



Bridging Divides



Engaging Diverse Communities Efficiently

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 67.3 million people in the United States spoke a language other than English at home as of 2018. Many of these individuals are also considered to have limited English proficiency [LEP]. Without language access, LEP residents may struggle to access a variety of government services. In some cases, this is an inconvenience. In other cases, it can keep people from making use of essential services. And in worst-case scenarios, when someone needs to access emergency services or is seeking health information, these language barriers can be literally life-threatening.

Language access is a legal requirement that keeps communities strong and residents safe. State and local governments face limited funding here, as they do in providing so many other services, but there are ways to budget efficiently for language access services to ensure that no one in your community gets left behind.

The following best practices will help your government create and optimize a language access plan to ensure that residents with LEP can take advantage of the services they require.

Your organization needs a language access plan

A language access plan is a formal policy that describes how your team will provide communication assistance services to individuals who don't speak English or have LEP; are deaf, hard-of-hearing, or blind; or who otherwise require language assistance services.

Although specific statutes and requirements vary according to circumstances and location, government entities are legally bound to make their services accessible to constituents, regardless of their English proficiency or disability status.

A language access plan ensures that your organization remains compliant with relevant laws while simultaneously guaranteeing that your staff is aware of what to do when someone needs language assistance. It also provides you and your colleagues an opportunity to tailor your language access services to your specific community and uncover opportunities for efficiency.

Steps to creating an effective language access plan

Pinpoint your community focus. The first step in designing a language access plan is to assess the language needs in your community. These will vary, depending on the level of government involvement and whether the area you serve is rural, suburban, or urban. Urban areas tend to have more immigrant and refugee communities and therefore a wider variety of spoken languages. More than 200 languages are spoken in New York City, for instance. Suburban and more rural areas typically have fewer languages to plan for but have unique community needs.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services maintains a list of the top 15 most commonly spoken languages for each state. This is a good place to start your discovery process but remember that local needs will vary. At the municipal level, the best course of action is to survey the community to get a better understanding of their language needs



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directly from the source. Consider not only which languages are spoken but also which methods of contact these residents prefer to use, whether that includes coming into an office, making a telephone call, sending an email, or visiting a website. The subject matter to be translated or interpreted must also be kept in mind. Specialized subjects like health care require translators and interpreters who are not only bilingual but also subject matter experts.

Develop a cost-effective language access plan. Now that you've defined your community needs, the next step is to develop an action plan that meets those needs and complies with all applicable laws and regulations. Broad categories within language access plans might include a needs assessment, an assessment of what language services are needed (the types of services the government will provide), a listing of the notices needed (how the government will let its stakeholders know about the

services available), staff training needs, and how (and how often) the program will be evaluated.

Language access benefits government at all levels, as well as the diverse communities they serve. One way to improve the return on investment of your language access program is to partner with existing organizations that serve these communities.

Efficiently handle language access requests. Look for ways to streamline existing processes so you can provide language access options for each constituent touchpoint you identified in the previous step, without exceeding your budget for language support. This could include document translation for written documents and forms, onsite or video interpreting for in-person interactions, over-the-phone interpreting, and more.

Organizations sometimes have different departments using multiple language service providers simultaneously, which adds unnecessary cost and can make it

difficult to create cohesion in your team's messaging. Consider coordinating your efforts by bringing everything under one office or department to create efficiencies. This may mean using the same provider for multiple projects, which keeps you from paying to translate the same verbiage more than once.

Your constituents need to be able to request language access at the time of service, whether that's in person, over the phone, via email, or via standard mail. For internal needs, many organizations find it helpful to submit all translation requests through a website portal. Some language service providers even offer a translation management system that allows your organization to request translations and track progress, streamlining the process.

Train staff members. Everyone on your team needs to know what their responsibilities are when it comes to ensuring that stakeholders can access services in their preferred languages. Determine which staff members are responsible for each aspect of your language access plan and train them according to their newly defined, clearly outlined roles.

Publicize your language access options.

A language access plan won't help the people it's intended for if they don't know it exists. How will your constituents know that you have language services available? Make a plan to inform them. This step could include:

- Mailing letters, emails, or mailer.
- Posting notices on your website or social media channels
- Playing multilingual announcements in your lobby
- Utilizing an advertising campaign
- Posting signage

Evaluate and adjust. Most of us have heard the saying, often attributed to Peter Ducker, that "What gets measured, gets improved." This principle is relevant to project planning for your language access work. Measuring the success of your program can save money and improve the quality of services over time. Determine which metrics are most important to your organization and the people you serve, evaluate them periodically, and then make adjustments as needed.



Your constituents are looking for connection and community. They want access to the services they need and require, in a language they can understand and through a cultural channel that builds trust and engagement.

Scaling language services efficiently

As your language services needs increase, you may need to scale up the services you offer. Here are some suggestions to maximize your services while minimizing cost.

Document translation. Ask your language service provider about bundling document translation services, which can result in a lower cost per word. You may also be able to negotiate a multi-year contract or a multi-vendor strategy for significant savings.

Artificial Intelligence assistance. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted translation can also help control costs, but don't confuse AI-assisted translation from a language service provider with a free tool like Google Translate. AI translation applications are not often accurate, and they may also lack proper data security. Human expertise is still required to catch and correct inevitable errors and to make sure that information is presented in a culturally competent way. Language service providers also have access to AI translation engines that are trained on data from specific industries, resulting in greater accuracy.


Over-the-phone interpretation. For over-the-phone interpreting, available options can both reduce call time (and the associated expenses) and improve

customer satisfaction. For example, connecting an LEP caller immediately with an interpreter who assists them throughout the entire call reduces frustration, incomplete calls, call handling time, and overall costs. Teaming up your representatives with an interpreter to take multiple calls in the same language also reduces call handling times by up to 14 percent.

Scaling up for crisis response. Working with a language service provider may also help your team prepare for the unexpected. For example, refugee resettlement or the arrival of a group of migrants can generate sudden, urgent requirements for translation and interpretation. And the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us just how quickly public health emergencies can escalate, creating new language access challenges. Preparing for severe weather is another example of a situation that requires multilingual outreach, done well but also done efficiently. Unfortunately, numerous examples exist of weather warnings and evacuation orders that didn't reach all the people in the affected area because they were not translated. Because language service providers have a network of linguists to draw from, they can help quickly respond to all sorts of crises and provide support in multiple languages.

Language access creates community, which builds trust

Prioritizing your LEP constituents can and must be done, even in a time of shrinking budgets, small teams, and inflation—especially if we are to bridge accessibility and outcomes gaps that have become the status quo. Success requires strategic planning and a focus on outcomes. When so many budgetary priorities compete with language access, it may be tempting to just keep everything the same as it has been in previous years. To do so reinforces and entrenches decisions that systematically hold specific populations back from growth and prosperity born of hard work and commitment to a community.

Your constituents are looking for connection and community. They want access to the services they need and require, in a language they can understand and through a cultural channel that builds trust and engagement. By taking a thoughtful look at diverse community needs and engaging in a strategic language access plan, local government officers can create a win-win situation. A strong plan will increase the return on investment of every dollar spent on language access and produce outcomes that positively change lives within the communities they serve. 

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