

## Language Access Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is language access?**

Language access ensures that people have access to public services regardless of their English language proficiency.

### **What are the sources of law that allow individuals to have language access?**

U.S. law prohibits discrimination based on national origin through [Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and includes requirements such as [Executive Order 13166](#), “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency,” to provide reasonable accommodation for Limited English Proficient persons to access services.

### **Who is a Limited English Proficient (LEP) individual?**

An individual who does not speak English as their primary language and has a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English can be considered as limited English proficient (LEP).

### **How many people living in the United States are considered LEP?**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s [American Community Survey](#), over 8% of the U.S. population, or more than 25 million people living in the U.S., have limited English proficiency.

### **Who must provide those with LEP language access?**

Any federal agency or federally contracted agency (state, municipal, or private) must ensure language access. These agencies must take reasonable actions to guarantee that LEP individuals have meaningful access to programs and services and information about such programs and services.

### **What is a language access plan? Why is a language access plan important?**

A language access plan details how an agency or organization can provide services to individuals who are non-English speaking or have limited English proficiency. The plan should include a needs assessment, a description of language services offered, implementation notices, training for staff, and evaluation and should be tailored to the services offered by the organization or agency.

Language access plans are critical to ensure that agencies have the information and resources needed to meaningfully serve the LEP community. To help agencies develop a language access plan, the federal government administers a website, [www.lep.gov](http://www.lep.gov), which provides information, tools, and other assistance.

### **Do state governments have responsibilities to provide language access to their residents?**

Some state and local governments have their own language access regulations.

**State:** Michigan’s “[Meaningful Language Access to State Services Act](#)” took effect in February 2024. This bill was passed in response to LEP persons experiencing barriers when trying to access state services. Before this law was enacted, if an agency only received funding from the state or local government, there was no requirement for the agency to provide language assistance. For example, state or municipal health care agencies in Michigan relying on state or local funding, with no federal funding, were not required to ensure language access as there was no legal requirement at the state level until 2024, meaning LEP persons faced significant language barriers when trying to access health care services through these agencies.

**City:** Baltimore codified its [Language Access Policy](#) in December 2024. The policy ensures access to essential Baltimore City services for all residents, regardless of the language they speak. Any Baltimore City government department, office, or other organization that administers a publicly funded program that delivers a direct public service must provide an LEP individual with meaningful access to services, regardless of whether the department, office, or organization is a recipient of federal financial support.

### **Do county and city governments also have a responsibility to provide language access?**

Even in states where there are existing language access laws, counties and cities may not be required by law to provide language access services. For that reason, local governing bodies, such as city councils, should pass their own laws to ensure that the LEP community has access to county and city services.

### **Why is language access important? Why is it a good thing?**

Language access is a critical tool to ensure that all people in the United States, including refugees and immigrants, can access the public services they need to support their well-being and fully integrate into the United States. When the LEP community can improve their overall well-being by meaningfully accessing public services, such as health care, education, and housing, U.S. communities as a whole can thrive.

### **How can improved language access impact community health?**

By eliminating language barriers, language access can lead to [improved community health outcomes](#). Language barriers can lead to medication dosing errors, difficulties in managing chronic conditions, and increased hospitalizations. When patients can fully describe their symptoms through the help of interpreters, or when they are able to read a form explaining treatment plans in their first language, they will receive the most appropriate care for their conditions. When health conditions are treated appropriately, health outcomes will improve overall.

### **What can you do to help promote language access?**

If you live in a state or locality that does not have laws in place to ensure language access to public services, please reach out to your elected officials and educate them on the benefits of language access. Research how other states or localities have codified language access and plot out your own action plan to promote language access in your community.