

Language Access for Limited English Proficiency Speakers and Cultural Competency for Agency Staff

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states “No Person in the United States shall, on ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

Persons who do not speak English as their primary language and who have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English can be limited English proficient, or “LEP”. These individuals may be entitled to language assistance with respect to a particular type of service, benefit, or encounter. All programs and operations of entities that receive assistance from the federal government are required to have meaningful access for LEP persons.

The following information will assist agencies in providing access to persons with limited English language skills and will help an agency’s staff work towards cultural competency when providing services to underserved populations.

I. Agency Approach to Address LEP

Agencies should emphasize language diversity, accessibility, and the cultural competency of all staff and volunteers. Staff and volunteers should receive training to ensure meaningful access for all clients.

Recipients of federal financial assistance have an obligation to reduce language barriers that can preclude meaningful access by LEP persons to important benefits, rights, programs, information, and services.

The starting point is an individualized assessment that balances the following four factors:

1. The number or proportion of LEP persons eligible to be served or likely to be encountered by the program or grantee/recipient;
2. The frequency with which LEP individuals come in contact with the program;
3. The nature and importance of the program, activity, or service provided by the program to people's lives; and
4. The resources available to the grantee/recipient and costs.

For recipients of Federal Financial Assistance, there is a [Language Access Assessment and Planning Tool](#) available for use. This tool will help your agency define its needs in serving clients with limited English skills.

Agencies should include a specific description of the bilingual services offered in the organization's brochures and/or website. Including a written description of available language services gives potential clients clear expectations and holds agencies accountable for providing culturally appropriate services. If an agency states that it offers bilingual services, the level and timeframe of services should be articulated in both languages on all materials.

Materials offered to clients should take into account race discrimination, socioeconomic segregation, language limitations, and immigrant's lack of knowledge about U.S. laws.

Agencies should have a voice mail message that is in different languages or the agency should develop a plan with clients so that they will be able to leave a message.

II. Staff Diversity

The goal of staff diversity should be incorporated into an organization's mission statements, strategic plans and goals. Although hiring bilingual individuals from different cultures does not in itself ensure that the staff is culturally competent and sensitive, this practice is a critical component to the delivery of relevant and effective services for all clients.

III. Developing Culturally Competent Skills of Existing Staff

Staff education and training is crucial to ensure cultural competency because all staff will interact with clients representing different ethnicities, acculturation levels, and social and economic standing. Agencies should collaborate with community-based organizations that serve limited English speakers in its community. Representatives from community-based organizations can provide training on serving these clients populations in a culturally competent manner.

In-house training options for cultural competency: [Tennessee Cultural Competency Resource Manual](#)

The following can help agencies develop the language skills of their existing staff:

- Paying for language training classes for current staff.

- Bringing in a language instructor to the agency's office to provide classes during working hours.
- Providing paid leave time to staff to take language classes.

IV. Hiring a Bilingual Staff

Suggestions for recruiting bilingual staff:

- Develop a list of ethnic language newspapers and newsletters in which to advertise job announcements.
- Mail job announcements to agencies and organizations that serve diverse communities.
- Mail job announcements to language departments, university newspapers, and cultural studies departments of local universities.
- Contact community-based organizations that serve immigrant communities to help recruit bilingual hiring candidates.
- Use internship programs to attract bilingual/bicultural students that can be recruited as staff in the future.

An interim approach could include working with bilingual staff at other agencies who will assist by offering both interpretation and support for immigrant and non-English speaking clients. Another interim suggestion could be to recruit a group of volunteer interpreters.

V. Interpreters

All program staff and volunteers should be trained in how to work with an interpreter. All staff and volunteers should be aware of how to access an interpreter when needed. See [Guidelines for Working with Interpreters](#).

Agencies should contract with interpreters who provide services in each of the languages represented in the community who will work with the agency as needed to help offer a full range of services. When hiring interpreters, the agency should use licensed or certified interpreters.

Hiring multiple interpreters, when possible, avoids conflicts that arise in small ethnic communities where the interpreter may be a friend of the abuser or in the abuser's family and may not respect confidentiality.

Interpreters should:

- Be proficient and have the ability to communicate accurately in both English and the other language;
- Have knowledge in both languages of specialized terms;
- Complete specialized training according to the needs of the agency;
- Understand rules regarding confidentiality and impartiality; and
- Adhere to their role as interpreters, not as advisors or counselors

Agencies should ensure that the client feels comfortable with the interpreter.

Interpreters should initially work with the client on a safety plan that includes language access and continuing contact with the agency.

It is inappropriate and dangerous to use the victim's companions or children, regardless of age, as interpreters because:

- •the companion may be the abuser;
- •the victim may edit their conversation because they fear their words will be spread in the community;
- •the victim may edit their conversation to protect their children because the knowledge of abuse may traumatize or endanger them;
- •the victim may edit their conversation to protect her dignity (e.g. in many cultures, it is deemed inappropriate to share relationship or sexual problems with one's children); and
- •staff should never ask the victim in front of her companion if she wishes him to serve as the interpreter because the companion may be the abuser.

When bilingual staff or volunteers are not available, staff should subscribe to a professional interpreter service.