



# ***Fiscal Year 2018–19 Social Security Administration Language Access Plan***

***Providing Access to Benefits and Services to Individuals with  
Limited English Proficiency***

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# LANGUAGE ACCESS PLAN OVERVIEW

## Vision Statement

The Social Security Administration (SSA) strives to deliver effective, efficient, and equitable service to the public. This includes providing access to our programs and services for our customers who are unable to speak, read, or write in English.

## Plan Statement

1. We value the diversity of our customers and seek to foster an inclusive environment that respects individual differences, including language preferences.
2. We continually work to improve service delivery options available to individuals with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) so that they can communicate with us effectively in-person, over the phone, in writing, and by video.
3. We are responsible for ensuring that the public has access to our programs and services, regardless of language preference. Our employees, contractors, and federally funded program providers take all reasonable steps to inform the public about our language accessibility services.
4. Our LEP policy and procedures align with the strategic goals described in our [Agency Strategic Plan](#). These goals are to:
  - Deliver Services Effectively
  - Improve the Way We Do Business
  - Ensure Stewardship

## Purpose and Authority

The purpose of this document is to provide current guidelines in accordance with:

- [Executive Order 13166](#) (Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency) - Signed on August 11, 2000;
- U.S. Department of Justice implementation standards set forth in [67 FR 41455](#) (Guidance to Federal Financial Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons) - Issued on June 18, 2002; and
- The U.S. Attorney General's [February 17, 2011 memorandum](#) to the heads of Federal agencies (Language Access Obligations Under Executive Order 13166).

## **Workgroup Structure**

SSA's LEP Workgroup conducts ongoing LEP oversight for the agency. The workgroup meets on a quarterly basis to ensure that we integrate language access into our regular business processes and maintain our focus on these services.

The workgroup consists of core representatives from these Deputy Commissioner-level offices, with participation from other offices as needed:

- Office of Communications;
- Office of Hearing Operations;
- Office of Analytics, Review, and Oversight;
- Office of Operations; and
- Office of Retirement and Disability Policy.

The workgroup considers and takes appropriate action concerning issues related to data quality; interpretation, translation, and general language access; policy guidance; quality monitoring; and training.

Workgroup leadership meets biannually with representatives from the LEP advocacy community. Additional meetings may be scheduled around special topics of immediate interest or concern.

## **SUMMARY OF OUR LEP SERVICE DELIVERY STRUCTURE**

### **Resource Allocation**

We carefully consider the needs of LEP individuals in determining our budgetary requirements while incorporating service delivery initiatives. We review language-related service usage on an annual basis to help the agency prioritize workloads.

### **Service Delivery**

We deliver services through a nationwide network of over 1,500 offices that includes regional offices, field offices (including Social Security card centers), teleservice centers, processing centers, hearing offices (including satellite offices, national hearing centers, and national case assistance centers), the Appeals Council, and our headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland.

Our field offices and card centers are the primary points of contact for in-person support for the public. Our teleservice centers handle telephone calls to our national 800 number. Employees in our processing centers primarily handle Social Security retirement, survivors, and disability

payments. They also perform a wide range of other duties, such as answering national 800 number telephone calls.

We rely on disability determination services (DDS) in all 50 states, as well as Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, to make determinations on Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability claims. Our administrative law judges in hearing offices and national hearing centers, as well as administrative appeals judges on the Appeals Council, make decisions concerning appeals of denied Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and SSI claims.

We provide quality service to our LEP customers in more than 150 languages through our team of bilingual and multilingual employees and our national telephone interpreter and translator services contracts. These services are also available through the state DDS offices, which may or may not have their own bilingual and multilingual employees. LEP individuals access our services in person, by telephone, online<sup>1</sup>, and via video service delivery.

We tailor language access strategies to meet the needs of the LEP community. We have established policies, procedures, and guidelines for identifying LEP individuals and their preferred language, both spoken and written. Our Program Operations Manual System (POMS) and Hearings, Appeals and Litigation Law (HALLEX) manual provide staff with guidance on using language services to assist customers.

## **Federal Financial Assistance**

When we provide [financial assistance](#) to an entity, we require the recipient, as well as any [sub-recipients](#), to take reasonable steps to ensure that LEP individuals have meaningful access to the programs and activities they conduct. Through our oversight and quality assurance activities, we ensure that all recipients of assistance adhere to our policies and our defined expectations as to meaningful language access for customers.

## **Bilingual and Multilingual Staff**

Our bilingual and multilingual public-contact employees help us provide quality customer service to LEP individuals.<sup>2</sup> We identify bilingual or multilingual hiring needs based on national trends in demographics and language preferences. We advertise bilingual-skilled positions to hire individuals with the language skills necessary to communicate with our LEP customers.

We recognize that conducting business in languages other than English often requires more time. We encourage our managers to take this factor into account when assigning work and

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<sup>1</sup> See “Public Information Materials” on page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Our personnel in Puerto Rico are bilingual in Spanish and English. Our policies for providing services and access to benefits for individuals in Puerto Rico with limited English proficiency are consistent with this document.

assessing employee productivity. As part of developing a disability claim, the state DDS office may send the claimant to a medical examination. Our policies encourage the use of bilingual and multilingual medical examiners, where available. (SSA does not identify state DDS bilingual and multilingual needs.)

## **Interpreter Services**

As a policy, we do not require individuals who need language assistance to provide their own interpreters; rather, we provide an interpreter free of charge to any individual requesting language assistance and to anyone our employees believe could benefit from having an interpreter. To ensure quality interpretation, we encourage customers to utilize our free interpreter services. (See “Qualified Interpreter” on page 9.)

If an LEP customer prefers to use their own interpreter, such as a family member, friend, or third party, we must determine whether the individual meets our interpreter requirements. Given the nature and complexities of our business processes, we generally do not permit children under the age of 18 to serve as interpreters. Refer to *Qualified Interpreter* in the *Definitions* section of this document for our requirements. In some instances, we may deem it necessary for customers to utilize SSA-provided interpreter services to ensure adequate language access.

## **Training**

Our staff is required to know how to identify LEP customers and the procedures for accessing our language assistance services. We provide training for direct service staff to ensure effective implementation of our policies and procedures, including those related to serving our LEP customers. We provide ongoing training on LEP services, cultural diversity, and unconscious bias for all SSA and state DDS employees. The purpose of this training is to help employees deliver effective and efficient language access services to our LEP customers.

Our blended approach to training leverages multiple communications methods, such as interactive video training, video-on-demand, and a variety of blended learning products. These and other LEP resources are accessible through the SSA Learning Management System and our LEP intranet site. We design our training tools to enhance skills (including the language skills of our employees) and contribute to our goal of providing optimal service to our LEP customers.

We also utilize and maintain a centralized electronic repository containing all LEP policy and procedure references. These resources are available to our employees through SSA’s intranet. We develop and review training materials and consider recommendations from stakeholders to maintain and continuously improve basic language access training. Some of our offerings include training on:

- Identifying LEP customers, taking appropriate action, and using available resources to assist them effectively;
- Implementing policies and procedures for providing effective language access services to LEP individuals;
- Identifying, assessing, and recording the language preferences of LEP customers at the earliest point of contact;
- Accessing language assistance through multilingual services, including in-house bilingual interpreters, translators, and telephone interpreter services;
- Facilitating requests for translation of non-English documents; and
- Identifying language needs in the communities we serve.

## **Written Communications and Translation of Documents**

To make it easier to understand our programs and to improve administrative effectiveness, our authorized translators produce written communications in languages other than English. They also translate evidentiary and other documents received from the public.

We evaluated our process for identifying materials requiring translation, identified the languages our LEP customers use most frequently, developed a priority order for our translation workloads, and allocated resources to translate the materials. We established regular periods for reassessing the materials requiring translation to ensure that we maintain current and effective public information materials.

## **Public Information Materials**

Our [Multilanguage Gateway](#) includes detailed instructions in several languages to help people access our free interpreter services. This site also includes links to publications in languages other than English.

These publications and instructions are also available from the [SocialSecurity.gov](#) home page by:

- Selecting the “Languages” link at the top of the page; or
- Selecting “Publications” from the *Items of Interest* section.

*Note: All [SocialSecurity.gov](#) pages have a “Languages” link at the top of the page.*

We also maintain a [Spanish language website](#) for people who prefer to conduct business with us in Spanish. Our website and all publications can be viewed using a computer, tablet, or smartphone.

## **Outreach to LEP Customers**

We actively collaborate with a wide range of language access advocates and government entities to gauge the needs of the LEP community and ensure that we have a broad perspective when determining the best way to serve our LEP customers.

The LEP Workgroup hosts biannual meetings with national language advocacy groups to obtain their feedback and perspectives about our language access service delivery. Our Office of External Affairs maintains regular communications with advocates, and we use these opportunities to hear from them and share updates related to the needs of our LEP customers. Within our 10 regions, our established working relationships with diverse LEP populations and their advocates helps us to consider whether any modifications need to be made to our policies and procedures.

## **Technology & Data Driven Decision Making**

We take advantage of opportunities to properly identify and record our customers' language preferences. Our employees use this data to arrange for services in an individual's preferred language, whether they access our services in person, over the internet, through video, or by telephone. We firmly commit to ensuring that our data accurately reflects our LEP customers' language preferences.

To fulfill this commitment, we will continue to:

- Emphasize to our employees the importance of language data collection accuracy;
- Review our data collection business process;
- Conduct ongoing data reviews to ensure reliability;
- Invest resources to address data quality; and
- Expand our data transparency efforts in coordination with our [Open Government](#) initiative.

## **Oversight and Quality Assurance**

Our oversight and quality assurance efforts help us monitor the effectiveness of our language access services. These efforts include:

- Policy review;
- Contract review;
- Customer satisfaction surveys; and
- Advocate and customer feedback.

Analysis of the feedback and data helps us enhance our LEP service delivery and training. Each SSA office takes reasonable steps to ensure that employees and contractors who provide language access services follow our policy guidelines.

## **Performance Measurement and Evaluation**

The LEP Workgroup re-examines priorities and assesses our language access services, policies, and procedures on an annual basis. We also review our language access policies periodically to ensure alignment with this document, our [Agency Strategic Plan](#), and the changing needs of the public.

We conduct ongoing reviews of our language access services contracts to ensure that contractors are providing quality LEP services. In our reviews, we ensure that our contracts and interagency agreements:

- Contain language that adequately describes our language needs, requirements, and quality expectations;
- Provide a means to assess whether our contractors' delivery of language access services meets our quality standards; and
- Provide a means to hold our contractors accountable for meeting our quality standards.

This framework allows us to respond quickly to any issues that may arise concerning language access services, policies, and procedures.

## **Tracking and Reporting**

The LEP Workgroup routinely reviews policies and business processes to ensure that this document remains current. They also monitor for trends or areas that could benefit from improvement, additional policies, or resources. Data may include:

- Frequently requested languages;
- Feedback from our employees;
- Customer surveys; and
- Customer complaints.

As part of our transparency efforts, we will continue to publish yearly and quarterly data for spoken language preferences on our [Open Government](#) website for claims related to:

- Retirement and Survivors Insurance ([Quarterly](#) | [Yearly](#));
- Disability Insurance ([Quarterly](#) | [Yearly](#));

- End Stage Renal Disease ([Quarterly](#) | [Yearly](#));
- Supplemental Security Income – Disabled ([Quarterly](#) | [Yearly](#)); and
- Supplemental Security Income – Aged ([Quarterly](#) | [Yearly](#))

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Authorized Translator**<sup>3</sup> — An SSA employee or SSA contractor who:

- Reads, writes, and demonstrates fluency in both English and another language;
- Has demonstrated competence to translate written text from one language to another; and
- Has received authorization from their SSA office, or by contract with SSA, to perform this function.

**Bilingual** — Reads, writes, and speaks two languages fluently.

**Bilingual Employee** — An SSA employee who reads, writes, speaks, and understands English and another language fluently and is authorized by their SSA office to provide language support.

**Interpretation** — Listening to a communication in one language and orally converting it to another language while maintaining the same meaning.

**Interpreter** — A person who speaks both English and another language fluently and acts as an intermediary between an individual who needs language assistance and SSA staff.

**Limited English Proficient (LEP) Individuals** — Individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and whose ability to read, write, speak, or understand English is limited.

**Multilanguage Gateway** — SSA’s [public internet site](#) with information in multiple languages concerning our programs and services.

**Multilanguage Resources** — SSA’s [internal intranet site](#) for employees who serve customers with limited English proficiency. This site is only available to SSA and state disability determination services (DDS) employees.

**Multilingual** — Speaks and understands more than two languages fluently.

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<sup>3</sup> For SSA translator policies and authorization criteria, see Hearings, Appeals, and Litigation Law Manual (HALLEX) I-2-5-76, [Obtaining Assistance in Processing Foreign Claims and Evidence](#); Program Operations Manual System (POMS) GN 00301.340, [Authorized Translators](#); POMS GN 00301.345, [Authorization of SSA Translators](#); and POMS GN 00301.350, [Authorizing Non SSA Translators](#).

**Multilingual Employee** — An SSA employee who reads, writes, speaks, and understands English and at least two other languages fluently and is authorized by their SSA office to provide language support.

**Qualified Interpreter**<sup>4</sup> — An authorized SSA employee, SSA contractor, or other individual whom SSA qualifies, who reads and demonstrates fluency in both English and another language and also meets the following criteria:

- Demonstrates familiarity with basic SSA terminology;
- Agrees to comply with SSA's requirements concerning confidentiality and disclosure of information;
- Has no personal stake in the outcome of the customer's SSA business that would create a conflict of interest; and
- Agrees to provide an accurate interpretation of both SSA's questions and the customer's responses and not to assume or infer facts or dates not actually provided by the customer.

**SSA** — The Social Security Administration.

**Telephone Interpreter Services (TIS)** — A contracted agencywide service providing interpretation via telephone in more than 150 languages and dialects.

**Translation** — Conversion of written text from one language to another while maintaining the same meaning.

**Us** — The Social Security Administration.

**We** — The Social Security Administration.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have feedback or concerns about our language access services, you may email us at [opi.net.post@ssa.gov](mailto:opi.net.post@ssa.gov) or write to the following address:

Social Security Administration  
Office of Public Inquiries  
Attention: LEP  
6401 Security Boulevard

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<sup>4</sup> For SSA interpreter qualification criteria, see HALLEX I-2-1-70, [Foreign Language Interpreters](#); POMS GN 00203.011, [Special Interviewing Situations: Limited English Proficiency \(LEP\) or Language Assistance Required.](#); and POMS DI 23040.001, [DDS: Interpreters for Individuals with Limited English Proficiency \(LEP\) or Individuals Requiring Language Assistance.](#)

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