



City of Seattle
Gregory J. Nickels, Mayor

Translation and Interpretation Policy

1. Purpose and Scope

The City of Seattle is committed to responsive government and the provision of quality customer service. This involves, in part, making reasonable efforts that City services and information about those services are provided in a manner that is accessible, relevant and timely. This policy on translation and interpretation is designed to promote fair and equitable access to City services for individuals with limited English proficiency.

2. Key Definitions

For the purpose of this policy, the following definitions should apply.

2.1 Limited English Proficiency (LEP)¹:

A person with limited English proficiency (LEP) cannot speak, read, write or understand the English language at a level that permits him or her to interact effectively with City staff.

Individuals who communicate with American Sign Language are covered in this definition, although other Federal laws and regulations such as the Americans with Disabilities Act apply and should be considered separately.

2.2 Translation:

Translation is the conversion of written communication from one language to another in a written form. An accurate translation is one that conveys the intent and essential meaning of the original text.²

2.3 In-person Translation

¹ City of Minneapolis, Minneapolis in Any Language Manual, p. 14 [http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/civil-rights/docs/LEP_Service.pdf#search=%22%22A%20person%20with%20limited%20English%20proficiency%20\(L%20EP\)%20cannot%20speak%22%22](http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/civil-rights/docs/LEP_Service.pdf#search=%22%22A%20person%20with%20limited%20English%20proficiency%20(L%20EP)%20cannot%20speak%22%22)

² City of Minneapolis, Minneapolis in Any Language Manual, p. 28 http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/civil-rights/docs/LEP_InterpretingAndTranslation.pdf#search=%22%22Translation%20is%20the%20conversion%20of%20written%22%22

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In-person translation is the conversion of written communication to oral rendition from one language to another preserving the intent and meaning of the original message.

2.4 Interpretation:

Interpretation is the oral rendition of a spoken message from one language to another, preserving the intent and meaning of the original message.³

2.5 Employee Language Bank

The Employee Language Bank is an internal resource that lists City employees who have volunteered their foreign language skills and time to assist with the short-term, usually under an hour, language needs of persons seeking access to City services and City departments.

An employee who works for the Language Bank should not be asked to interpret or translate sensitive or critical information. The City specifically disclaims and advises residents not to rely on the translation or interpretation of sensitive or critical information that is not done by a professional or court certified translator or interpreter.

2.6 Language Line

The Language Line is a commercial interpretation service accessed through the telephone.

2.7 Vital Documents

Vital Documents are documents that provide essential information for accessing basic City services and benefits. Examples of vital documents include:

- Consent and complaint forms
- Notices of eligibility criteria, rights, denial, loss, or decreases in benefits or services
- Notices of availability of free language assistance
- Summary explanations of department's direct services

2.8 Critical Information

³ City of Minneapolis, Minneapolis in Any Language Manual, p 24 http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/civil-rights/docs/LEP_InterpretingAndTranslation.pdf#search=%22%22Interpretation%20is%20the%20translation%20of%20a%20spoken%22%22

Critical information could be written or oral that may have life and death implications. For example, emergency evacuation messages are considered critical.

2.9 Sensitive Information

Sensitive information is information of a confidential or proprietary nature, or information that impacts, expounds on or references the rights or responsibilities of the City or the resident under federal, state or local law, or that could potentially expose the City to legal action, or information could have a potentially financial impact on City, the person seeking translation or interpretation services, or another person or entity.

2.10 Primary Languages

Primary languages are languages other than English spoken by the largest numbers of City residents, based upon data from the Federal Census, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle Municipal Court, and City Call Centers. These languages are broken into two tiers. The first tier includes the top seven languages spoken in Seattle and the second tier includes languages spoken by at-least 2000 Seattle residents.

The 1st tier languages are:

Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Somali, Tagalog, and Korean

The 2nd tier languages are:

Cambodian, Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya, Laotian, Thai, and Russian

3. **Policies**

The City of Seattle should make reasonable efforts to implement the following policies:

3.1 Translation

3.11 City Departments should translate vital documents into the 1st tier languages spoken by substantial residents of the City of Seattle. Documents containing critical information should be translated into the 2nd tier languages as well.

3.12 City Departments that are conducting major projects in a neighborhood where 5% of the population consist of a specific language group, based on the current census data, should translate and distribute documents relevant to the project in that language (s).

- 3.13 If a department is providing a targeted service to a particular language group, information about the service should be translated into the language.
- 3.14 Departments, at their own discretion, can translate documents other than vital documents and translate documents into languages other than the 1st tier languages.
- 3.15 All the aforementioned should be provided to City residents free of charge.

3.2 Interpretation

- 3.21 City Departments should use the Language Bank or the Language Line, where appropriate, for interpretation to assist and inform residents about direct City services.
- 3.22 Invitations to community meetings called by the City should inform the public in 1st tier languages that interpreters may be provided, if possible, at the meeting if the City receives a request five working days prior to the event.
- 3.23 Neighborhood specific events should provide interpreters in the languages where 5 % of the residents represent a language group, based on the current census data, and when it is requested 5 days prior to the event.
- 3.24 Departments, at their own discretion, may provide interpreters more frequently than is required in this policy.

3.3 General Disclaimer on Translation and Interpretation

The City should make reasonable efforts to provide translation and interpretation services so that City services are reasonably accessible for individuals with limited English proficiency. However, the circumstances of individuals may vary so widely that no particular person should rely solely upon the Employee Language Bank or any commercial, telephone-based interpretation service. City efforts at translation and interpretation are not substitutes for competent translation and interpretation services obtained by individuals interested in accessing City services. The City cannot warrant that translation and interpretation services provided under this policy should be adequate for the purposes of every individual in every circumstance and disclaims any liability alleged to arise from such services.

3.4 Resources

- 3.41 For requests that involve the interpretation of information that is neither sensitive nor critical, a City staff should first use the Employee Language Bank. If possible, a City Department should first seek employees in the

Language Bank from its own department to satisfy a request because a Department employee may have greater familiarity with the Department's policies and procedures.

3.42 If City employees with the appropriate language skills are not available or the interpretation should require additional time, language providing service or professional and/or certified interpreter under contract with the City should be used. Interpretation of a more complex and/or technical nature should be done by a professional and/or certified interpreter.

3.43 The translation of any written documents should be done by a professional under contract with the City for interpretation and translation services.

3.5 Policy Statement for Competency

3.51 The City is committed to using competent, trained and culturally sensitive translators and interpreters. This policy is for both volunteer City and professional/court certified translators and interpreters.

3.52 Seattle residents may use their own interpreters for information that is neither sensitive nor critical.

3.53 For reasons of accuracy, confidentiality, and family dynamics, minor children (under 18) should not translate or interpret vital documents for family members or other limited English speakers.

3.6 Documents Bank

For purposes of education and efficiency, Department Of Information Technology will maintain an online bank of translated documents that can be shared by every department.

3.7 Accountability Policy

3.71 The City should monitor by department levels of service and cost of these services. This should be done through each department's accountability agreement, departmental translation/interpretation liaisons, and City-wide coordination.

3.72 The City should solicit feedback and comments from staff, the immigrant and refugee communities and translation and interpretation contractors on the effectiveness of these policies.

3.73 The City should review periodically this policy and make adjustments, as appropriate, based on changing demographics and other factors.