

I thank Representative ELLSWORTH for his excellent recommendations in offering this bill and seeing it through to the point where we are now on the House floor. I hope this bill will soon become law.

I urge all my colleagues to vote for H.R. 4881.

Mr. BRALEY of Iowa. Mr. Speaker, I encourage all of my colleagues to vote in favor of this bill.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Iowa (Mr. BRALEY) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 4881, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

PLAIN LANGUAGE IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS ACT OF 2008

Mr. BRALEY of Iowa. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 3548) to enhance citizen access to Government information and services by establishing plain language as the standard style for Government documents issued to the public, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 3548

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2008”.

SEC. 2. PURPOSE.

The purpose of this Act is to improve the Federal Government’s effectiveness and accountability to the public by promoting clear communication that the public can understand and use.

SEC. 3. DEFINITIONS.

In this Act:

(1) AGENCY.—The term “agency” means an Executive agency, as that term is defined in section 105 of title 5, United States Code.

(2) PLAIN LANGUAGE.—The term “plain language” means language that the intended audience can readily understand and use because it is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices of plain language writing.

SEC. 4. RESPONSIBILITIES OF FEDERAL AGENCIES.

(a) REQUIREMENT TO USE PLAIN LANGUAGE IN NEW DOCUMENTS.—Within one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, each agency—

(1) shall use plain language in any covered document of the agency issued or substantially revised after the date of the enactment of this Act;

(2) may use plain language in any revision of a covered document issued on or before such date; and

(3) shall, when appropriate, use the English language in covered documents.

(b) GUIDANCE.—In implementing subsection (a), an agency may follow either the guid-

ance of the Plain English Handbook, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Plain Language Guidelines. If any agency has its own plain language guidance, the agency may use that guidance, as long as it is consistent with the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, the Plain English Handbook, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the recommendations made by the Comptroller General under section 5(c).

(c) ADDITIONAL PROVISIONS RELATING TO USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE.—Nothing in this Act shall be construed—

(1) to prohibit the use of a language other than English;

(2) to limit the preservation or use of Native Alaskan or Native American languages (as defined in the Native American Languages Act);

(3) to disparage any language or discourage any person from learning or using a language;

(4) to impact or affect protections regarding language access; or

(5) to be inconsistent with the Constitution of the United States.

(d) COVERED DOCUMENT.—In this section, the term “covered document”—

(1) means any document that explains how to obtain a benefit or service or file taxes, or that is relevant to obtaining a benefit or service or filing taxes; and

(2) includes, whether in paper or electronic form, a letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction but does not include a regulation.

(e) USE OF PLAIN LANGUAGE BY AGENCIES.—Each agency should, to the extent practicable and appropriate, use plain language in any collection of information (as defined in section 3502(3)(A)(i) of title 44, United States Code).

(f) INCORPORATION OF COMPTROLLER GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS.—

(1) REPORTS.—

(A) FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION.—The Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, acting through the Plain Language Action and Information Network, shall submit to the committees described in paragraph (2) a report on whether the recommendations made by the Comptroller General in the report under section 5(c) have been incorporated into the Federal Plain Language Guidelines described in subsection (b), and, if such recommendations have not been incorporated, an explanation of why they have not been incorporated.

(B) SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION.—The Securities and Exchange Commission shall submit to the committees described in paragraph (2) a report on whether the recommendations made by the Comptroller General in the report under section 5(c) have been incorporated into the Plain English Handbook described in subsection (b), and, if such recommendations have not been incorporated, an explanation of why they have not been incorporated.

(2) COMMITTEES.—The committees described in this paragraph are the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the Senate.

(3) DEADLINE.—The reports required under paragraph (1) shall be submitted within six months after the issuance of the report provided by the Comptroller General under section 5(c).

SEC. 5. REPORTS TO CONGRESS.

(a) INITIAL REPORT.—Within six months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the head of each agency shall submit to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives and

the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the Senate a report that describes how the agency intends to meet the following objectives:

(1) Communicating the requirements of this Act to agency employees.

(2) Training agency employees to write in plain language.

(3) Meeting the deadline set forth in section 4(a).

(4) Ensuring ongoing compliance with the requirements of this Act.

(5) Designating a senior official to be responsible for implementing the requirements of this Act.

(6) Using, to the extent practicable and appropriate, plain language in regulations promulgated by the agency.

(b) ANNUAL AND OTHER REPORTS.—

(1) The head of each agency shall submit to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the Senate a report on—

(A) compliance with this Act; and

(B) the agency’s continued efforts to meet the objectives specified in subsection (a).

(2) A report under this subsection shall be submitted—

(A) annually for the first two years after the date of the enactment of this Act; and

(B) once every three years thereafter.

(c) EVALUATION AND REPORT BY COMPTROLLER GENERAL.—Within six months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Comptroller General shall evaluate existing guidance for agencies on writing in plain language, including the guidance listed in section 4(b), and provide to the Office of Management and Budget, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives, and the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the Senate a report providing recommendations on—

(1) plain language guidelines; and

(2) best practices for plain language.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Iowa (Mr. BRALEY) and the gentleman from North Carolina (Ms. FOXX) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Iowa.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. BRALEY of Iowa. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Iowa?

There was no objection.

Mr. BRALEY of Iowa. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, last September, I introduced H.R. 3548, the Plain Language in Government Communications Act, and I rise today to talk about the responsibility of this government to communicate effectively with its constituents.

I know that lawyers are often blamed for the legalese that makes government documents so difficult to read and understand. Some might find it unusual that this “Plain Language” bill was introduced by someone who practiced law for 23 years before being elected to Congress. They might be surprised to learn that the use of clear,

concise language in communications has been a passion of mine since I began practicing law in 1983, when the Iowa Supreme Court adopted plain language requirements for jury instructions. Since that time, I have been writing and speaking about the importance of using plain language to improve both written and spoken communications.

I was proud to introduce the Plain Language in Government Communications Act, a bill that requires the Federal Government to write documents such as letters from the Social Security Administration or a notice from the Department of Veterans Affairs in simple, easy-to-understand language. This bill has been endorsed by a broad array of organizations, including the AARP, National Federation of Independent Businesses, Disabled American Veterans, the Small Business Association, Women Impacting Policy, the American Nurses Association, and the American Library Association.

I want to thank the Information Policy Subcommittee Chairman William Lacy Clay and Ranking Member Michael Turner, as well as Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Henry Waxman and Ranking Member Tom Davis for their support of this important legislation. I am pleased that this bill has such strong bipartisan support and passed unanimously in both of these committees.

Anyone who has done their own taxes knows the headache of trying to understand pages and pages of confusing forms and instructions. There is no reason why the Federal Government can't write tax documents and other public documents in language we can all understand.

Writing government documents in plain language will increase government accountability and will save Americans time and money. Plain, straightforward language makes it easy for taxpayers to understand what the Federal Government is doing and what services it's offering.

Small businesses will also see substantial benefits by eliminating Federal gobbledygook. Small businesses often have limited resources and are forced to hire lawyers and outside consultants to navigate the maze of Federal paperwork and convoluted language.

The National Federation of Independent Businesses estimates that the average per hour cost of paperwork and record keeping for small businesses is \$48.72 per hour. The use of clear, easy-to-understand language in government paperwork will substantially reduce burdens on small businesses.

The Plain Language in Government Communications Act will require the Federal Government to write new publications, forms and publicly distributed documents in a clear, concise, well organized manner that follows the best practices of plain language writing.

I have in my hand the Plain Language Handbook that's already being

used by the Securities Exchange Commission, along with the Federal Plain Language guidelines which were adopted under another plain language initiative that began under President Clinton. These guidelines make it clear that the ultimate purpose of any communication from the Federal Government should be to reach the intended audience, the constituents and citizens of this country, in language they can understand and act upon.

Using complex language in government forms, letters, notices and instructions imposes unnecessary hardships on citizens. Replacing complex language with plain language will improve services to the public, save time agencies spend answering questions about what documents mean, and make it easier to hold government agencies accountable for their work.

This document to my right is a perfect example of what I'm talking about when I talk about the problem posed by using gobbledygook in Federal communications. This is a quote from a former Secretary of Defense, and it says, "There are known knowns. These are things we know we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are some things we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. These are things we don't know we don't know."

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That is the problem we are trying to address with this bill.

One other example is this language from a Federal contract requiring investigations of contracts to make sure that they are living up to the purpose that they were intended to perform. This is the original language that was contained in the contracting compliance document, and it covers almost an entire page. The plain language version of that same admonition says simply: "We will take two steps to look at this matter. We will find out if it was an error or a fraud, and we will let you know the result." Clear, concise, and directed to the intended audience.

Finally, one of the best examples of the cost-savings potential is this Veterans Administration form that was used to respond to concerns raised by veterans seeking assistance with their benefits. An old letter that was not drafted in plain language generated an average of 91.4 calls per month, a total of 10,968 calls in a year. After that same form was drafted using these very basic plain language guidelines, they resulted in only 16 calls per month and a total of 1,900 calls for the entire year. You can imagine the enormous savings of time at the Veterans Administration responding to concerns from veterans seeking assistance when you reduce it by that much.

Mr. Speaker, it's important to clarify that nothing in this bill is intended to impact the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 13166, Department of Justice LEP Guidance, any agency LEP guidance, or any other statute, execu-

tive order, agency guidance, regulation, or court order regarding language access.

I hope this bill makes it easier for Americans and small businesses to work with and understand their government. I also hope that in some small way, this bill honors the memory of our former colleague, Maury Maverick, Sr., who served two terms in the House from 1935 to 1939. Congressman Maverick invented the term "gobbledygook" to describe bureaucratic language that was as hard to understand as the call of wild turkeys in his native South Texas.

I want to thank all of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle who join me today in standing up for plain language, in standing up for effective communications with our constituents, in standing up for small business owners, and in standing up for taxpayers, who will see significant cost savings when this bill is signed into law.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Ms. FOXX. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 3548, the Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2008. This legislation would enhance citizen access to government information services by promoting the use of "plain language" in government documents issued to the public.

Writing in plain language doesn't mean writing only about simple things. It means writing well about anything the government writes about.

During committee consideration of this legislation, Republican amendments were adopted that further the cause of requiring the use of plain language. Mr. SALI succeeded in revising the bill to require plain language be used in preparing collections of information, primarily tax documents, as well as regulations issued by Federal agencies. In addition, the committee accepted an amendment I offered to promote the use of the English language in documents.

I have been a consistent advocate in Congress of improving government accountability, responsiveness, and transparency. I believe this legislation is consistent with these efforts.

I urge my colleagues to support the Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2008.

Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to my colleague from Idaho (Mr. SALI).

Mr. SALI. Mr. Speaker, as you sit down to beat the April 15 deadline for filing your tax returns, consider this: In 1913 the IRS tax form, that's singular, "form," was 1 page, and the entire Tax Code was a mere 14 pages long. Today the Tax Code consists of an amazing 15,758 pages bound in 22 volumes. James Madison's words ring true when he said, "It will be of little avail to the people that the laws are made by men of their own choice if the laws be so voluminous that they cannot be

read or so incoherent that they cannot be understood.”

Today this Chamber is addressing a commonsense measure, one dedicated to James Madison's proposition that the laws governing us should be readily understood by average citizens.

No one enjoys paying taxes, but at the very least the forms should be readable and understandable to the average American. Americans should be able to tell quickly and easily whether they're paying too much or too little in taxes. It should not take an attorney to figure it out.

It is imperative that Americans know just what is being asked of them, and that is why plain language in tax forms and instructions is so important.

The Plain Language in Government Communications Act will enhance citizen access to government information and services by promoting the use of plain language in government documents issued to the public.

When the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives addressed this bill in January, I raised concerns that the bill only focused on documents relating to benefits or services. Since that time I have worked with Congressman BRALEY to find a way to expand the scope of this bill to include things like tax forms, instructions, surveys, and other similar documents. These changes appear in the text under consideration today, requiring that tax forms and instructions be made available in plain, straightforward language.

During this time of year, we all recognize the importance of plain language as we tackle tax forms. It is my hope that this bill will become law, which will lessen the burden of government on taxpayers.

I urge my colleagues to support this important and commonsense measure.

Mr. BRALEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I want to thank my colleague from Idaho for working to improve this bill and also for sharing my passion for making sure that the Federal Government is doing everything it can to communicate clearly and effectively with the citizens and taxpayers of this country.

I also want to thank my colleague from North Carolina for her excellent point that adopting plain language requirements does nothing to dumb down the intent and purpose of these Federal documents. In fact, the whole point of adopting plain language guidelines is to improve the effectiveness and the clarity of these documents so that the average person who interacts with them on a daily basis is able to respond directly to the responsibilities laid out under the Federal statutes and regulations and perform the obligations that they are required to by law.

So I want to thank my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for having enormous opportunities to make this a bill that I think we can all be proud of, one that our constituents back home will

benefit from, and one that will save, most significantly, the taxpayers of this country, in my belief, millions and millions of dollars.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Ms. FOXX. Mr. Speaker, I am very, very pleased with this bill and urge all Members to support the passage of H.R. 3548.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. BRALEY. Mr. Speaker, at this time I would just like to remind everyone that one of the points of the bill is it to save taxpayers money. The example that I used earlier from the Jackson, Mississippi, Veterans Benefits Administration where they changed the form that allowed them to reduce substantially the number of requests they got from veterans seeking help with their disability benefits saved \$10,000 in one year, just that one form. And if you think about the multiplier effect of applying plain language guidelines to documents in every Federal agency that are being sent out to citizens and taxpayers, the enormous potential at savings is something that I think we will all be proud of once this bill is signed into law by the President.

With that, I urge its passage.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Iowa (Mr. BRALEY) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 3548, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

Mr. BRALEY. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

HONORING AND RECOGNIZING MEALS ON WHEELS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Ms. WOOLSEY. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and agree to the resolution (H. Res. 259) honoring and recognizing the work of the Meals On Wheels Association of America, its member senior nutrition programs throughout the country, and their annual March For Meals campaigns.

The Clerk read the title of the resolution.

The text of the resolution is as follows:

H. RES. 259

Whereas the Meals On Wheels Association of America is the oldest and largest organization in the United States representing those who provide meal services to people in need;

Whereas the Meals On Wheels member local senior nutrition programs help those men and women in cities, suburban areas,

and rural communities across America who are elderly, homebound, disabled, frail, or at risk;

Whereas the Meals On Wheels member programs provide nutritious meals to individuals who suffer from long-term chronic conditions as well as those who may just need short-term assistance;

Whereas good nutrition is essential to good health and the meals provided by senior nutrition programs contribute to the overall well-being of America's seniors;

Whereas the Meals On Wheels member programs serve this country's over 60 population, which is rapidly growing and projected to increase dramatically;

Whereas the demand for the services Meals On Wheels member programs will continue to increase at an astounding pace;

Whereas in the words of the Meals On Wheels Association of America, these programs are needed "so no senior goes hungry"; and

Whereas each March, chosen because it was during this month that the law was enacted that included senior meal programs in the Older Americans Act of 1965, Meals On Wheels member programs across the country conduct local, community-based "March For Meals" fundraising and awareness campaigns: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the House of Representatives—

(1) recognizes the important work the Meals On Wheels Association of America and its member senior nutrition programs throughout the country do in preventing senior hunger and improving the quality of life for hundreds of thousands of our nation's seniors each year,

(2) recognizes the important role the Meals On Wheels Association of America and its member programs throughout the country's March For Meals campaigns play in increasing awareness of the need for senior nutrition programs and in raising non-Federal funds and soliciting volunteers to support and assist these programs in accomplishing their important mission,

(3) honors the Meals On Wheels Association of America and its member programs for their continuing hard work and dedication on behalf of our nation's seniors, and

(4) encourages Members of Congress to support their local senior nutrition programs by participating in their annual March For Meals events and delivering meals to homebound seniors in a community within their district or State.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. WOOLSEY) and the gentlewoman from North Carolina (Ms. FOXX) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Ms. WOOLSEY. Mr. Speaker, I request 5 legislative days during which Members may insert material relevant to H. Res. 259 into the RECORD.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from California?

There was no objection.

Ms. WOOLSEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

(Ms. WOOLSEY asked and was given permission to revise and extend her remarks.)

Ms. WOOLSEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H. Res. 259, authored by the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. LOBIONDO). H. Res. 259 honors