


Date: October 23, 2020

To: Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Thomas B. Modica, City Manager 

Subject: **Update on Language Access Policy**

At its April 14, 2020 meeting, the City Council requested City Manager to:

- 1) Establish COVID-19 information lines in multiple languages and also website landing pages in the three most commonly spoken languages (Spanish, Khmer, Tagalog), as described in the City's Language Access Policy (LAP);
- 2) Provide adequate staffing, resources, and translation services to ensure that monolingual residents are apprised of the most up-to-date information regarding the COVID-19 global pandemic, public health updates, and City services; and,
- 3) Report back on the feasibility and costs associated with permanently moving translation services in-house to provide a faster response and update to our residents.

Additionally, at its August 11, 2020 meeting, the City Council adopted the Framework for Reconciliation with an amendment to improve language translation services at City Council meetings. This memorandum provides an update on those items, as well as the services provided by through the LAP in FY 20.

Language Access During COVID-19 Response

The City's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has entailed an unprecedented volume of public communications to share information about testing, City services and resources, health information and orders, closures, and more. The inability to conduct in-person meetings has also required additional work to ensure virtual public engagement in Spanish, Khmer, and Tagalog to ensure non-English-speaking residents have access to information. In March 2020, as the City was initiating its pandemic response, the LAP Program Coordinator was embedded in the Joint Information Center (JIC) to support information translation. Subsequently, bilingual staff were also reassigned to the JIC to provide greater efficiency for document translation.

COVID-19 Bilingual Information

The City's COVID-19 website was developed with Spanish, Khmer, and Tagalog pages, with links to translated health orders, documents, and other information. Additionally, the main page of the website can be instantly translated using the Google Translate plug-in located at the top of the page.

The COVID-19 information phone line utilizes a multilingual phone menu, voicemail inboxes, and has a full-time Spanish-speaking staff person. Khmer and Tagalog translation staff from the JIC respond to callers as needed. Testing and contact tracing efforts have also incorporated

LAP procedures by ensuring staff scheduled during each shift are multilingual and can meet the needs of the diverse individuals served. If staff are not immediately available to provide services in the language needed, staff will use over-the-phone interpretation using the LAP language line. Approximately 20 percent of the information line and contact tracing calls require bilingual staff, with the majority of those calls in Spanish.

Translation and Interpretation Requests

As reflected below, the unprecedented volume of requests related to COVID-19 and its impact on City services, resulted in a 260 percent increase in translation requests compared to FY 19.

	Spanish	Khmer	Tagalog
FY 19 Translation Requests	170	165	104
FY 20 COVID Translation Requests	391	384	366
FY 20 Non-COVID Translation Requests	163	157	126
Total	554	541	492

In FY 20, the LAP fulfilled 102 requests for interpretation at public meetings. Although many meetings were canceled early in the pandemic due to health orders, 23 meetings transitioned to virtual community events, which required professional interpretation. The total number of requests for interpretation was about half compared to FY 19 (205).

All LAP services related to COVID-19, including the costs of bilingual staff time for translation, are reimbursable by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for pandemic response.

Language Access at City Council meetings

The transition to virtual public meetings presented several technological challenges, including the ability to offer simultaneous interpretation at City Council meetings. The City Clerk's Office has been working with LAP staff to address concerns regarding the availability and quality of interpretation at City Council meetings.

Technical Issues

Community members provided feedback about technical issues, including background noise, extended wait times to be added into the meeting room in their language, and sound quality of the meeting and interpretation. To address these issues, the City Clerk's Office provided space for interpreters in the media room and lobby of Council Chambers, while also maintaining social distancing requirements. Each interpreter has their own headset to minimize background noise and assist with volume control. The City Clerk's Office is working with the Technology and Innovation Department to meet with vendors for a better software solution.

Interpretation Availability & Quality

As requested by City Council during the FY 21 budget process, Spanish interpretation is now available at all City Council meetings, including study sessions. Prior to this directive, it had

been challenging to schedule an available interpreter within a 24-hour timeframe. Additionally, the interpreters did not always have adequate time to review the agenda and any presentations or materials prior to the meeting, which has had an impact on the quality of interpretation. Moving forward, the City Clerk's Office will be able to provide the vendor with advance notice of the City Council meetings schedule and materials for the interpreter to better prepare.

Staffing and Budget

The City Clerk's Office estimates the cost to provide two Spanish interpreters for 3-6 hours at 40 City Council meetings in FY 21 will be \$64,000 annually. The estimated cost does not include translation services for other language requests (Tagalog or Khmer). The additional \$40,000 allocated during the FY 21 budget adoption process to the LAP in the City Manager's Office will provide for regular interpretation provided at 25 City Council meetings. Staff anticipate an additional \$24,000, currently unbudgeted, will be needed to provide Spanish interpreters at the remaining 15 meetings in FY 21. The City Clerk's Office will monitor utilization of interpretation at City Council meetings, along with the associated expenditures in FY 21, and report back to City Council at a future date on whether the additional \$24,000 can be absorbed within the City Manager's General Fund budget, or if an additional one-time appropriation will be required.

In-House Language Access Services

LAP staff and the City Clerk's Office currently use vendors to provide interpretation and translation services. To provide the minimum level of services needed with City staff based upon current demand, it is estimated at least six Spanish translation/interpretation staff, four Khmer-speaking staff, and two Tagalog-speaking staff would be required.

Each translation/interpretation staff, hired under the classification of Administrative Aide II, would cost \$83,992 to \$108,778 annually (depending on step placement). A fully-staffed Language Access Division with 12 translators/interpreters would cost approximately \$1,007,904 to \$1,305,336 annually.

If you have any questions, please contact Deputy City Manager Teresa Chandler at (562) 570-5116.

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