Municipality of Anchorage
Language Access Program Update
July 18, 2025

Executive Summary

This report details the work completed and recommendations for updating the Municipality of Anchorage's (MOA) Language Access Plan (LAP) from January to July 2025. The overarching goal has been to create a radically simple language access program that empowers staff to effectively serve individuals with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and or Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and ensures the public is fully aware of and can easily access available language services.

The comprehensive update involved reviewing existing policies, conducting a departmental assessment, engaging with vendors and community stakeholders, and developing new training and communication materials. The recommendations aim to streamline processes, enhance staff capacity, and improve public awareness, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and accessible MOA for all residents.

I. Conclusions: Creating a Radically Simple Language Access Program

A radically simple language access program hinges on two core principles:

1. clear guidance for staff on identifying and providing services, and
2. robust public awareness of service availability and receiving those services

A. Ensuring Staff Understand How to Identify a Person Who Needs Services and Provide Them

For staff to effectively provide language access services, they must first be able to identify individuals who need assistance and then understand the straightforward steps to connect them with the appropriate resources.

1. Identifying Language Needs: The updated approach emphasizes practical indicators for staff to identify individuals requiring language assistance. These include:

- **Self-Identification:** The individual explicitly states they need an interpreter or translator.
- **Staff Assessment:** The individual struggles with speaking, reading, or writing in English (e.g., difficulties with sentence structure, understanding, or frequently asking staff to repeat or slow down).
- **Visual Cues:** The individual points to a "Point to Your Language" poster, which is designed to be easily accessible and understood.

(Reference: MOA - 2025 Draft Language Access Plan (1).docx, Section 7; 5.0 with AI audio MOA Training Video 2025.pdf, Page 10)

2. Providing Language Services: Once a language need is identified, staff are guided to utilize professional, paid language services, avoiding reliance on friends, family, or untrained bilingual staff. The primary methods include:

- **Over-the-Phone Interpretation (OPI):** The primary and most readily accessible service, currently provided by Language Link. Staff follow a simple, step-by-step process to connect with an interpreter.
- **In-Person Professional Interpreters:** For situations requiring face-to-face interaction, the Alaska Institute for Justice Language Interpreter Center is the designated provider, requiring advance scheduling.
- **Video Remote Interpreting (VRI):** A modern solution for visual communication, with details on providers and procedures to be disseminated by the Office of Equity & Inclusion.
- **Sign Language Interpreters:** Specific providers and relay services are identified for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.
- **Document Translation:** For written materials, staff are instructed to identify the document and required languages, then submit them to approved vendors for professional translation. A key recommendation is to use simplified language in source documents and exercise caution with AI translation tools for official materials.

(Reference: MOA - 2025 Draft Language Access Plan (1).docx, Section 8; 5.0 with AI audio MOA Training Video 2025.pdf, Pages 6-7, 11)

3. Staff Training and Capacity Building: A critical component of a simple program is consistent and effective staff training. The plan mandates annual refresher training for all staff, covering the Language Access Policy, identification techniques, and proper utilization of interpretation resources. The Office of Equity & Inclusion and Department Language Access Representatives are responsible for this training. Recommendations from focus groups and the DEI Commission report emphasize the importance of compensating bilingual staff for their skills and ensuring cultural appropriateness of interpreters, suggesting a need for a committee to oversee this.

(Reference: MOA - 2025 Draft Language Access Plan (1).docx, Section 9; 5.0 with AI audio MOA Training Video 2025.pdf, Page 9; Language Access Equity Committee Work.pdf, Page 2-3)

B. Making Certain the Public Knows Language Services Are Available and Receive Them

Public awareness is paramount to ensuring equitable access. The program focuses on clear notification and an accessible feedback mechanism.

1. Notification of Services: The MOA is committed to prominently displaying "Point to Your Language" posters in public-facing offices and counters. Online, an "Icon" web button and banners will facilitate text translation and direct users to language services information. Community outreach through partners is also a key strategy. The external flyer clearly communicates that "All services are FREE for MOA business" and "You Have the Right to Be Understood."

(Reference: 6.0 MOA - External Flyer.pdf; 6.0 MOA Language Access Program Poster (18 x 24 in).pdf; MOA - 2025 Draft Language Access Plan.docx, Section 8.C; 5.0 with AI audio MOA Training Video 2025.pdf, Page 8)

2. Complaint and Feedback Process: A clear and accessible complaint process is established for LEP individuals who believe services were inadequate or denied. Complaints can be filed online, via email, phone, or in-person/by mail to the Office of Equity and Inclusion. The process ensures investigation and written notification of outcomes, including corrective actions if noncompliance is found. The DEI Commission report suggests allowing agencies or advocates to complain without identifying the individual and providing a place to upload evidence. It also recommends alleviating punishment for residents who miss deadlines due to inadequate language access.

(Reference: MOA - 2025 Draft Language Access Plan.docx, Section 11; Language Access Equity Committee Work.pdf, Page 7)

II. Work Completed: January - July 2025

This section outlines the key activities undertaken to update the MOA's Language Access Plan.

A. Assessment Creation and Interviews

An assessment spreadsheet was created and distributed to various MOA departments to gather data on their current language service provision. Interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights.

Key Findings from Departmental Assessments:

- **Plan Existence:** While many departments (e.g., Anchorage Health Department, Treasury, AWWU, Anchorage Public Library) reported having a written LAP, several (e.g., Solid Waste Services, Information Technology, Chief Admin Officer, Mayor's Office, AFD, PM&E, Purchasing) indicated they did not have one or were unsure. Some existing plans were outdated (more than 3 years old).
- **Identification Methods:** Most departments primarily rely on self-identification, staff assessment, and language identification cards/signage.
- **Services Provided:** Telephone interpretation (Language Link) is the most common service. Some departments also provide document translation, in-person interpretation, and bilingual staff assistance. Video interpretation is less common, but some departments expressed a need for it.
- **Training Gaps:** Several departments reported inconsistent or no formal training on language access procedures, or that training was only conducted upon new hire.
- **Designated Department Language Access Representatives:** Most departments have a designated Language Access Representative, but some were unsure or indicated the contact was outdated.
- **Data Recording:** Recording of language service requests and interactions is inconsistent, with some departments using invoices, manual logs, or no formal process.
- **Frequency of Use:** Many departments rarely or never utilize language services, while others like APD use them daily, and AWWU and Public Transportation use them monthly.
- **Most Requested Languages:** Spanish, Hmong, Russian, Korean, Samoan, and Filipino/Tagalog were frequently cited. ASL was also mentioned.
- **Effectiveness and Challenges:** Departments rated their services from "Unsure" to "Very Effective." Common challenges included lack of resources (especially for document translation), lack of trained staff, limited availability of language access providers (e.g., for specific dialects), and difficulties in identifying language needs. Some noted customer reluctance to use services.

- **Budget Allocation:** Most departments reported spending and allocating between $1-$1,000 annually, with Public Transportation allocating "More Than $10,000." Several departments expressed a need for more funding for translation services.
- **Suggested Improvements:** Departments requested updated data on LEP populations, consistent plans across departments, annual mandatory training, improved video services, and a municipal contract for ASL interpreters. Many expressed a desire for a clear LAP template and more guidance.

(Reference: MOA Language Access Plan Assessment Form - 2025 (Responses) (1).xlsx - Form Responses 1.csv)

B. Policy & Procedure 16-6 Suggested Updates

Policy & Procedure 16-6, the existing Language Access Policy, underwent significant review and suggested updates to align with current best practices and federal guidelines. Key changes include:

- **Expanded Definitions:** Inclusion of Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) and clearer definitions for existing terms.
- **Clarified Responsibilities:** More detailed roles for the Office of Equity and Inclusion, Department Language Access Representatives, and Frontline Municipal Departments.
- **Prohibition of Informal Interpreters:** Explicitly stating that friends, family, or children should not be relied upon for interpretation.
- **Enhanced Complaint Process:** Streamlined and more accessible complaint mechanisms.
- **Emphasis on Plain Language:** The DEI Commission report specifically recommended the "recognized use of plain language for all communications for those with English Language Learners and those with low literacy levels."
- **Mayor's Language Access Liaison Placement:** The DEI Commission report suggested a discussion about the best placement for this role, recommending it be self-sustaining and autonomous, potentially reporting to the Equity Committee directly.

(Reference: MOA Policy_Suggested Edits.pdf; MOA - 2025 Language Access Plan.docx; Language Access Equity Committee Work.pdf, Page 1-4)

C. Vendor Outreach and Updates of Contracts with Recommendations of Publishing a New RFP for Additional Vendors

Outreach was conducted with existing language service providers, Language Link (for OPI and translation) and Alaska Institute for Justice Language Interpreter Center (for in-person interpretation and translation). The assessment revealed some limitations, such as difficulty accessing interpreters for specific dialects (e.g., African dialect, Hmong) and a desire for more video interpretation options.

Given the identified needs and the goal to "Expand Language Offerings" and "Ensure Quality Standards for Interpretation and Translation Services" (as highlighted in the Director's Meeting presentation), a recommendation to publish a new Request for Proposals (RFP) for additional vendors is being made. This will allow the MOA to diversify its language service providers, potentially securing more competitive rates, broader language coverage, and enhanced service types (e.g., VRI, specialized language services). The DEI Commission also suggested a committee to ensure cultural appropriateness of interpreters and auditing of trainings, which could be integrated into future vendor requirements.

(Reference: MOA - 2025 Language Access Plan.docx, Section 8; MOA_Director's Meeting Feb 2025_Language Access Program.pptx, Proposed Updates & Timeline; MOA Language Access Plan Assessment Form - 2025 (Responses) (1).xlsx - Form Responses 1.csv; Language Access Equity Committee Work.pdf, Page 2)

D. Creation of Language Access Program Poster for Staff

A dedicated "Municipality of Anchorage Language Access Program" poster (18 x 24 in) was developed for staff. This poster serves as a quick reference guide, outlining the MOA's policy, federal law context, most spoken languages, types of language assistance available, how to identify language needs, and steps for calling Language Link. It also includes contact information for the Office of Equity and Inclusion.

(Reference: 6.0 MOA Language Access Program Poster (18 x 24 in).pdf)

E. Creation of Notification of Language Services to the Public

An external flyer, "Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) -- Language Access Services," was created to inform the public. This flyer clearly states that "All services are FREE for MOA business" and highlights available services (interpretation, document translation, assistance for deaf/hard-of-hearing) and how to get help (in-person, call, "Point to Your Language" poster). It also provides a QR code and contact information for the Office of Equity and Inclusion to learn more or file complaints.

(Reference: 6.0 MOA - External Flyer.pdf)

F. Updated Simple Language Access Plan

The "MOA - 2025 Draft Language Access Plan (1).docx" represents a significant update, aiming for simplicity and clarity. It consolidates information on purpose, policy, affected organizations, references, definitions, responsibilities, identification methods, assistance measures, staff training, monitoring, evaluation, and the complaint process. This updated plan serves as a comprehensive yet accessible guide for all MOA departments.

(Reference: MOA - 2025 Language Access Plan.docx)

G. Presentation to Language Access Representatives

A presentation titled "Language Access Program Update 2025" was developed and delivered to MOA Directors and Language Access Representatives. This presentation underscored the importance of language access, highlighted the benefits of a comprehensive program (economic efficiency, effective service delivery, increased inclusivity), outlined proposed updates and timelines (policy enhancements, technological integration, staff training, community engagement), and communicated immediate needs from directors (self-assessment completion, records submission, representative assignment).

An additional two hour training was provided in-person to the Language Access Representatives. This training included components of the information presented to the directors, but also expanded to include scenarios of language barriers and how to provide services. The recorded video is available through OEI.

(Reference: MOA_Director's Meeting Feb 2025_Language Access Program.pptx)

H. Creation of an Online Intro to Language Access Video Training

An online introductory video training, "MOA Language Access Training Video," was created. This video provides an overview of the MOA Language Access Program, covering policy and legal frameworks, when and how to deliver language services, and MOA procedures. It serves as an accessible and consistent training resource for all staff.

(Reference: 5.0 with AI audio MOA Training Video 2025.pdf, Pages 1, 16)

I. Focus Group Conversations with English Language Learners

Insights from the "Language Access Equity Committee Work.pdf" indicate that focus group conversations with English Language Learners (LEP community members) were conducted or their feedback was considered. Additionally, small group conversations were held at ALP and Catholic Social Services in June 2025. These sessions highlighted critical issues such as:

- The inadequacy of relying on friends or children for interpretation.
- Experiences with lack of language access in specialized medical appointments.
- The need for culturally appropriate interpreters.
- The desire for the Municipality to release progress on language access.
- The importance of complaint forms being available in all languages and allowing complaints without identifying the individual.
- Concerns about telephonic interpretation being awkward and clunky, and the difficulty in holding translators accountable.
- Recommendations for the MOA to hire and highly compensate bilingual frontline employees.
- Being told "Your English is good - you don't need an interpreter"
- Language access issues at non-muni establishments like local hospitals, Anchorage School District and Ted Stevens Airport.

(Reference: Language Access Equity Committee Work.pdf, Pages 1-7)

III. Recommendations

Based on the work completed and the insights gathered, the following recommendations are put forth to further strengthen the Municipality of Anchorage's Language Access Program:

1. **Standardize and Mandate Training:** Implement a mandatory, annual language access training for all MOA staff, with a focus on practical scenarios for identifying LEP individuals and utilizing services. This training should be easily accessible (leveraging the new video) and tracked for compliance.
2. **Update OEI Language Access Muniverse Webpage:** Have additional resources related directly to the Language Access Program Poster that further explain practices and procedures. For simplicity, having this created in a toolkit fashion that follows the poster will make it easier to navigate for staff
3. **Enhance Technological Integration:** Accelerate the implementation of digital translation tools and multilingual website access. Explore on-demand interpretation technology beyond basic telephonic services, including robust VRI solutions, as requested by departments.
4. **Publish a New RFP for Language Service Vendors:** Issue a comprehensive Request for Proposals (RFP) to expand the pool of qualified language service providers. This RFP should prioritize:
   - Broader language coverage, including less common dialects and indigenous languages
   - Robust VRI capabilities.
   - Mechanisms to ensure culturally appropriate interpretation.
   - Competitive pricing and clear billing procedures.
5. **Strengthen the Language Access Representative Program:** Ensure every department, especially those with high public interaction, has a clearly designated Language Access Representative whose role is formally recognized, funded, and integrated into their job description. These liaisons should be adequately trained and empowered to track service requests, train new staff, and report on compliance.
6. **Develop Clear Guidelines for "Essential Public Information":** Create a municipal guideline for departments to determine what constitutes "essential public information" requiring translation, ensuring consistency across the MOA.
7. **Improve Data Collection and Monitoring:** Implement a standardized system across all departments for recording language service requests, utilization, and feedback. This data is crucial for measuring effectiveness, identifying emerging needs, and informing future resource allocation.
8. **Address Bilingual Staff Compensation:** Investigate and implement a policy for appropriately a.) assessing language ability, b.) providing training on "how to serve as an interpreter" and c.) compensating bilingual MOA employees who utilize their language skills in their official duties, recognizing this as a valuable asset.
9. **Continuous Community Engagement:** Formalize a process for regular listening sessions and feedback mechanisms with LEP communities to ensure the LAP remains responsive to their evolving needs and experiences. This should be integrated into how departments do their work.
10. **Promote Plain Language:** Continue to advocate for and train staff on the use of simplified, plain language in all communications, both written and oral, to enhance accessibility for individuals with varying literacy levels.
11. **Fund Allocation for Language Access:** Every department stated financial issues for providing services. The Assembly and Mayor should work together to create a budget line item that creates a pool for language access needs OR to carve out funding for departments to provide services.

12. **Language Access Coordinator/Manager Position:** Eventually the MOA should create a full-time position for a language access coordinator or manager. This person will be able to operate a comprehensive language access program that supports the community and staff in this work.

By implementing these recommendations, the Municipality of Anchorage can build upon the foundational work completed and establish a truly simple, effective, and equitable language access program for all its residents.

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Deliverables

Language Access Program Poster (Displayed in department offices) - Canva link for making changes

Notification of Services flyer (External but should also be displayed around MOA buildings) Canva link for making changes

Training Video - Canva link for making changes

Updated Language Access Plan Template