

Bridging the Language Gap



Recommendations from Chicago's
Language Access Advisory Committee



City of Chicago
Mayor Rahm Emanuel

Executive Summary

- As part of Mayor Emanuel’s overall efforts to implement policies and programs outlined in the Chicago New Americans Plan, the Mayor appointed a diverse group of community, legal, and civic leaders in July of 2014 and tasked them with developing a language access policy to ensure that immigrants and Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) residents have meaningful access to City services, resources, and programs.
- Following months of discussions and a comprehensive review of data and best practice research, the Language Access Advisory Committee developed a set of recommendations for the City to pursue, including the following:
 - Develop a Language Access Plan for each public-facing department;
 - Designate a Language Access Coordinator for each public-facing department;
 - Create an annual, public Language Access Compliance Report; and
 - Continue collaboration with the Language Access Advisory Committee and community organizations to ensure successful implementation and quality service delivery.
- Upon consideration of the Advisory Committee’s recommendations, the Mayor will introduce an ordinance that establishes the City’s first Language Access Policy, ensuring that immigrants and LEP residents have meaningful access to City services, resources, and programs in the top five languages spoken in Chicago, including Spanish, Polish, Mandarin, Hindi and Arabic. To implement this policy, the City allocated \$100,000 of the 2015 City Budget to translate the City of Chicago website and other materials into these languages.
- The City will implement these recommendations over the next few months and continue to work with community organizations and the Language Access Advisory Committee to identify opportunities to expand this language access policy to additional departments and sister agencies.



Background on the **Language Access Advisory Committee**

As part of Mayor Emanuel's overall efforts to implement policies and programs outlined in the Chicago New Americans Plan, the Mayor appointed a diverse group of community, legal and civic leaders in July of 2014 and tasked them with developing a language access policy to ensure that immigrants and LEP residents have meaningful access to City services, resources, and programs.

The Committee was tasked with evaluating options for both short and long-term language access policies, and at the Mayor's direction, the group focused on three critical issues: increasing accessibility to City services for LEP residents, improving service delivery and efficiency of government services, and ensuring compliance with a quality language access policy.



Why does Chicago Need **Language Access**?

Chicago has over 400,000 residents that are considered LEP. This means that approximately 16.1% of the population in Chicago may face significant language barriers when accessing City services or programs. From accessing safety net programs to dealing with emergency situations, having a language barrier between clients and City officials produces undesirable and tragic outcomes, not only for immigrants, but also for the city at large.

To truly integrate immigrants and LEP individuals, the City must welcome them by encouraging them to exercise their rights as Chicago residents and supporting their understanding of those rights. All Chicago residents have the right to access City services, but unless they receive those services in a language in which they are proficient, the right is not exercised. Additionally, providing language access to LEP individuals increases the safety and well-being of all Chicago residents.

Currently, most City departments and sister agencies provide some services and information in multiple languages. The City will work to ensure that in addition to this, City employees are made aware of the best way to support all immigrants and LEP residents by creating a customized citywide policy and provide training to all front-line staff to improve service delivery.

The Advisory Committee's **Recommendations**

Following months of discussion with community members and City departments, as well as a comprehensive review of data and best practices research, the Language Access Advisory Committee recommends that the City establish a city-wide language access policy, which includes the following components:

Services in the Languages Spoken by LEP Populations

Departments should provide services in any non-English language spoken by a limited or no-English proficient population that constitutes 5% or 10,000 individuals, whichever is less, in Chicago, as those languages are determined on a variety of relevant sources, including United States Census data and community feedback. Currently in Chicago, this would mean that departments would provide services in the following languages: Spanish, Mandarin, Hindi, Polish, and Arabic.

Departmental Language Access Plans

Many city departments provide some services and information in multiple languages, but currently, these entities do not meet a consistent standard for language accessibility. By requiring City departments to implement language access plans, the City will increase the quality and reliability of services provided to LEP individuals.

All City departments that provide direct public services should ensure meaningful access to such services by taking reasonable steps to develop and implement department-specific language access plans regarding LEP persons. City departments should have the flexibility to determine appropriate language assistance for their individual department's service populations. In implementing a program of language assistance, each department should, however, ensure that they:

1. Identify and translate all **essential public documents** provided to or completed by program beneficiaries and participants;
2. Include **interpretation services**, such as telephonic interpretation services and utilizing bilingual staff, particularly for public-facing positions;
3. **Train front-line staff and managers** on language access policies and procedures;
4. Post **signage** that explains the availability of free interpretation services in conspicuous locations;
5. Establish an appropriate **monitoring and measurement system** regarding the provision of department language services and the quality of such services and vendors;
6. Create an appropriate **public awareness strategy** for the agencies' service populations; and
7. Develop and **share best practices** for language access within and between City departments.

Departmental Language Access Coordinator

Each department should designate a Language Access Coordinator to oversee the creation and implementation of a department-specific internal language access policy and the coordinator should also be responsible for collecting department data and monitoring compliance. Language Access Coordinators should meet regularly to share best practices, resources, and technical assistance.

Language Access Compliance Report

After departments establish their Language Access Plans, as well as the appropriate monitoring and measurement system, departments should be required to submit and publish an annual, public compliance report that measures information pertaining to the clients served, the quality of language services provided through staff and vendors, as well as the compliance of the language access plan.

Collaboration with Community Organizations and the Language Access Advisory Committee

The Office of New Americans and City departments will work closely with community organizations and the Language Access Advisory Committee to ensure quality delivery of services and implementation of the language policy. Regular updates by the Office of New Americans will keep stakeholders informed on performance and compliance, allowing them to share successes, react to challenges, and make adjustments as needed.



Acknowledgements

The Office of New Americans thanks all of the members of the Language Access Advisory Committee for their contributions and leadership and looks forward to continued engagement during the implementation of the Language Access Policy recommendations.

Language Access Advisory Committee Members

- Grace Chan, formerly of the Chinese American Service League
- Savannah Clement, Latino Policy Forum
- Ami Gandhi, South Asian American Policy & Research Institute
- Juliana Gonzalez-Crussi, City of Chicago Advisory Council on Equity and LUCHA
- Robert P. Groszek, Greater Avondale Chamber of Commerce
- Grace Hou, Woods Fund
- Ahlam Jbara, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
- Andrew Kang, Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Chicago
- Gary Kenzer, formerly of the Polish American Association
- Jill Kushner Bishop, Multilingual Connections
- Sylvia Puente, Latino Policy Forum
- Aaron Siebert-Llera, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
- Tonantzin Carmona, Director of the Office of New Americans

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