



## Chapter 6: **Language Access**

This chapter addresses challenges facing both municipalities and immigrants in the arena of language access. In this chapter, we discuss language access in terms of immigrants' ability to access information in a language they understand and municipalities' ability to communicate effectively with residents who speak limited or no English, also known as Limited English Proficiency (LEP) individuals.

Improving language access is a critical aspect of integrating immigrants. It is important from a public safety perspective, from a civic life perspective, and from an economic development perspective. By addressing language access issues, municipalities enable immigrants to become active participants in the community, thus bolstering the civic life and economic prosperity of the municipality as a whole.

## Common Challenges

For many municipalities, achieving successful language access is one of the biggest challenges of immigrant integration. Often municipalities do not have the staff capabilities or financial resources to provide translation or interpretation services. This problem is particularly challenging for municipalities with immigrant groups from many different countries, each with different language needs. Lack of language access can have a number of negative consequences including the following:

### Public safety challenges.

It presents a major public safety challenge if LEP individuals do not know basic procedures, such as who to call in case of emergency or how to obtain assistance related to housing, transportation, or any number of community services. Additionally, as discussed in the public safety chapter, even if individuals can speak English, they may choose not to communicate because of a lack of trust of government.

### Civic and community engagement challenges.

LEP residents often feel shut out or intimidated when municipalities lack bilingual staff or do not have information available in languages other than English. As a result, LEP individuals are less likely to participate in community events, attend public meetings, or seek services. Encouraging immigrants to get involved locally is near impossible if municipal staff can't communicate with local immigrant residents.

### Economic growth challenges.

The lack of language access also means that entrepreneurial immigrants are likely to face challenges opening and sustaining their own businesses, making it difficult for them to integrate economically.

### Shortage of bilingual and bicultural service providers

Information about municipal services is often not made available in the languages immigrants speak, meaning that local immigrants may not be aware of services that are available to them. According to MMC's 2011 survey of municipalities in the region, only 28 percent of municipalities indicated they have activities or services designed specifically for the immigrant community. This is significantly low given that, in the last decade, the foreign-born population has risen significantly in the collar counties (see Chapter 1: Demographics).



**Parade of nations.**

Source: Aurora Hispanic Heritage Advisory Board.



Senator Durbin on Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce parade float.  
Source: Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce.

## Strategies to Address Language Access Challenges

There are a number of short- and long-term strategies municipalities can use to maximize limited resources and to ensure quality language assistance is available to immigrant communities. Implementation of these strategies can start by looking internally to see if there are overlooked opportunities within the municipality.

# SPOTLIGHT

## Language access in Aurora

The City of Aurora offers a \$60 stipend per pay period for bilingual municipal employees who provide interpretation and translation assistance in addition to performing their normal responsibilities. Bilingual employees' language proficiency is regularly evaluated for quality assurance. In addition to working with bilingual staff, Aurora also contracts with an outside call center that offers translation and interpretation services to municipal, police, and fire departments for more complicated and sensitive technical and legal issues.

In Illinois, public officials and employees whose job descriptions require the use of a second language are eligible to receive a bilingual pay differential, which augments the base pay rate. Funding for this program comes from municipal budgets. Establishing a pay differential can help draw bilingual applicants and encourage bilingual employees to use their language skills.

## Language Access Center

The Language Access Center, a program of the DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform, offers an array of services including interpretation, translation, interpreter training and consultation with health and human service organizations to identify the most cost-effective and efficient ways to meet the needs of the area's fast-growing immigrant population. The DuPage Federation also provides cultural competency training to help service providers be linguistically and culturally competent.

**Hire bilingual and bicultural staff.** The hiring process is a key opportunity to increase staff diversity and resources. By hiring bilingual, and if possible, bicultural staff, municipalities and agencies can immediately expand their capabilities without having to pay for additional services. In the absence of other resources, or as a supplement to other resources, staff members who speak another language and have personal familiarity with another culture can be a huge resource. They can provide basic information, help establish trust, and make the municipality feel more welcoming, in turn allowing for greater civic and economic integration. Increasing employee diversity is as simple as indicating a preference for bilingual candidates in job postings. Municipalities with personnel plans can also revise the plans to ensure that they promote cultural and language diversity. Plans should also prioritize which staff positions need bilingual staff. It is important that positions involving frequent interaction with residents—front-desk, water billing, cashiering, call centers, or police department positions, for instance—be filled by bilingual individuals.

It is important to emphasize that while a staff member may be bilingual, that does not mean s/he replaces professional translators or interpreters. Particularly when it comes to life and safety and legal issues (e.g., fire calls, police reports, medical documents, board meetings, etc.), only bilingual employees who are professionally trained and certified in translating and interpreting should be contracted.



**Utilize community interpreters and establish a volunteer language bank.** Community volunteers are an important and all too often untapped resource for municipalities. Municipalities should consider reaching out to residents from different immigrant groups, inviting them to serve as volunteers offering language and cultural guidance or informal translation or interpreting services. A good way to connect to potential volunteers is to partner with local faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and community college or university student groups. Municipalities can offer certification, including language proficiency assessment and basic training, in order to help ensure and improve the quality of volunteer services.

Engaging young people is a great way to get entire families involved in the community. When recruiting interns and volunteers (many high school students have community service requirements), communities should take advantage of younger residents' cultural diversity and language abilities. Perhaps the Spanish club would be interested in volunteering at a senior center or assisting with translating municipal flyers. The art club could volunteer to host an arts and craft table at a community services fair to free up parents to speak with social service agency representatives.

Again, volunteers do not replace professional translation and interpreting services, but they can fill important gaps, especially in places where there are many different language needs. For instance, volunteers can assist with reviewing documents translated by third parties, translating informational and marketing materials, and interpreting at town hall meetings, events, and workshops.

Working with community volunteers not only helps save costs but also establishes important connections between the municipality and immigrant groups, promoting civic engagement and helping to cultivate new leaders who can serve as a point of contact between municipal staff and an immigrant community and potentially represent their community on boards and committees.

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### Website translation and social media

The City of Evanston has an “Evanston en Español” page which provides a professional translation of the City website’s on-line content. The City’s homepage also has a window with a drop-down Google Translate menu where visitors can select their language and see an automated translation of the site. Evanston also operates a Spanish-language Twitter account ([www.twitter.com/evanstonespanol](http://www.twitter.com/evanstonespanol)) and a Spanish monthly e-newsletter of local news and events ([www.cityofevanston.org/newsletter](http://www.cityofevanston.org/newsletter)).

The Village of Bensenville’s website also has a “translate page” option in the footer, which automatically links to a Spanish version of the site translated by Google and has options for selecting different languages as well.



**Día de los Niños.**

Source: Aurora Hispanic Heritage Advisory Board.

### Use translation and interpreting technology.

In cases where municipalities do not have bilingual staff and volunteer resources or may wish to supplement these, there are a variety of communications technology options available. The Migration Policy Institute's "Communicating More for Less" report<sup>63</sup> discusses various options for interpreting (verbally translating from one language to another) that are used by entities ranging from departments of education and departments of children services, to hospitals and medical centers, to courts and correctional facilities. Options include technology that allows for remote, rather than in person, interpreting, with the interpreter connected either through audio or audio-visual technology. There are also options for automated interpreting. See the report for a thorough discussion of the pros and cons of each technology.

Another important use of technology is in the translation of municipal websites. As people increasingly turn to municipal websites for news and basic information, websites have become a powerful means of reaching and communicating with LEP individuals. Having translated material widely available can also help municipalities with few bilingual staff reach a much larger audience. Translation options range from professional to more basic and free options like Google Translate.

### Share resources across departments.

Municipalities can greatly improve multilingual assistance by coordinating across agencies and departments, and by working across jurisdictional boundaries to ensure that resources that can be shared are being shared. Often one department has language resources (bilingual staff, translated documents) that other local offices are missing, but there is a communication gap. Agencies can also share translation templates for key documents and may even want to coordinate on subscribing to translation or interpretation services.

In order to facilitate sharing, municipalities should digitize key documents and tag each document with an ID to help keep track of different translations and assist with quality assurance. Municipalities can also work to establish bilingual glossaries of key terms and phrases so that municipal staff are empowered to handle basic language and communication issues without having to rely on person interpreters or third-party services.

### Spread the word.

Municipalities may have language resources that residents and even other staff are not aware of. Simple strategies, such as signs in municipal offices indicating that assistance in other languages is available, can help spread the word and set a tone of inclusivity.

## SPOTLIGHT

### Carol Stream and Schaumburg

The Village of Carol Stream keeps a list of bilingual personnel that is distributed to all municipal departments, enabling employees to provide excellent customer service to residents. The Village also uses inter-jurisdictional partnerships to help improve language access. The Village has a language resource list, which includes bilingual contacts from other municipalities. In emergencies, Village employees and police officers may call a neighboring municipality for assistance.

The Village of Schaumburg developed a Foreign Language Resource Pool to encourage all its employees to embrace diversity by enhancing communication with all members of the Schaumburg community. The resource pool offers a list of employees who are fluent in another language and have expressed an interest in becoming a resource volunteer.

63 Sperling, Jessica, The Migration Policy Institute, "Communicating More for Less: Using Translation and Interpretation Technology to Serve Limited English Proficient Individuals," 2011. <http://www.diversityrx.org/resources/communicating-more-less-using-translation-and-interpretation-technology-serve-limited-eng>

**Create a language access plan.** In addition to the above strategies, a crucial long-term strategy for improving language access is to create a plan. Having a roadmap in place can help municipal staff target efforts to improve language access, and set priorities so that the most important issues are addressed first. A plan also allows for better inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional communication and facilitates sharing and collaboration.

### ***Step 1: Assess local needs and capabilities***

The first step in creating a plan is to understand current conditions—both by assessing local needs and inventory current capabilities. Municipalities should get a sense of demographic trends in their communities via demographic analysis, surveys, or intake information. Important information to take note of includes:

- The different countries of origin represented in the community.
- The different languages represented in the community.
- The different English-speaking levels.

Municipalities can use free U.S. Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data to obtain this information. CMAP also makes Census and ACS data available in user-friendly municipal profiles, which are available on the CMAP website.<sup>64</sup> In future updates of these profiles, CMAP has committed to include data on foreign-born residents in each municipality. Staff can also reach out to local service providers who may keep records of new residents' country of origin, native language, and English language abilities, as well as the characteristics of residents who leave the community.

Finally, municipalities should also keep track of available resources. For instance:

- Bilingual staff
- Community volunteers
- Community-based organizations with language access programs
- Translated documents
- Bilingual glossaries

By cross-referencing needs and capabilities, staff can then identify the major gaps in language access.

### ***Step 2: Identify priorities and set goals***

Based on the information obtained through the needs and capabilities assessment, municipalities can identify priority issues and establish short-, mid-, and long-term goals.

**Short-term goals** may include lists of the key documents that need to be translated or gaps in the glossary.

**Mid-term or long-term goals** may include lists of key staff positions which would ideally be filled by bilingual individuals, potential organizations or volunteers to work with, and other local agencies or other municipalities to partner with.

### ***Step 3: Implement***

At the implementation stage, the municipality begins working with the appropriate partners to carry out the recommendations listed above. Municipalities should also train staff, particularly staff who work directly with the public, on how to work with LEP residents, and what resources are on hand if they are faced with a situation they do not have the skills or knowledge to handle effectively.

Another crucial component of implementation is reaching out to LEP communities to inform them about the available resources and encouraging them to take advantage of these resources. Municipalities can work with faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and ethnic media to “get the word out” and obtain feedback.

### ***Step 4: Reassess***

Language needs are continuously evolving. As such, it is important that a translation plan be updated and that it reflects the needs of the community as well changes in staff resources and capabilities. Reassessment should also evaluate the quality of the services provided. Municipalities should create standard evaluation procedures, as well as simple, user-friendly complaint procedures. Municipalities should update their plan as needed to ensure that it remains current and useful.

<sup>64</sup> Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), “MetroPulse: Community Data Snapshots,” 2013. <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/data/metropulse/community-snapshots>.

