

## MEETING THE LANGUAGE ACCESS NEEDS OF ALAMEDA COUNTY'S DIVERSE CLIENT POPULATION

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building a workforce that reflects the diversity of its county and supports the language needs of the client is a main responsibility of any human service agency.

Although Santa Clara County has been a model for providing language access to its clients, it is important for us as an agency to continue to research and recognize the way other counties provide bilingual services. It is important to be aware of the available products that make it easier for workers to communicate with clients.

From a human resource standpoint, it is important that HR understand what the agency needs to maintain a bilingual service level. Since we are responsible for hiring workers, we need to be involved in understanding the concept of how the agency identifies a need for a bilingual worker. Not only is it important that we take part in the accountability to the employees we support, but also to the public we serve.

The mission statement of Santa Clara County Social Services is *“to provide life protecting, life sustaining, and life enhancing, culturally competent services to adults, children, families, elders, and economically dependent individuals.”*

By maintaining a focus on our mission, we can understand the needs for services in our county. Santa Clara County has an ethnically diverse population of 1.8 million people, which is 58% white,

21% Latino, 4% African American, 16.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and .2% other

Our staff consists of 2,900 budgeted staff members from highly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They are 31% white and other non-white, 35% Latino, 23% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% African American, 3.2% Filipino, and 0.6% American Indian.

We also provide bilingual contract staff to non-English-speaking customers in 24 languages including: American Sign Language, Amharic, Bosnian, Cambodian, Cantonese, Farsi, Hindi, Hmong, Ilocano, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Mandarin, Oromo, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Samoan, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Tigrinya and Vietnamese.

The use of bilingual workers has allowed Santa Clara County Social Service Agency to go above and beyond the minimum requirements. Workers who receive a differential are compensated well and understand the importance of providing clients with information in their primary languages.

In addition, bargaining unit contracts stipulate case load standards and therefore allow us to assign bilingual cases to individual workers who can then become familiar with the case throughout its history. This allows for a better case plan and ultimate sufficiency for the client.

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Recommending the AT&T language line to the Language Access Committee is a first step in providing certain departments, such as the Assistance Application Center, with additional resources. The Committee can be involved in the cost analysis and developing a policy on usage.

Continuing to research how other counties maintain their bilingual service level should also be a way for SCC to always stay on top of the way it provides services to clients. This review of our current practices will guarantee that we as an agency always maintain the focus of our mission statement “to provide culturally competent services to adults, children, families, elders, and economically dependent individuals.”

## **MEETING THE LANGUAGE ACCESS NEEDS OF ALAMEDA COUNTY'S DIVERSE CLIENT POPULATION**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The mission statement of the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) states that it will “promote the social and economic well being of individuals and families in Alameda County...and recognizes the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity”

With a county population of 1.4 million people, Alameda County SSA provides services to an estimated 160,000 people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The Chinese, Vietnamese and Spanish speaking populations are heavily represented in Alameda County. Keeping with the agency's mission and with the laws regarding the responsibility to provide language access to clients, the SSA puts forth extreme efforts to meet its clients' language needs.

Alameda County SSA has incorporated language access needs into both its master plan and its strategic plan. The agency, as well as the employees, strives to meet language access needs by combining the strengths of its current bilingual staff with the use of commercial technology. Through these efforts, Alameda County plans to meet the needs of its clients.

### **BACKGROUND**

Maintaining an appropriate service level for a diverse client population is a top priority for Alameda County. The issue of the agency's ability to support the needs of its current client population has recently been brought to the forefront by mem-

bers of the community who are not satisfied with the current efforts. The community has expressed concern that the agency is not meeting the requirements of the Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act. To address these concerns, Alameda County has committed itself to meeting and surpassing the minimum requirements of the act. They have done so by developing a Master Plan for Language Access.

In Alameda County, 25% of the residents report speaking a language other than English at home; for Oakland, the percentage exceeds 30%. The master plan includes estimates on the future projections of the immigrant communities within the county and addresses the need to be prepared for a dramatic change that may soon affect the county and its services. Addressing this change early on will allow the county to maneuver successfully through the technicalities of providing a comprehensive service.

The master plan also provides accountability for the current administration and workforce. It allows employees to become part of the solution by addressing their client's language needs. Both employees and administration participate in a newly created language-access committee. The committee allows SSA staff to have direct input about how to address the needs of the client, and how providing appropriate language documents and communication fit in with the dynamics of everyday workloads and expectations.

Administration and the language access committee have begun working on the path to organizing a Language Support Services Unit. This unit will be

the central point of interaction the public will receive with workers. All their services will be assessed and determinations made based on the information provided to the workers at this site. However, the satellite offices will remain as additional assessment sources.

Additionally, they have had success in the use of a language line. Alameda County has expanded its use of the AT&T Language Line to all of its agency employees. More importantly, the agency is aware of the bilingual capabilities from assets already in place...its employees. It will prove to be a tremendous undertaking on the agency's part to identify current staff members who possess bilingual skills and arrange for a systematic approach to structuring them in the most needed areas, and compensating them for these skills. Furthermore, the agency is responsible for continuing the practice of providing documentation in accessible forms to clients in their native languages. Providing guidelines and notifications in the preferred language is part of the minimum requirements of the Dymally-Allatorre Act. This entire process will be an agency-wide undertaking that will affect the entire client population.

Currently, the county is serving clients by relying on them to self-identify the language in which they need to be assisted. Since workers are generalized and must assist in any language that is directed to them, they rely on the AT&T Language Lines or nearby bilingual staff members for translation. This practice has been adequate up until now and will continue to provide areas for improvement. By directing clients to a centralized office, where questions and concerns can be addressed in a number of languages by use of the Language Line, the county is maintaining the minimum requirements of the Dymally-Alatorre Act. However, with the vision of

the county to surpass these minimum requirements, a further pursuit of using bilingual staff will need to be reviewed.

Developing a bilingual staff that can be assigned cases, based on clients' self identified language needs, serves to best assist the client. As a client is served by a worker who speaks the same language, a more relaxed open interaction can occur, allowing the client to be more forthcoming with information and also allowing the client to receive a calm approach to an otherwise dreary encounter. This is especially true for those who have newly immigrated to this country. It is a cultural disparity that can impair the process of information retrieval, which in turn can mean errors when establishing a case plan for a client.

Principle #3 in the 1999-2004 Strategic Plan states that the agency will honor diversity. It puts forth a "commitment to actively work towards a staff that fully embodies the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Alameda County community".

The use of bilingual workers is in direct correlation with the core values of the agency:

- Responsibility
- Integrity
- Respect
- Initiative

All of these values can be best achieved by allowing a personable relationship between the client and the worker. Establishing a workforce that is culturally diverse, language proficient, and technically equipped, serves to promote the values which we desire to instill in people we serve and promotes the need to become self-sufficient and confident individuals.

### **LANGUAGE ACCESS LINE**

AT&T's Language Access Line has become a necessary accessory to both the business community and the human service agencies that assist the multicultural populations of the Bay Area. With this new technology, AT&T has made it possible for communication to continue beyond a few introductory words.

The Access Line gives workers within the Social Service Agency the ability to perform their tasks without the barrier of language. Workers who are not bilingual can access an operator by dialing the number for the preferred language. The worker is then able, with the assistance of the interpreter, to assess the client's needs. The workers can process applications and additional case-related paperwork through conversation with the client. The benefit to the client is great customer service. They are guaranteed their case will be handled in a timely manner and will not be delayed due to a language barrier.

Although there is staff available to handle the predominant languages recognized by Alameda County, there may be times when staff is not available. The Language Line provides immediate coverage to assist any worker.

Utilization of this service is definitely a plus for any agency, but ultimately the best customer service is the availability of direct services in a client's own language. The Language Line is a wonderful addition to, but not a replacement for, the personal service given by a worker who speaks the same language as a client.

### **LANGUAGE ACCESS COMMITTEE**

A response to the agency commitment for language access to all citizens in Alameda County is the commitment to establish the Language Access Committee. The Language Access Committee is currently underway in determining its role and objectives. It is doing so by establishing priorities. It is doing so by determining the course of action necessary for the committee to achieve the goals of its master plan. Some of the committee's priorities include: naming a coordinator, assigning cases based on language, coordinating translation services, revising client language preference documents, establishing bilingual pay for workers, and developing a policy on bilingual usage. Given that the Language Access Committee has full support from the administration, the likelihood of having these priorities met within a reasonable amount of time is realistic. Naming a coordinator to manage the process is extremely important. Coordinating the many concerns of the community and the agency requires complete focus.

Addressing the need to assign cases based on language is paramount. However, realization of this task opens the door for new hiring practices which have not historically been the case in Alameda County. Such a change would require a new direction for the Human Resource Department and the Equal Opportunity Office. Hiring can be done based on language needs if the formula for determining language needs is established. This first step is accomplished by revising the language preference document completed by newly assessed clients. Of course, case load standards and bargaining unit contracts would need to be given 'meet and confer' timing. Since case standards are set at 157 for the average Eligibility Tech II, this standard is sure to change based on client needs. This would

allow for the transition of clients to workers who are assigned specific languages.

The compensation of employees for working within this skill area would lead to the renegotiation of contracts and impact the budget of the agency. Currently, an employee is paid \$35.00 for carrying a case load of 25% for non-English speaking clients. In Santa Clara County, workers are paid anywhere between \$100 and \$150 for having a 75% case load of non-English speaking clients. The establishment of policy on which positions are assigned bilingual pay will need to be developed and implementation kept ongoing.

Utilizing bilingual staff and the Language Line in such budgetary times and shrinking workforces, assists the county in its ability to continue its core services.

### **CURRENT ACCESS**

Current language services are provided throughout the county by employees who speak a second language or through the AT&T Language Line. The Language Line allows employees to sit and talk with a client through a confidential third party who is reached via telephone line. The third party is fluent in the language requested and provides translation services to both the client and the worker. Every employee within the County is allowed access to this service for client needs. After an employee determines the language needed by the client, it only takes a few minutes to get a translator on the line. The client can be communicated with and can receive immediate service. Calls typically last anywhere between 10 and 20 minutes. If the client needs extensive information, then the worker can arrange for an appointment with a bilingual worker on-site or at a satellite office.

The Social Services Agency has designated a core group of workers who are centrally located and receive random calls from clients. Since the case-workers are generalists they do not maintain the files on any one particular client. When clients call, they are able to assist them with any questions. If there is a language barrier, the worker can give the call to a bilingual worker or get assistance from the language line. The worker is then able to document the outcome of the conversation in the welfare database. This standard use of the language lines helps the agency meet its minimum requirement to serve the community. It allows for the fundamental use of quick communication to achieve the requirements for assisting a client. The worker is able to fill out forms or ask simple questions of the client through the interpreter. Likewise, the client is able to have a simple conversation with the worker about any questions they may have in regard to their eligibility, etc.

The services provided and the communication achieved through the language line can definitely be improved upon and kept more consistent by using bilingual workers. A bilingual worker assisting a client is far more valuable to the relationship factor than a phone interpreter could ever be.

### **CONCLUSION**

The language needs of Alameda County justify further effort by both the agency and the community to meet those needs. With such a large and diverse population, the county could benefit from creating a systematic approach to addressing client needs based on language preference. By involving the employees and the community, the agency has established its commitment to its mission and goals.

Coordinating such an effort is dependent upon a consistent approach, and communication between

all levels within this organization. The establishment of the language access committee is the first step towards making this county surpass its minimum requirement for language access. The committee, which is comprised of administrative personnel and line workers, will provide the input and accountability to allow for proper implementation and follow-through of the set directives.

Although the success of this effort is largely dependent upon the ability to assign cases to bilingual workers, this will require increased recruitment of bilingual workers, and negotiation between the agency and the unions. This will help to serve the best interests of the population. This client-consideration needs to be thoroughly recognized as part of the mission statement even more so than the compensation needs. Providing fair compensation commensurate with that of other counties keeps everyone in sight of the goal to be responsible, respectful, have integrity, and take initiative. By all members acknowledging these goals, the county gains a happy workforce who will provide services to clients, who in turn feel respected and comforted by the worker. In essence, the mission of the agency to "...promote the social and economic well being of individuals and families in Alameda County...and recognize the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity....." can then be achieved.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

After reviewing the process of how Alameda County provides language access service, it is the usage of the AT&T Language Line that is most attractive. Santa Clara County Social Services has established a way to provide bilingual services to clients and has done well to receive input from community organizations and employees. It assigns cases based on language. It identifies positions needed to maintain services to clients. It hires and compensates employees with language skills. The Agency also has an adequate supply of contracted interpreters who can be requested by workers.

SCC Social Service Agency understands the need to continue to provide the community with the best service possible. Having an additional option for employees to use should be a welcome addition to how services are currently provided.

With current budget cuts affecting all county departments, Social Services has been hit very hard and has cut many positions that provided direct client services. With this reduction in staff, it will become more important for current staff to have sufficient resources available to them that could assist clients.