Why Language Access?

“Language access” means providing individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) meaningful access to the same services as English-speaking individuals. A language access plan (LAP) for New Hanover County is a critical tool to ensure residents with limited English proficiency can connect with and have access to vital community services and information. An efficient and effective language access plan will also guide county staff and internal stakeholders on best practices for assisting residents with limited English proficiency and serve as a model for inclusive customer service across the organization.

New Hanover County’s mission is to provide equitable opportunities and exceptional public services through good governance to ensure a safe, healthy, secure, and thriving community for all. To achieve this, county services and resources must be equitable and accessible to all. The creation of a language access plan will not only increase access to county resources but will bring the community together through better understanding, engagement, and empowerment.

A language access plan also ensures compliance with federal, state, and local laws and regulations. These laws, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, require government entities that receive federal funds to provide language assistance services to individuals with limited English proficiency to avoid national origin discrimination and to provide meaningful access to county resources, essential services, and vital information.

Introduction and Purpose

In 2023, New Hanover County was selected to participate in the 2023 Local Government Language Access Collaborative by UNC-Chapel Hill’s Institute for the Study of the Americas, an initiative that brings together local governments and community-based organizations to build inclusive practices and policies related to language access.

Relationship-building between residents, local governments, and community partners through the Language Access Collaborative sets an example and encourages language access service expansion throughout the county. Cape Fear Latinos is New Hanover County’s community partner, a grassroots non-profit organization that works with the Hispanic/Latino community in and around New Hanover County. This collaboration will help build trust in communities that often feel overlooked and connect individuals and families to resources that will help build sustainable and successful futures. A language access plan put into action will ensure that residents have the right resources and information at the right time to make informed decisions that impact their health, safety, and well-being.

This plan will address and outline our efforts to empower individuals with limited English proficiency and enable them to fully engage with and access services throughout the county. Through consistent monitoring and updating of this LAP, the county will better serve and understand the needs of residents and improve the accessibility of services and resources. Further, New Hanover County will ensure it moves towards policies and procedures supporting the right of all residents to communicate within the language they prefer and provide resources to county staff to meet residents’ diverse needs.
Organization(s) / Individuals Affected
This policy applies to all New Hanover County departments and agencies.

Training for language access will include training in language services, cultural sensitivity, and customer service to help staff deliver effective and efficient language access services to individuals with limited English proficiency. The training will be delivered via a blended approach, using a variety of tools, such as new employee orientation as well as in-person, classroom-style training, and online webinars designed to enhance skills, including the language skills of our employees.

Definitions

- **Bilingual/multilingual staff:** Bilingual staff refers to individuals who are proficient in speaking two languages. Multilingual staff refers to individuals who are fluent in more than two languages. Both bilingual and multilingual staff play a crucial role in language access initiatives.

- **Interpretation:** Is the act of facilitating communication between individuals or groups who speak or sign in different languages. It involves the oral rendering of spoken words of one language into another language in real-time, allowing for effective communication.

- **Language Access:** Language Access refers to the provision of language services and resources to ensure effective communication between individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) and those who speak English fluently. It involves implementing measures to overcome language barriers and to ensure that language is not a barrier to accessing important information and services.

- **Language Access Plan (LAP):** A set of policies and procedures established to provide the most effective services for those with limited English proficiency.

- **Limited English Proficiency (LEP):** LEP refers to individuals who have a limited ability to understand, speak, read, or write in the English language. These individuals may have a primary language other than English or have a limited command of English due to factors such as immigration, language barriers, or educational background.

- **Meaningful Access:** Refers to the concept of ensuring that individuals can fully and effectively engage in a certain activity or process. It entails removing barriers and implementing practices that allow individuals to understand and engage in the process without limitations or discrimination.

- **Preferred Language:** This is the language that an individual chooses to use for communication purposes. It is the language in which they feel most comfortable, proficient, and able to convey their thoughts, ideas, and needs effectively.

- **Qualified interpreter or translator:** A qualified interpreter or translator is an individual who possesses the necessary skills, proficiency, and expertise to convey information accurately and effectively from one language to another. In both cases, qualifications can be demonstrated through education, certification, training, experience, and ongoing professional development.

- **Translation:** The process of converting written communication from one language into another, while maintaining the meaning, tone, style, and intent of the original text or speech. It involves a skilled translator who possesses a deep understanding of both the source language (the language of original content) and the target language (the language the content is being translated into).

- **Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act:** Prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin by entities that receive federal financial assistance. As explained in Executive Order 13166, a person may not be discriminated against because they are not proficient in the English language due to their national origin.
• **Vital Document:** Refers to a document that holds crucial information and requires translation or interpretation services to ensure effective communication between individuals who speak different languages. These documents are often related to legal, medical, emergency, or government matters where accurate and clear communication is essential to protect the rights, safety, and well-being of individuals with limited English proficiency or non-native speakers.

**Assessment**

New Hanover County will identify strategic languages to be addressed by this plan using collected data and assessments, the four-factor analysis, and the safe harbor parameters as listed below.

**Four-factor Analysis**

- Number of individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) served or encountered in the eligible service populations
- The frequency with which individuals with limited English proficiency come in contact with the recipient’s program, activity, or service
- The nature and importance of the recipient’s program, activity, or service
- The resources available to the recipient and costs

**Safe Harbor Parameters**

- 5% (or 1,000 residents, whichever is less) of the population eligible to be served or likely to be affected or encountered
- If there are fewer than 50 people in a language group that reaches the 5% trigger above, the recipient can request oral interpretation of vital documents, free of cost.

These factors create a picture of the needs of the community and priority areas that the county needs to address first. The greater the number of individuals with limited English proficiency, the greater the frequency of contact with county services, and the greater the importance of the service, the more likely language services will be needed. The guidance provided helps to create an indicator and a formal threshold by which language access policy and procedure can be formed. Through regular data and trend assessment, language access demands can be monitored and improved based on changing community demographics.

In developing the Language Access Plan (LAP), New Hanover County staff completed a departmental needs assessment, gathered information from stakeholder groups, and reviewed language assistance services. Details and findings from these assessments are outlined below.

**Departmental Assessment**

The Offices of Diversity & Equity and Communications & Outreach submitted an internal survey to all departments about language access and resources. Sample survey questions and key findings are listed below:
What are the most frequently encountered non-English languages by your department and how often do these encounters occur? (Please select one: Frequently, Often, Occasionally, Rarely or Never)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE IDENTIFIED*</th>
<th>FREQUENCY OF REQUESTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASL</td>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*More languages were identified by departments in the survey responses, but all fell within the “Rarely” or “Never” category rankings.

How does your department interact with the public and individuals who prefer languages other than English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP COMMUNICATION METHODS (ranked in descending order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephonic interpreter (Language Line)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual staff (not certified as an interpreter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated written documents or signage (e.g., notices/tools on how to identify language service needs, notices of eligibility translated into languages other than English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic communications in languages other than English (can include social media, website, and other digital promotions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events and services are promoted through non-English-speaking media (can include social media, website, outreach to local organizations, and other digital promotions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff interpreter (verbal communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff translator (written communication)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most county departments identified a resource or process for meeting the needs of individuals with limited English proficiency, with the Language Line reported as the most used tool. Many departments use bilingual staff for assistance, but only a few have embedded qualified interpreters or translators on staff.

Translation of vital documents is available to all county departments, either through county staff, a contracted, professional service, or pre-existing materials from state or federal partners, but more work can be done to improve the number of documents accessible to individuals with limited English proficiency.

**Stakeholder Engagement**

The collaboration between New Hanover County and Cape Fear Latinos in the Language Access Collaborative aims to enhance communication and accessibility services for the community. As a part of this collaboration, Cape Fear Latinos conducted a survey aimed at capturing language proficiency data in the Hispanic/Latino community and gauging the community’s sentiments regarding the services and communication provided by New Hanover County. This information helps New Hanover County understand the language needs of our community and implement inclusive language access policies.

Throughout this collaboration with Cape Fear Latinos and internal initiatives, issues have been identified that will be addressed in part by this plan. Resolving these issues will improve language access and support for the LEP population. Key findings from Cape Fear Latinos are highlighted below.

- Cape Fear Latinos has identified a gap in the availability of interpreters which can hinder effective and timely communication between service providers and individuals with limited English proficiency. This highlights the importance of recruiting and providing trained interpreters to bridge the language gap and ensure accurate understanding and effective services.
- It was noted by Cape Fear Latinos that many individuals with limited English proficiency have had issues with the Language Line, causing more confusion than assistance. This highlights the need for further evaluation and improvement of language access technologies and services. Clear guidelines, training, and user-friendly systems can help minimize confusion and ensure smooth communication.
- It has also been identified that documents and forms are not always available in Spanish or other strategic languages. This creates an additional barrier for individuals with limited English proficiency who may have difficulty understanding information provided in English. Addressing this gap involves ensuring that essential documents, such as forms, notices, and instructions, are provided in strategic languages to facilitate access to vital information and services.

These identified barriers highlight the ongoing challenges that the LEP population faces in accessing services. It is crucial to continue collaborating between Cape Fear Latinos, New Hanover County, and any other community stakeholders to implement necessary measures that address these gaps.

The collaboration between New Hanover County and Cape Fear Latinos in creating a language access plan exemplifies a shared commitment to inclusivity, effective communication, and community engagement. Through this partnership, New Hanover County is actively working to bridge language barriers, improve accessibility to services, and create a supportive environment for all individuals in the community.
Language Data Collection

Data is collected from a variety of sources to capture the full picture of individuals with limited English proficiency and the need for language access in New Hanover County. Sources used to inform this plan include data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey and 2020 Census, New Hanover County 911 Communications, New Hanover County internal surveys and customer service records of Language Line usage, New Hanover County Schools, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Novant Health, Cape Fear Latinos, and other community-based organizations and partners.

There are more than 51 languages spoken in New Hanover County. Based on internal and external data sources, the most common non-English languages spoken in New Hanover County are Spanish, Chinese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, and Russian. New Hanover County also includes American Sign Language (ASL) as an identified language need based on population data from these sources.

### AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY, 2021 (Five-Year Data)

**Limited English Proficiency Households in New Hanover County**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIMARY LANGUAGE SPOKEN IN HOUSEHOLD</th>
<th>TOTAL RESIDENTS</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>3,884</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Indo-European languages</td>
<td>2,057</td>
<td>2.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian and Pacific Island languages</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>0.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### LANGUAGE LINE USAGE, 2020-2023

**Languages Requested by Residents within New Hanover County Government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LANGUAGE REQUESTED BY RESIDENT</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL REQUESTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>71.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>7.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>3.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili</td>
<td>1.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burmese</td>
<td>1.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>1.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian, Kinyarwanda, Korean, Mandarin, Karen, Hindi, Portuguese Brazilian, Haitian Creole, Cantonese, French, Urdu</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategic Languages
New Hanover County’s primary language spoken in LEP households is Spanish, based on data collected from the above sources and ongoing monitoring of community needs.

American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation is also identified as a communication need to be addressed in this plan.

Language Access Policy
New Hanover County will ensure individuals with limited English proficiency have meaningful access to benefits, programs, and services provided by the county, aligning with the county’s mission to provide equitable opportunities and exceptional public service.

County departments and staff will let individuals with limited English proficiency know they have the right to language services at no cost to the resident requesting assistance. Notices of this right will include information about available language services and will be provided in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to the county’s website, NHCtv public television channel, social media, local community organizations and agencies, public statements, brochures, signage, and posters within county facilities.

Language Access Resources
To facilitate this policy, New Hanover County has several resources readily available for employees to assist residents with additional communication needs.

Language Line
The Language Line is available at all customer-facing facilities to provide access to live interpreters in 240 languages. Once connected through a phone line, an interpreter will interpret for the customer and the employee throughout the encounter.

Employees serving customers who are deaf or hard of hearing will have access to sign language video interpretation through an app, facilitated by trained staff at the following locations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY FACILITY</th>
<th>DEVICE LOCATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government Center</td>
<td>Customer Service Counter, first floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>230 Government Center Drive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmington, NC 28403</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Human Services</td>
<td>First floor, front desk reception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650 Greenfield Street</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmington, NC 28401</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff’s Office</td>
<td>Detention Division, front desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3950 Juvenile Center Road</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle Hayne, NC 28429</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Register of Deeds</td>
<td>Register of Deeds' office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>320 Chestnut Street</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmington, NC 28401</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In-person Interpretation
New Hanover County will make its best effort to ensure timely access to in-person, professional interpretation services at county facilities and public meetings. On-site multilingual staff are available at the New Hanover County Government Center, Sheriff’s Office, and Health and Human Services facility.

Individuals with limited English proficiency may request interpretation for public meetings, small group meetings, or one-on-one interactions with county staff. Such requests should be made at least 48 hours in advance to ensure adequate time to arrange for interpreter services and can be submitted by staff to the Language Access Coordinator for confirmation.

Family members, friends, or minors should not be used as interpreters if the LEP individual declines services offered by New Hanover County as the use of such a person would compromise the effectiveness of services or violate the LEP individual’s confidentiality.

Bilingual/Multilingual Staff
Currently, on-site bilingual/multilingual staff are available at the New Hanover County Government Center, Sheriff’s Office, and Health and Human Services facility. Approved county bilingual/multilingual staff must demonstrate an ability to:

- Fluently and effectively communicate in both English and the primary language of the LEP individual
- Have a basic knowledge of specialized terms and concepts used frequently in the provision of county services
- Understand the obligation to maintain confidentiality
- Understand the roles of interpreters and the ethics associated with being an interpreter

New Hanover County has a bilingual/multilingual hiring preference for positions that provide direct, critical services to individuals with limited English proficiency and these positions are advertised to attract
bilingual/multilingual candidates. Prior to becoming a New Hanover County employee, a bilingual/multilingual candidate shall be tested to ensure that are competent in each identified language. Bilingual/multilingual employees may receive additional remuneration if interpreter duties fall outside of their everyday responsibilities. Compensation for interpretation services performed by qualified employees is determined by Human Resources.

**Translation**

New Hanover County will ensure the proactive translation of vital written documents into identified strategic languages or frequently encountered languages of LEP groups served or likely to be affected by the benefit, program, or service.

The determination of what documents are considered “vital” is left to the discretion of individual departments, which are in the best position to evaluate their circumstances and services within their language access planning materials. Documents that may be considered “vital” may include, but are not limited to:

- Claim or application forms, release, administrative complaints, or waiver forms
- Public outreach or educational materials (including web-based material)
- Emergency preparedness information for the public
- Letters or notices pertaining to policy changes
- Written notices of rights, denial, loss, or decreases in benefits or services, or hearings
- Forms or written material related to individual rights
- Notices of community meetings or other community outreach
- Notices regarding the availability of language assistance services provided by the component at no cost to individuals with limited English proficiency

Official translation requests should be submitted to the Language Access Coordinator for assessment and routing to internal or professional services. Departments will incur any additional costs for translation requests that are routed to professional services.

**Language Access Coordinator**

The Language Access Coordinator will help bridge language barriers and ensure effective communication across various departments and agencies within New Hanover County. The coordinator oversees and implements the language access plans and policies. They also assess the current language needs of New Hanover County and develop strategies to effectively communicate with individuals with limited English proficiency, including but not limited to:

- Coordination of interpreter services for language-dependent interactions between agency staff and individuals with limited English proficiency
- Ensure compliance across the agency with Title VI LEP standards and other federal, state, and local regulations
- Oversee the translation of key documents, forms, and informational materials into multiple languages to ensure accessibility for individuals with limited English proficiency
- Coordinate and implement community outreach and communication efforts to inform the public of language access resources
- Serve as the main point of contact for language-related inquiries and concerns within the agency
Overall, the Language Access Coordinator is responsible for facilitating effective communication, identifying, and addressing language barriers, and improving access to government services for individuals with limited English proficiency. Their work contributes to creating a more equitable experience for diverse members of the community in their interactions with government agencies.

Resolving Complaints
New Hanover County will make all reasonable modifications to policies and programs to ensure that individuals with limited English proficiency have an equal opportunity to enjoy all county programs, services, and activities. Any person who believes they have been mistreated by an unlawful discriminatory practice has a right to file a formal complaint with New Hanover County.

Complaints may be sent by email, mail, or dropped off in person to the Office of Diversity and Equity. Complaints must be filed within 180 days following the alleged discrimination occurrence. New Hanover County will follow the established complaint procedures and will document actions taken to resolve each complaint promptly.

Title VI Compliance
Office of Diversity & Equity
Linda Thompson, Chief Diversity & Equity Officer
lthompson@nhcgov.com
910-798-7414

ADA Compliance
County Attorney's Office - Risk Management
Franklin Juarez, Safety Officer
fjuarez@nhcgov.com
910-798-7037

Language Access Coordinator
Office of Diversity & Equity
(pending)
References

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 [https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs/TitleVI](https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs/TitleVI)
- Section 1557 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Health and Human Services [https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/section-1557/index.html](https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/section-1557/index.html)
- Building Integrated Communities 2023, UNC-Chapel Hill’s Institute for the Study of the Americas. [https://migration.unc.edu/](https://migration.unc.edu/)