

LANGUAGE ACCESS IN ALAMEDA COUNTY: ENSURING THE PROVISION OF LANGUAGE ACCESSIBLE SERVICES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

With decreasing funding and dwindling revenue sources, counties are seeking new and more effective ways of providing services, particularly services related to individuals with limited English proficiency. Individuals who cannot understand the English language, whether spoken or written, are potentially at risk of exclusion from program participation, and at risk of receiving inaccurate or incomplete information from service providers.

While San Mateo County continues to face increases in the Hispanic and Asian populations, it is critical for the San Mateo County Human Services to explore all feasible opportunities to address the growing linguistic and cultural needs of its community. More so, the Human Services Agency stands to benefit from evaluating the impact of language access in a call center environment. To this extent, I conducted an internship with Alameda County Social Services Agency to assess the opportunities and challenges San Mateo County may face in providing adequate language services, based on Alameda County's language access efforts.

This paper provides an overview of Alameda County Social Services Agency's efforts to ensure the provision of language accessible services and describes how Alameda County developed and executed its Master Plan for Language Access.

BACKGROUND

With demographic projections for Alameda County demonstrating a continued growth of racial, ethnic and cultural communities, Alameda County Social Services Agency was questioned by community members about its ability to meet legal requirements protecting the civil rights of minorities. The community expressed concerns that the Alameda County Social Services Agency was not adequately ensuring that persons with limited English proficiency could access and utilize services.

The following mandates shaped Alameda County's approach to ensuring the provision of services to persons who are limited English proficient.

- **Civil Rights Act of 1964**
- **Executive Order 13166**
- **Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act**
- **California Department of Social Services Division 21**

MASTER PLAN FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS

To meet the growing needs of its diverse population, Alameda County Social Services Agency made a commitment to meet and surpass the legal requirements for language access.

A Master Plan for Language Access Committee was formed and developed a comprehensive action plan entitled Master Plan for Language Access. The intended goal of the Master Plan for Language

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Access was to ensure limited English proficient individuals access to needed services. The Master Plan encompassed seven elements.

- **Facilities**—Display appropriate signage.
- **Interpretation**—Expand language interpretation services.
- **Translation of Materials**—Provide language-appropriate translated materials.
- **Dissemination of Translated Materials**—Institute a centralized system for acquisition of translated materials.
- **Staffing**—Improve mechanisms that promote the recruitment and retention of bilingual/multilingual staff and develop training programs.
- **Documentation**—Ensure and institutionalize Agency programs that operate in a linguistically accessible manner.
- **Demonstration Program Development**—Provide language services for on-call, on-demand interpretation need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of my internship with Alameda County Social Services Agency, I respectfully submit the following recommendations.

It is essential for San Mateo County Human Services Agency to:

- Assess potential barriers to language access in call center environment.
- Develop a systematic approach to ensuring the provision of language accessible services.
- Research cost implications for implementing language access strategies and programs given the current economic climate.
- Explore adaptation of the AT&T Language Line for staff.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary role of public service agencies is to provide social and human services to those in need. How can any public agency successfully accomplish this without being able to effectively communicate with those seeking assistance? In the public service arena, effective communication extends beyond purely clear, concise and grammatically proper language. To ensure the appropriate provision of public services, social and human service agencies must ensure that communication is also linguistically appropriate.

Some of you may have experienced or are peripherally aware of the difficulties and frustrations faced by those who cannot understand a particular spoken or written language. Minimizing the barriers, difficulties and frustrations felt by those who are limited English proficient is the goal of ensuring language access.

For more than two decades, it has been a priority of San Mateo County Human Services Agency to not only ensure the language needs of its community members are met, and build a workforce that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of San Mateo County. Although the Human Services Agency has implemented several language access strategies and has actively recruited bilingual staff, it recognizes the recent growth in number of languages spoken and understands the complex intensification of language access. For San Mateo County, maintaining high levels of service delivery in any language is further compounded by the economic downturn facing all counties.

By the end of my internship with Alameda County, it was evident that Alameda County Social Services Agency is committed to providing a meaningful opportunity for constituents to apply for and receive services that are linguistically appropriate.

BACKGROUND

As the 1990's came to an end, Alameda County was on the verge of embarking on a new community initiative that would bring to light the need for providing linguistically and culturally competent access to all their social service programs. Demographic projections for Alameda County continued to forecast a continued growth of racial, ethnic and cultural communities. While an analysis of Alameda County's Social Services Agency, herein referred to as the Agency, indicated that Spanish and Vietnamese are two limited English proficiency categories that met the 5% threshold of the Dymally-Alatorre Act in CalWORKs, Medi-Cal and General Assistance, the Agency's customers required language services in several other languages that represented a large number of customers (see Appendix A). In fact, according to 1990 Census data, 25% of Alameda County residents reported speaking a non-English language at home.

Limited English Proficient

While English is the predominant language in the United States, more than 400 languages and dialects are currently spoken in California. Limited English Proficient refers to individuals who cannot speak, read, write or understand the English language at a level that allows for effective communi-

cation with social services agencies. As a result of language differences, limited English proficient (LEP) persons are at risk of being excluded from program participation, experiencing delays in the delivery of services, and receiving inaccurate or incomplete information from service providers.

LEP Legal Requirements

The passage of federal, state and local mandates are intended to protect the civil rights of minorities and ensure that persons with limited English proficiency can effectively access and utilize social services. The following mandates provide guidelines for ensuring the provision of services to persons who are limited English proficient.

- **Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI)**—prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.
- **Executive Order 13166**—sets forth compliance standards that beneficiaries must follow to ensure that the programs and activities customarily obtained in English are accessible to LEP persons and thus do not discriminate on the basis on national origin.
- **Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act**—requires every local agency serving a substantial number of non-English speaking people employ a sufficient number of qualified bilingual persons in public contact positions or as interpreters to assist those in such positions to ensure provision of information and services in the language of the non-English speaking person. A substantial number of non-English speaking people represent members of a group who comprise 5% or more of the people served by any local office or facility of a state agency.
- **California Department of Social Services Division 21**—requires county welfare depart-

ments ensure that effective bilingual/interpretive services are provided to serve the needs of the non-English speaking population and requires that each agency maintain case record documentation in sufficient detail to permit the reviewer to determine the agency's compliance with the requirements.

INTEREST FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

San Mateo County Human Services Agency has always been on the cutting edge of service delivery. With declining funding levels and a growing need to address an array of linguistic, ethnic and cultural needs, it is critical for San Mateo County Human Services Agency to explore all feasible opportunities to enrich its service delivery strategies and approaches. Given the size of Alameda County, San Mateo County was interested in learning how a much larger county addresses the complex issue of ensuring language access.

In terms of ensuring the provision of language accessible services, the following statistics help frame the challenges facing San Mateo County. San Mateo County continues to undergo increases in the Hispanic and Asian populations. Between 1990 and 2000, Census data demonstrated a rise in the Hispanic population from 18% to 21% and a similar rise in the Asian population from 16% to 20%. Correspondingly, according to 2000 Census data, 41.5% of San Mateo County residents report speaking a language other than English at home of which 18% speak Spanish, 16% speak an Asian language (e.g., Chinese and Japanese) and 7% speak an Indo-European language (e.g., German, Hindi and French).

A secondary interest for the Human Services Agency surrounds the recent implementation of its

Health Insurance Telecenter (HIT) and the potential implications on language access. In November 2003, the Human Services Agency launched HIT which essentially transformed the Medi-Cal ongoing caseload from the traditional assigned caseload worker approach to a call center business strategy. In this call center environment, the majority of Medi-Cal transactions occur over the telephone with minimal in-person contact. This means that service delivery at HIT is highly contingent upon effective telephone interactions. With the implementation of this new business strategy, the Human Services Agency stands to learn from Alameda County's ability to ensure language accessible services particularly in comparison to Alameda County's Benefits Center which also utilizes a similar call center business strategy.

MASTER PLAN FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS

History

As depicted in the Alameda County Social Services Agency mission and strategic plan, it is of the utmost importance to the Agency to promote the social and economic well-being of all of its individuals and families. However, with the continued growth of racial, ethnic and cultural communities in Alameda County, the Agency's ability to meet the language needs of the community was called into question. Specifically, members of the community voiced concerns that the Agency was not adequately meeting the requirements stipulated under the Dymally-Alatorre Act.

Moreover, with the advent of welfare reform the Agency acknowledged the end of many entitlement programs and the imposition of time limits for TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) recipients. It became crucial for public services

agencies to ensure greater access to services for those in need so that families could quickly access and utilize services that move families towards self-sufficiency (Lum, 2000).

The Agency's mission is to promote the social and economic well-being of individuals and families through responsive, accessible and flexible service delivery system that recognizes the importance of family, cultural and ethnic diversity, and the increased vulnerability of populations at risk.

To meet the growing needs of its diverse population, Alameda County Social Services Agency made a commitment to "going beyond the minimum." The Agency was not only committed to providing a meaningful opportunity to apply for and receive agency services, but also committed to operating beyond the 5% threshold required by the Dymally-Alatorre Act.

In an effort to respond to the challenges of delivering LEP services, the Agency convened the Master Plan for Language Access (MPLA) Committee to evaluate how services can best be delivered in a rapidly changing environment and design an Agency-wide plan to ensure language accessibility for all agency-provided services.

After six months of planning and development, the MPLA Committee comprised of a cross-range of agency representatives developed a comprehensive action plan, referred to as the Master Plan for Language Access, ensuring the provision of language accessible services and communications to limited English proficient clients.

Master Plan Description

Despite the fact that the Agency did employ a sufficient number of bilingual/multilingual staff, translated various written materials, and instituted the use of a language preference form, the Agency sought to address the provision of language accessible services more systemically. The Master Plan for Language Access was designed to ensure that the provision of language accessible services was implemented and monitored by the new Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs. The Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs was also responsible for coordinating the Agency-wide efforts to execute the objectives delineated in the plan.

The Master Plan for Language Access, herein referred to as the Master Plan, embodied each of the four key principles identified in the Agency's Strategic Plan—valuing innovation, increasing accountability, honoring diversity and taking pride in our accomplishments. These four guiding principles represent the Agency's informed, well-conceived, and strategic answer to the often unpredictable political and social environment (Lum, 2000).

To build effective relationships in multicultural communities—all voices must be heard.

~Chet P. Hewitt, Agency Director

Master Plan Key Elements

Minimizing the language access barriers in Alameda County was accomplished by providing a meaningful opportunity to apply for and receive the varied services afforded by its Social Services

Agency. To this extent, the Master Plan encompassed seven elements.

Facilities—Display appropriate signage regarding Civil Rights and the right to interpretation services in multiple languages at all Agency facilities with public contact.

Interpretation—Expand language interpretation services through effective recruitment, staffing, training and deployment of bilingual/multilingual workers, and utilization of effective multilingual services with contracted community-based organizations and AT&T's Language Line Services.

Translation of Materials—Provide language-appropriate translated materials through identification and prioritization of all program materials requiring translation, and development and institution of protocols for the timely and accurate translation of materials.

Dissemination of Translated Materials—Institute a centralized system for acquisition of translated materials in both manual and electronic formats, and install an automated worker alert system to indicate need for language specific correspondence with limited English proficient clients.

Staffing—Improve mechanisms that promote the recruitment and retention of bilingual/ multilingual staff and develop training programs that facilitates service excellence directed to LEP clients.

Documentation—Ensure and institutionalize Agency programs that operate in a linguistically accessible manner through developing a monitoring mechanism that measures, evaluates and makes all Agency personnel accountable for programmatic compliance with developed policies and protocols.

Demonstration Program Development—Test the effectiveness and feasibility of a two-pronged approach to providing language services for on-call, on-demand interpretation need through: 1) the development of a pilot Language Services Unit to provide Agency-wide assistance on interpretation and translation needs, and 2) a pilot interagency outsource contracting for language coverage.

MASTER PLAN SUCCESSES

The Master Plan for Language Access has been operational for approximately four years and has successfully revealed and addressed language access inefficiencies for Alameda County.

The effectiveness of the Master Plan is illustrated by the following accomplishments:

- The Agency Language Access Committee was formed and has worked directly with management to devise policies, procedures and programs to enforce language access requirements. The committee reports directly to the Agency Director and its membership consists of line staff and management who are expressly committed to language access efforts.
- Over the past year, the Agency has encountered a 300% increase in the use of the AT&T Language Line by Agency staff and community-based organizations. The AT&T Language Line provides immediate interpretation services to Agency staff that are working with LEP persons.
- The Diversity Training Curriculum for the agency was retooled to include Civil Rights guidelines and training for providing barrier-free services for LEP clients.
- The Agency has translated over 300 documents into five different languages, translated and installed signage in five languages at all its public contact offices, uploaded over 300 trans-

lated forms onto its Intranet and installed language software for translations.

- A study has been initiated by the Agency to determine its ongoing compliance with the Dymally-Alatorre Act. Should the study find any service discrepancies, the Language Access Committee will develop and recommend any necessary corrective actions plans.

MASTER PLAN CHALLENGES

Alameda County Social Services Agency has made notable progress in its efforts to ensure a meaningful opportunity to apply for and receive services afforded to persons with limited English proficiency. However, the efforts put forth by the Agency and staff have not been without challenges.

With **shrinking resources in an exceptionally unstable economic climate**, Alameda County language access efforts have been significantly challenged. As recent as February 2004, the decrease in resources has forced the Agency to downsize its Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs. At this point, the potential implications on language access are not yet unknown.

Throughout the planning, development and implementation of the Master Plan for Language Access, one of the prevalent challenges facing the agency was **changing the philosophical viewpoint of agency staff**. The Agency worked diligently at:

- Emphasizing and creating a general understanding of the importance of assisting LEP population in meeting their needs.
- Diminishing misconceptions about the need to speak every language and easing concerns about the allocation of limited resources.
- Addressing the English-only ideology among Agency staff.

A second challenge facing the Agency resulted from the mere **complexity of language access**. The Agency must evaluate the language access needs of the aggregate population, but must also assure the language provisions are made for micro-communities present in Alameda County. For instance, while the Laotian language is relatively small in terms of overall Alameda County clientele, approximately 70% of Laotian community is receiving services from the Agency. This type of situation is of express interest to the agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First of all, I would like to commend Alameda County Social Services Agency for its commitment to ensuring the provision of language accessible services. Notwithstanding, the vast knowledge acquired from the Agency's experiences, successes and challenges with ensuring language access, San Mateo County Human Services Agency must approach the issue of language access within its own current social and political framework. As a result of my internship with Alameda County Social Services agency, I respectfully submit the following recommendations.

- The implementation of the Health Insurance Telecenter in San Mateo County signifies a new business strategy for proving ongoing case maintenance to over 22,000 Medi-Cal families. As a call center, HIT is fundamentally driven by providing complete and accurate information over the telephone. With nearly 8,000 or 36% of the Medi-Cal families serviced by HIT, it is imperative for San Mateo County evaluate any potential language barriers resulting from the implementation of the call center.
- Overall, San Mateo County Human Services Agency has continually sought ways to ensure the provision of language accessible services.

However, with San Mateo County's growing limited English proficient population, the Human Services Agency stands to benefit from establishing a systematic approach to ensuring the provision of language accessible services. This approach could include a survey of the strategies employed by the various programs under the Human Services Agency and the identification of best practices.

- While ensuring San Mateo County residents access and receive linguistically appropriate services is critical for the Human Services Agency, it is equally important to evaluate the cost implications associated with existing and future language access strategies and programs particularly given the current economic climate.
- Among the various language access strategies already implemented by Alameda County Social Services Agency, the adaptation of the AT&T Language Access Line has seemingly been one of the most utilized language access strategies for Alameda County. The ability for staff to acquire interpretation services on-demand is essential to the provision of human services. It is clearly in the best interest of the Human Services Agency to explore the adaptation of the AT&T Language Line for line staff.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the staff and management of Alameda County's Social Services Agency for welcoming me and being a gracious host during my internship, in particular Rita Hayes. I would like to extend me sincerest appreciation to my facilitator, Vince Reyes of Alameda County Social Services for giving me so much of his time, introducing me to his colleagues and providing me with a wealth of material that greatly enhanced my experience.

I would also like to thank my BASSC colleagues, especially Elaine Azzopardi, Richard Holman and Robert Manchia, for their continued support and encouragement during the Executive Development Training program.

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**APPENDIX A
ALAMEDA COUNTY
SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY**

PROGRAM NAME	PRIMARY LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE OF ALL PROGRAM CASES
CalWORKs	Spanish	1,606	7.6
	Vietnamese	1,326	6.2
	Cantonese	528	2.5
	Farsi	511	2.4
	Cambodian	363	1.7
	Mien	155	0.7
	Laotian	102	0.5
<i>Total Number of Cases</i>		22,724	
Medi-Cal	Spanish	10,997	18.82
	Cantonese	4,645	8.37
	Tagalog	684	1.23
	Farsi	626	1.13
	Korean	327	0.59
	Mandarin	319	0.57
	Cambodian	264	0.48
	Russian	235	0.42
	Laotian	172	0.31
Mien	119	0.21	
<i>Total Number of Cases</i>		55,485	
Refugee Cash Assistance Program	Other non-English	12	33
	Vietnamese	10	28
	Russian	7	19
	Farsi	6	17
	English	1	3
<i>Total Number of Cases</i>		36	
Food Stamp Non-Assistance	Spanish	289	5
	Cantonese	175	3
	Vietnamese	153	3
	Farsi	29	1
	Tagalog	28	1
<i>Total Number of Cases</i>		5,532	

Data extracted from Alameda County Social Services Agency Master Plan for Language Access, March 2000, page 7.