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INTRODUCTION



Illinois is home to a diverse population, and language barriers can prevent Limited English Proficient (LEP) residents from fully participating in all that the state has to offer. People with limited English proficiency may not be aware of public services provided to them or might not understand communications our agency wants to convey to the public. As the Director of the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) it is important to me that we provide language access services to the residents and visitors of Illinois. We are committed to ensuring

everyone is provided with equal access to the available programs, services, and information that OSFM has to offer.

I am pleased to present the revised OSFM 2025 Language Access Plan which outlines our efforts to do everything possible to assist all customers by providing services in the language which they can best understand.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michele L. Pankow". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michele" being more prominent.

Michele L. Pankow
Illinois State Fire Marshal





Office of the State Fire Marshal

Language Access Plan

I. LEGAL BASIS AND PURPOSE

a. Background on Language Access Laws and Orders

This document shall serve as the Language Access Plan ("LAP") for the Office of the State Fire Marshal ("OSFM") to provide services to limited English proficient ("LEP") individuals, as required under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 45 C.F.R. §80 et seq., and 28 C.F.R. §42 et seq. A LEP individual is someone who is not able to speak, read, write or understand the English language at a level that allows him or her to effectively access or take advantage of OSFM services, documents, programs, or activities. The purpose of this LAP is to provide a framework for the provision of timely and reasonable language assistance to LEP persons who come in contact with OSFM, and to ensure that those LEP individuals are provided with meaningful and equal access to OSFM and matters within OSFM's regulatory scope.

In 2000, President Clinton's Executive Order 13166 affirmed the obligations of all federal agencies, *as well as any state or local agency that receives federal financial assistance*, to ensure that LEP individuals can meaningfully interact with government agencies. Federal financial assistance includes, but is not limited to, grants and loans of federal funds; grants or donations of federal property; training; details of federal personnel; or any agreement, arrangement, or other contract which has as one of its purposes the provision of assistance. An agency's failure to ensure that LEP individuals can effectively participate in, or benefit from, federally assisted entities, programs, and activities may run afoul of the protections under Title VI. As such, all State of Illinois agencies, boards, commissions, programs, and activities that receive federal funding must take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to LEP individuals. Similarly, the Illinois Civil Rights Act of 2003, which is modeled after Title VI, prohibits units of State, county, and local government from utilizing criteria or methods of administration that have a disparate impact on the basis of race or national origin, regardless of intent. *See* 740 ILCS 23/5.

b. Employment Plans, Bilingual Needs and Disability Surveys

Every year, State agencies are required to report data and information to the Department of Central Management Services (CMS) to enable CMS to track State agencies' hiring practices of African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, respectively, and to assess State agencies' success in implementing strategies and programs in accordance with the previous year's



Employment Plans. State agencies are also required to annually report Bilingual Needs and Bilingual Pay data. A Disability Survey is also offered to OSFM employees annually so those employees have the ability to voluntarily self-identify a disability so the Agency can collect affirmative action statistics but also to identify employees who may need assistance in emergency situations. The responses to these surveys contribute to a collective effort to ensure that everyone across the State of Illinois can access the rights, privileges and benefits to which they are entitled, including individuals with limited English proficiency.

II. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION & DATA

Based on information supplied by the Office of the Governor, the top five non-English languages spoken in Illinois are: Spanish, Polish, Chinese (including Mandarin and Cantonese dialects), Tagalog, and Arabic. OSFM has taken steps to provide interpreter and/or translator services to all LEP individuals. To that end, OSFM has acquired contractual resources to expand language access not only to individuals in those five most common identified languages, but in other languages as needed. The Great Cities Institute states that 1,024,888 individuals in Illinois did not speak English very well from years 18-22.

Last year, OSFM only had two LEP requests in Spanish. This low number results from our proactive approach, as our agency primarily interacts with Fire Service agencies and not directly with the public. When we receive an LEP request, it is generally interpretation needs between field inspectors and LEPs on inspection visits. Data collection relies on OSFM staff indicating LEP requests to the Language Access Coordinator and will note total interactions during the year on our database. In addition, OSFM surveys all divisions yearly, and no divisions requested extra bilingual staff or additional resources to assist LEPs. OSFM also conducts a yearly DEIA survey for internal staff to note additional languages they are proficient in, both written and oral, which was zero, not including our bilingual personnel. Regarding complaints, the agency has not received any complaints.

III. LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE RESOURCES

a. In-House Interpreters

OSFM has two designated Spanish-speaking translators on staff. One is the OSFM Hispanic Liaison, who also serves as the Language Access Coordinator; the other is an Agency employee with a Spanish skillset. Both are fluent in Spanish and available to assist Spanish-speaking LEP individuals. These translators will be deployed as needed and when requested. The Hispanic Liaison, Roberto Lopez, oversees data on complaints and data collection on LEP requests, frequency, and language requests and updates the Languages Access plan yearly. His email is Roberto.c.lopez@illinois.gov, and his cell number is (312) 814-1645.

OSFM has a clear procedure. When OSFM staff receive an express request from Spanish-speaking LEP individuals for an interpreter or translator, arrangements will be made to connect those LEP individuals with one of those designated OSFM staff members. Alternatively, if any OSFM staff having direct communication with a Spanish-speaking LEP person believes that the LEP individual is having difficulty understanding all or a portion of the conversation, that OSFM staff



member can either inquire if the LEP individual would like an in-house Spanish-speaking interpreter/translator to join the conversation, or unilaterally determine to engage an in-house Spanish-speaking interpreter/translator.

The OSFM Hispanic Liaison will be the primary contact for requests regarding translation assistance for Spanish-speaking LEP persons, whether for spoken interpretation or translation or to translate a written document. Our other designated on-staff Spanish-speaking translator will provide backup for the Hispanic Liaison as needed.

b. 3rd Party Language Assistance Translator/Interpreter Services

For other, non-Spanish, languages for which OSFM does not have in-house interpreters or translators, OSFM currently has contractual arrangements in place for translator and interpreter services. A request can be made by LEP individuals, or OSFM staff may recognize that an interpreter is needed to assist LEP individuals. Once the need is identified, the OSFM staff member involved can communicate that request to the Agency Language Access Coordinator Roberto Lopez.

OSFM's Language Access Coordinator will determine which third-party option best addresses the situation of the person in need of language access assistance and will then provide the means to connect that person with the most appropriate vendor. Services available include:

- Language conversion service to translate documents for these six languages: Polish, Arabic, Hindi, Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog. Spanish translations are done in-house using OSFM's staff translators.
- Translator and interpreter services addressing approximately 200 languages.

Document translation is a service available to OSFM and its clients through the Department of Innovation and Technology (DoIT) using the DoIT Document Translation Portal. Once approved to access the service, agencies can have documents translated using DoIT's Document Translation Portal to convert Agency documents on request. Agencies will be billed based on their usage of the document translation service on a per page basis.

Translator/interpreter services are available 24/7/365 from the contracted vendors by phone, with a live agent providing the interpreting or translation services needed, in approximately 200 languages including American Sign Language and Mexican Sign Language services in one of the contracts.

In addition, OSFM's contracted computer-testing provider, PearsonVue, can address either translation or accommodation requests as needed for test-taking assistance. The current contract with PearsonVue is consistent with the Illinois Information Technology Accessibility Act (IITAA) standards. *See 30 ILCS 587/1 et seq.* These IITAA standards will be added to other OSFM contracts for software and online services provided by OSFM that will be accessed by the public as those software and online services contracts come due for renewal.



c. Accessing OSFM Document Resources & Complaints

OSFM's Divisions have many forms, applications and other documents available at the OSFM website to contractors, business owners and operators, and the general public. A comprehensive list of the OSFM Divisions' Documents can be accessed directly by using this link: <https://sfm.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/sfm/sfmdocuments/documents/osfmvitaldocuments.pdf>. The OSFM vital documents can also be viewed on our website here <https://sfm.illinois.gov/about/osfm-dei.html>. The OSFM initial webpage includes a language visual tool on top that lets users select their preferred language, and the first six listed are the most common in our state. In case language assistance is required with reading and/or completing a document, please contact the OSFM Language Access Coordinator at Roberto.C.Lopez@illinois.gov, or contact the Division associated with the document directly using the information in the Vital Documents Form. The Language Access Coordinator is also the Agency's Hispanic Liaison, so if assistance with Spanish translation of an OSFM document or other written material is needed, the same contact will be used: Roberto.C.Lopez@Illinois.gov. As noted, before, the agency's primary interaction is with fire agencies and not directly with the public; therefore, OSFM rarely receives document translation.

In the event that someone should encounter difficulties, either specifically with Language Access or generally with any kind of treatment felt to be questionable or problematic, there is an OSFM form available to help report that treatment. The OSFM Complaint Form, available at this link: <https://sfm.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/sfm/sfmdocuments/documents/dei/osfmdeicompaintform.pdf>, should be filled out, signed and returned to the OSFM Language Access and Disability Access Coordinator. Questions about the form, how to complete it, or problems with accessing the link should be sent to the same person for assistance.

When staff requests language assistance from LAC, they play a crucial role in informing LAC, and training is provided. The Language Access Coordinator will then ask the LEP how our process was, and the LEP will be informed of the complaint form at that moment. If the agency received a complaint, the Languages Access Coordinator would be the first person to receive notification. LAC will note facts, enter them into systems, and ensure a secure and efficient escalation to the Deputy Director. LAC will note recommendations, and the Deputy Director will decide on the next steps, consulting with the State Fire Marshal or General Counsel. If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily, LAC will reach out to the Governor's Office of New Americans at GOV.NewAmericans@illinois.gov.

IV. TRAINING OF OSFM STAFF & OUTREACH

OSFM is committed to training OSFM staff and increasing awareness of LEP issues and responsibilities among that staff. This training may include defining LEP individuals and identifying LEP individuals who need language assistance, awareness of OSFM's in-house Spanish-speaking translators, information on current state contracts available for translation services, and identifying options that OSFM has made available to LEP individuals to assist them. Every year, the Language access coordinator sends out staff duties to all staff when dealing with LEP and actions. During orientation, HR will provide new staff with the Language



Access Plan (LAP) document, along with information about their state benefits. This ensures that all new employees are informed and up to date with the LAP. Training will be required for the Language Access Coordinator and staff receiving bilingual pay to review the Language Access Plan (LAP), available resources, and related procedures.

OSFM also has a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (“DEIA”) working group that can internally augment Agency efforts to raise awareness of LAP and LEP issues within the Agency. In addition, our Agency Hispanic Liaison is also the OSFM Diversity Officer, responsible for training Agency staff on matters of diversity and access. To that end, the OSFM Diversity Officer will:

- Conduct staff training to address raising our employees’ awareness of cultural issues;
- Explore ways to improve Agency staff’s communication with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The OSFM Diversity Officer will also initiate outreach to our State’s diverse communities by:

- Forging relationships with those communities to raise their awareness of the various elements comprising OSFM’s mission; and
- Explain the avenues available to those communities for connecting with the Agency to meet their language needs better; and
- Quarterly outreach events in marginalized communities focused on local schools are shared with all staff members to participate.

V. PUBLIC NOTIFICATION AND ONGOING PLAN EVALUATION

The LAP will be submitted to the Office of the Governor. The LAP can be made available upon request via the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”). FOIA requests can also be filed online through the OSFM website at <https://sfm.illinois.gov/electronic-foia-request-form.html>. Language Access Resource signage will be prominently posted in all OSFM offices across the state. This will ensure staff are informed about available resources and equipped to provide them to the public. Members of the public visiting our offices will also have access to this signage and related materials. The Diversity Officer will work with fire departments in our state and with fire associations or commissions that want to partner with the OSFM to increase access to communities with high LEPS.

The LAP will be reviewed at certain intervals to ensure the LAP meets the ongoing and evolving needs of LEP individuals, accurately reflects OSFM’s operations at the time, and is in line with expectations from the Office of the Governor.

VI. CONTACT INFORMATION

OSFM’s Language Access Coordinator:
Roberto C. Lopez
1035 Stevenson Drive
Springfield, IL 62703



Roberto.C.Lopez@illinois.gov
(217) 685-0450 (cell)
(312) 814-1645 (office)

VII. EFFECTIVE DATE

This OSFM LAP shall be effective as of July 1, 2021.

- Revision: November 30, 2025.

