

## Ten Things You Need to Know About Language Access Advocacy for Seniors

1. **More than 3.3 million of American's seniors are not fluent in English.** A significant number of these seniors are low-income; in 2003, 38% of low-income SSI applicants who were 65 and over asked to be interviewed in a language other than English.
2. Individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and who have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English are considered **limited English proficient, or "LEP."** These individuals may be entitled to language assistance with respect to a particular service, benefit, or encounter.
3. Language assistance, including **translation and interpretation, is vital to assist LEP seniors** in navigating aging network services. (Note: *Translation* refers to written materials, and *interpretation* is oral assistance.) **Cultural competence**, or the ability to interact effectively with persons of different cultures, is also a key component of effective communication with LEP individuals.
4. **Many LEP seniors are unable to attain full fluency in English.** Age and physical barriers may combine with other factors; seniors are less likely to be working, going to school, or raising children, the typical methods for attaining fluency in adulthood. Further, elderly refugees who have fled oppressive governments or war zones may have experienced severe trauma. It is unrealistic to expect them to attain full proficiency.
5. **LEP seniors are diverse and live throughout the U.S.** Hailing from many different backgrounds and ethnicities, they are not just in coastal centers. Minnesota is home to many Somalis. There are significant Hmong populations in towns such as La Crosse, Wisconsin. Spanish-speaking elders, who comprise the largest single LEP group, are a significant presence in almost every state. **LEP seniors also speak many different languages.** The Social Security Administration broadly distributes its "Interpretive Service Policy" in 19 languages.
6. **Language access is a protected civil right.** Federal law prohibits discrimination based on national origin, including discrimination in language access. These civil rights protections have become well-established through an Executive Order and various federal regulations. *Any recipient of federal funds is required to take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access to programs by LEP individuals.* Many states and localities also have enacted additional specific requirements for language services for LEP individuals.
7. To be effective, **language services must meet certain qualitative standards**, particularly where a client's legal rights, health or well-being is at stake. Trained professionals familiar with appropriate concepts and specialized vocabulary can be extremely important to avoid dangerous or detrimental outcomes. Minor grandchildren

are not generally appropriate interpreters except in emergency situations. Untrained laypersons often are unfamiliar with legal or medical terms and can make serious mistakes.

8. Many organizations serving LEP clients use professional **“language line” services** – telephonic services available in hundreds of languages on demand. Such services may also be able to provide **“oral translation,”** or simultaneous spoken communication about the contents of a document written in English. Such services can be extremely effective, but should not take the place of hiring **bilingual staff** and providing **written translations**.
9. As required by federal law, organizations serving LEP populations should endeavor to undergo regular **assessment, planning, and monitoring** of LEP outreach and the delivery of services. Achieving progress in gaining individual and institutional cultural competence should be seen as a dynamic, ongoing process.
10. There are many **resources** available to aging network organizations:
  - a. The National Center on Cultural Competence has many resources on understanding language access and how to implement it.  
[nccc.georgetown.edu/features/language.html](http://nccc.georgetown.edu/features/language.html)
  - b. The Federal Interagency Working Group on Limited English Proficiency has a website with a wealth of resources, including links to a [Know Your Rights Beneficiary Brochure](#), available in 10 languages, and a Language Identification Flashcard to assist in identifying 38 languages. The various federal agency LEP policies and plans are also provided at this site.  
[www.lep.gov/resources/resources.html](http://www.lep.gov/resources/resources.html)
  - c. The U.S. Department of Justice recently issued a “Language Access Assessment and Planning Tool,” useful for all entities that receive federal funds.  
[www.lep.gov/resources/2011\\_Language\\_Access\\_Assessment\\_and\\_Planning\\_Tool.pdf](http://www.lep.gov/resources/2011_Language_Access_Assessment_and_Planning_Tool.pdf)
  - d. The National Senior Citizens Law Center has produced a number of pieces on language access, including a resource manual on language access and In-Home Supportive Services (California’s personal care program for low income Medicaid recipients). [www.nsclc.org/index.php/health/language-access](http://www.nsclc.org/index.php/health/language-access)
  - e. The U.S. Administration on Aging has produced a Diversity Toolkit for planning services to diverse communities. While not focused on language services, the kit includes many useful resources.  
[www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA\\_Programs/Tools\\_Resources/DOCS/AoA\\_Diversity\\_Toolkit\\_full.pdf](http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA_Programs/Tools_Resources/DOCS/AoA_Diversity_Toolkit_full.pdf)