

City of Seattle Language Access Plan

Introduction

The City of Seattle is committed to ensuring that all residents have equitable access to city services, programs and information regardless of the language they speak.

The City receives federal financial assistance which requires all programs, services, and facilities to comply with the Federal Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The City must provide meaningful access for individuals with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). LEP individuals have limited ability reading, writing, speaking, or understanding English.

In 2017, the Mayor issued [Executive Order 2017-10](#), which requires all City departments to create Language Access Plans (LAP). These plans help ensure that federally funded entities deliver equitable, effective, and legally compliant services, and that staff are trained to meet the needs of LEP individuals. In 2023, Seattle deepened its commitment by adopting the [Race and Social Justice Ordinance](#), which formalized the City's long-standing work to eliminate racial disparities and advance equity. In 2025, Mayor Bruce Harrell issued [Executive Order 2025-03](#), which emphasizes the importance of plain language and digital equity to make city information clear, accessible, and inclusive for all communities.

All City of Seattle departments and contractors receiving federal funds must include language access in their efforts to work toward equitable and inclusive community engagement strategies. Title VI requires the City of Seattle to enforce language access under national origin protection. Departments are **required** to submit a LAP to the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) on a biennial basis. For questions or support, please contact the OIRA language access team at IMR_LanguageAccess@seattle.gov

Language Access Plans

OIRA coordinates and supports the collection of these LAPs. Two documents were created to help City staff submit their plans more effectively. The [Language Access Assessment](#) was created to help departments self-assess where they are in the language access continuum. This encourages departments to reflect on their strengths, area of growth to create their LAP to achieve meaningful access for community members. A [Language Access Template](#) was also created to simplify the collection of information and data from each department to collect uniformed LAPs. Each City department should tailor their LAPs to meet their specific needs and

include the required four-factor analysis developed by the US Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2021 to evaluate language access compliance. These four factors^[1] are:

1. **Number or Proportion of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Persons:** This factor considers the number or proportion of LEP persons eligible to be served or likely to be encountered by the program.
2. **Frequency of Contact with LEP Persons:** This factor examines how often LEP persons encounter the program, activity, or service.
3. **Nature and Importance of the Program or Service:** This factor evaluates the nature and importance of the program, activity, or service provided by the program.
4. **Resources Available and Costs:** This factor assesses the resources available and the costs to the recipient in providing language access.

The Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD) and OIRA assesses demographic data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), Seattle Public Schools (SPS), Public Health-Seattle & King County, Seattle Police Department, Seattle Immigration Court Cases, Seattle Housing Authority, and Seattle Municipal Court Interpreter Services on most spoken or requested non-English languages, and other sources to determine the language assistance needs of the community it serves. OIRA and OPCD provides the [2023 City of Seattle Top Languages](#) which lists individual languages and the total number and percentages of LEP individuals in Seattle on an annual basis.

Below are the top 15 languages in order of highest prevalence^[2]:

#	2023 Top Languages
1	Spanish
2	Chinese
3	Vietnamese
4	Somali
5	Tagalog
6	Korean
7	Amharic
8	Russian
9	Japanese
10	Tigrinya
11	Arabic
12	Oromo
13	Hindi
14	French
15	Ukrainian

¹ October 26, 2001 DOJ Clarifying Memorandum Regarding Limited English Proficiency and Executive Order 13166, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/federal-coordination-and-compliance-section-190>

² City of Seattle Top Languages (2023), [https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/OIRA/2023 Seattle Top Languages Report.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/OIRA/2023%20Seattle%20Top%20Languages%20Report.pdf)

Language Services

The City of Seattle offers multiple language services to communicate with LEP individuals.

- **Interpretation:** The oral rendering of speech from one language to another, either in-person or via phone/video. The City uses multiple vendors to work with interpreters who are accredited to provide fluency in speaking, reading, and writing a specific language(s) and tailored to specific requirements based on needs and available resources. Interpretation is available via telephone, handheld video application, remote video interpreters or by hiring onsite interpreters. OIRA developed a City of Seattle interpretation policy for internal employee use outlining the best practices when using interpretation as well as a list of contracted vendors.
- **Translation:** The conversion of written content into another language, particularly of vital documents. Vital documents are “paper and electronic documents and communications deemed significantly important to LEP individuals to access an entity’s program services and activities.” The City primarily uses SmartCat to provide translation services for City documents and rely on a team of linguists who are based primarily in the Puget Sound area to perform the translations. The linguists are independent contractors whose contracts are managed by OIRA. Examples of vital documents include forms, notices, outreach materials, eligibility documents, Title VI Plan and LAP etc.
- **Bilingual staff:** City employees who are proficient in English and at least one other language relevant to the population served can enhance direct service delivery. The City’s Language Premium Program ensures that City employees are proficient in these skills to provide interpretation and translation services to the public and compensated for these skills.

Notification of Rights

City departments must notify the public that language assistance is available free of charge. City departments must describe in their LAP how they inform LEP individuals or beneficiaries about the availability of language services. The LAP includes language services available on all digital and print materials.

City departments must post translated notices about the availability of Language Line assistance services at public entrances, lobbies, websites, kiosks, and facilities managed by the City.

Language Access Training

OIRA provides virtual training to all City employees in its policies and procedures for providing language assistance services. These trainings are available on-demand and on the City's training site Cornerstone. This training is required for City employees who interact with LEP individuals and includes:

1. The importance of providing language assistance services
2. Tools for how to effectively and respectfully communicate and interact with LEP individuals
3. An outline of the City's policies and procedures when providing language access services
4. How to document data involving people's needs and preferred language of LEP individuals
5. How to request and use an interpreter
6. What type of translated information is available for LEP individuals and where it can be located

Language Access Liaisons

OIRA coordinates a citywide network of Language Access Liaisons, with at least one representative designated by each department. Liaisons are responsible for developing and implementing their departments LAP, attending OIRA-led meetings and trainings and applying best practices within their departments. OIRA convenes monthly meetings to provide training, share updates and monitor progress on LAPs. This structure ensures ongoing collaboration across departments and supports the City's commitment to language access.

Data Collection

OIRA's Language Access program actively leverages a range of language service providers such as SmartCat and Language Line, among others to collect and analyze data on multilingual service delivery across departments. These insights enable the team to identify gaps, inform targeted training opportunities and support strategies to enhance adoption and effective utilization by City Staff. By continuously monitoring trends, OIRA ensures a data-driven approach to advancing equitable access.

Evaluation

All City departments are required to monitor, evaluate, and update the LAP regularly to ensure its effectiveness. Each City department must submit their LAP to OIRA for review and for technical assistance to ensure compliance with LEP requirements.

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) monitors, investigates, and responds to complaints or language assistance suggestions submitted by LEP individuals, community members, and staff. SOCR assesses and upgrades policies and procedures as needed in response to these complaints.