding, and notices that require an immediate response, including notices delivered via mail or email or placed on a vehicle/building.
- c. For delivered notices requiring an immediate response, if a translation is not feasible financially, a second option is to include a translated disclaimer listing a phone number e.g. “For free, you can request interpretation over the phone or in-person, and have some documents translated for you. Please call ___ if you do not understand or need help with this document.”
- d. Translated information is only as useful as it is accessible. We recommend agencies to make translated forms, documents or other materials easily available both online and in print, for LEP/NEP clients and for the non-profit or government employees working with those clients to obtain access to public services.

4. Translate and post more multilingual signage, with a quality control mechanism.

- a. Effective signage can help prevent clients from going to the wrong room or service center, or waiting in the wrong line. When translating new signage, we recommend agencies to prioritize translating and posting information on: service center locations and hours of operation (on the front doors, facing outwards); room names and a brief list of services available there; deposit box instructions, if applicable; and any pertinent notices e.g. schedule or service changes.
- b. Multilingual signage can also encourage clients to self-identify their language needs, for those clients who do not understand English very well. Thus we also recommend agencies to prioritize translating and posting signage right at the first point of contact / front desk, which reads “Free interpretation assistance is available, please ask at the front desk.” Agencies should also post signage indicating available free telephonic interpretation services, e.g. Language Line, and copies of the “I Speak” cards produced by the Office on Human Rights.
- c. Languages for new translations of signage should be prioritized according to the languages spoken by those LEP/NEP populations most served or likely to be served by the agency.

5. Promote available services and resources through multilingual outreach.

- a. We recommend agencies to conduct more outreach to limited and non-English proficient populations, so that they know services are available and accessible in their language. Of course, before multilingual outreach efforts begin, agencies should first check that the services to be promoted are fully accessible in those languages.
- b. We recommend agencies to utilize demographic data, from the US Census or other sources, and local partners to determine which populations to reach out to and target outreach efforts. The DC Mayor’s Offices on Latino Affairs, African Affairs and Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, as well as local non-profit organizations may also assist in guiding an agency’s outreach efforts and identification of various sectors of the population to target.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

This is not a set of finite findings, but an ongoing process of talking to people, observing the centers and how services are provided, and pursuing a deeper understanding into where the breaks are in the line of processes in place to serve residents with limited or no-English proficiency. This project will continue into the next fiscal year of 2014 as OLA begins working with senior management at the five prioritized agencies, in order to see which recommendations are feasible or need to be modified or new recommendations to add. This project will also continue as OLA keeps meeting with new government and non-profit frontline employees to request more feedback on difficulties providing and accessing Language Access services, respectively.

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