



U.S. Department of Justice

# Civil Rights Division

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## *A Snapshot of Federal Agency Language Access Progress*

### **A Preliminary Review of 40 Federal Agency Language Access Plans**

On November 21, 2022, the Attorney General issued a Memorandum titled “[Strengthening the Federal Government’s Commitment to Language Access](#),” directing federal agencies to update their language access plans. Over 40 federal agencies answered the Attorney General’s call. This past year, the Federal Coordination and Compliance Section (FCS) of the Civil Rights Division worked with federal agencies to update their language access plans and provided detailed feedback and individualized technical assistance using a 33-point checklist based on its [Language Access Assessment and Planning Tool](#). We analyzed responses across federal agencies to identify preliminary trends and ongoing challenges in providing people with limited English proficiency (LEP) with meaningful access to federally conducted programs and activities. Our analysis reviews language access plans submitted to the Department but not finalized. These preliminary snapshots help identify areas for improvement, particularly as federal agencies move toward implementation. We also acknowledge and commend the significant federal agency efforts to overcome language barriers.

#### *A Movement Toward Establishing and Identifying Dedicated Federal Agency Language Access Coordinators*

Within the last two years, four agencies have appointed federal agency-wide language access coordinators for the first time: the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Justice, and Labor. Establishing dedicated senior language access personnel helps to ensure consistent and coordinated oversight and implementation of language access policies and procedures. We encouraged appointment of coordinators and recommended that all federal agencies include contact information for language access personnel to better inform and address language access concerns from the public and staff.

#### *A Continued Need to Verify the Accuracy and Quality of Language Assistance Services*

Ensuring the quality and accuracy of language assistance services provided by federal agencies is critical. While nearly half of draft language access plans FCS reviewed already included quality control standards, we encouraged all agencies to do so. Federal agencies can continue to improve quality control by establishing minimum qualifications to ensure linguists’ competency, assess or otherwise verify bilingual employees’ language skills and confirm the accuracy of any language assistance services provided (e.g. double-checks or periodic audits of translated content). It is also a best practice to describe how bilingual staff are recruited, hired, identified, assessed, and trained.



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## *Encouraging Agencies to Train Staff on How to Communicate with People with LEP*

The day-to-day provision of language assistance services relies on the knowledge and skills of staff who interact with people with LEP. To provide meaningful access to people with LEP, staff must be trained on language access policies and procedures, including how to access language assistance services. We recommended that many of the plans offer more detail on language access training for public-facing employees. At a minimum, public-facing agency staff should know how to identify whether someone is LEP and their language needs, know how to obtain agency language assistance services (e.g. where translations are located), and understand best practices with respect to interpretation and translation.

## *Promising Efforts to Translate Digital Content*

The Attorney General asked agencies to consider whether they could adapt their digital communications to welcome people with LEP. Translated digital content is essential as it is often the first entry point for members of the public learning about our programs and services. Our review was encouraging: at least three quarters of the draft federal agencies' language access plans described how they did or will incorporate translated content into their digital platforms. Some of these plans provided detailed descriptions of how to disseminate multilingual content to the general public. We encouraged other federal agencies to follow this lead and review the [Digital Services and Websites](#) portion of LEP.gov.

## *A Continued Need to Translate Vital Documents*

The success of government efforts to effectively communicate with members of the public depends on the widespread and nondiscriminatory availability of accurate, timely, and vital information. "Vital documents" include both paper and electronic materials that contain critical information for accessing an agency's programs or activities or that is otherwise required by law. Swift and accurate communication is particularly important during major disasters and public health emergencies. Almost two-thirds of draft federal agency plans we reviewed included provisions for the translation of vital documents. Thirty-five percent of these agencies prioritized the translation of vital documents into target non-English languages. We encouraged all agencies to create procedures to identify and translate vital documents and to establish target languages for translation.

## *Recent Efforts to Include the Needs of Persons with a Disability*

In recognition that speakers of American Sign Language (ASL) and other sign languages may also face language barriers, many language access plans have begun to address the needs of persons with a disability. Twenty-five percent of the draft federal agency plans we reviewed referenced people with disabilities. Although the legal framework, needs, and solutions can differ between persons with a disability and persons with a national origin-based language barrier, we are encouraged by this movement towards inclusivity.