

## **Working towards Broader Language Access – Findings and Best Practices**

Thirty-two percent of Americans, ages five or older, who speak an Asian or Pacific Island language are limited English proficient (LEP) individuals. Without an effective means of delivering and communicating services to LEP individuals, federal agencies may alienate segments of the population that have rights to their services. As a result, many LEP individuals may not have access to critical information provided by agencies due to limited access to language services in the following areas: agency benefits, programs and services; assistance in investigations; or filing of complaints. In 2000 Executive Order 13166, “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency” was issued; which requires federal agencies to examine ways to improve access to their services for LEP individuals. The Executive Order also requires agencies to formulate and implement plans to ensure that LEP individuals would have meaningful access to services. Then in 2011, the U.S. Attorney General made a call for federal agencies to renew their commitments to language access. To help agencies meet the call, our project team developed guidance for agencies with regard to plan development and implementation based on the experiences of selected federal agencies.

We developed an approach to understand the current state of federal LEP plans and to highlight promising practices that could be easily exported to other agencies in order to help further meaningful language access across the federal government. We conducted research on policies, guidance, and individual LEP plans and found that agencies were at various stages of the planning and implementation process. Four agencies, in particular, had effective LEP access practices: the Departments of Education (DoEd) and Labor (DoL), Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and Social Security Administration (SSA). We spoke to representatives at these agencies about key factors in developing and implementing their plans and reviewed supporting documents provided by the agencies.

The agencies presented similar themes within two key phases of the process to ensure success: 1) plan development and 2) implementation. In the plan development phase, agencies highlighted the need for 1) top leadership support, 2) an effective working group with decision-making authority and the power to hold the agency accountable for following through on plans, and 3) mechanisms for engaging their respective LEP communities in the planning process. During implementation, we found that agencies used multiple cost-effective strategies to provide LEP individuals with access to services, while ensuring quality and actively making LEP customers aware of their services.

Lessons learned from select agencies could help bolster the efforts of other agencies that may be facing some challenges either in developing or implementing a language access plan. As a result, we developed best practices that federal agencies should consider in developing, updating or implementing their language access plans to ensure their efficacy and success. Examples of how to achieve the following best practices are detailed in our report:

1. It is essential to have top level management demonstrate commitment to improving language access through active participation, policies, and performance metrics, among other things.
2. Establish permanent high profile, working groups that are given the authority to implement policies and monitor and hold agency components accountable.
3. Engage with external stakeholders, including other government entities, LEP working groups, and the LEP community early on and often to proactively address issues.
4. Take steps to ensure services are cost-effective and of the best quality.
5. Develop multiple strategies for communicating important information and available services to LEP individuals to maximize the resources devoted to language access.
6. Continue to monitor and update plans to ensure the agency is appropriately adjusting to the needs of its LEP customers.

Although these practices may help agencies along the way, language access plans should be considered living documents that require continuous vigilance in order to improve services for varying populations of LEP individuals with ever changing needs.