

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Guidance to Federal Financial Assistance Recipients: Providing Meaningful Access to Individuals Who Have Limited English Proficiency in Compliance With Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

AGENCY: Department of Veterans Affairs.

ACTION: Notice and request for comments.

SUMMARY: In accordance with Executive Order 13166, Improving Access to Service for Persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), this notice requests comments on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) draft guidance on improving access for persons with limited English proficiency to VA assisted programs and activities. Executive Order 13166, requires each Federal agency that awards Federal financial assistance to publish in the **Federal Register** a notice containing Departmental guidance that assists recipients in complying with obligations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title VI regulations to ensure meaningful access to Federally assisted programs and activities for LEP persons.

DATES: Comments must be received on or before July 10, 2003

ADDRESSES: Mail or hand-deliver written comments to: Director, Regulations Management (00REG1), Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Ave., NW., Room 1068, Washington, DC 20420; or fax comments to (202) 273-9026; or e-mail comments to OGCRegulations@mail.va.gov. Comments should indicate that they are submitted in response to "LEP Guidance". All comments received will be available for public inspection in the Office of Regulation Policy and Management, Room 1158, between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday (except holidays). Please call 202 273-9515 for an appointment.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Tyrone Eddins, Office of Resolution Management (08), at (202) 501-2801; or Royce Smith, Office of General Counsel (024), at (202) 273-6374, Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW., Washington, DC 20420.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The purpose of Executive Order 13166 is to eliminate, under Title VI, to the maximum extent possible, limited English proficiency (LEP) as an artificial barrier to full and meaningful participation by beneficiaries in all Federally assisted and Federally conducted programs and activities. The

purpose of this policy is to further clarify the responsibilities of recipients of Federal financial assistance from VA, and assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities to LEP persons, pursuant to Title VI and Title VI regulations. The policy guidance explains that to avoid discrimination against LEP persons on the ground of national origin, recipients must take reasonable steps to ensure that LEP persons have meaningful access to the programs, activities, benefits, services, and information those recipients provide, free of charge.

On March 14, 2002, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a Report To Congress titled "Assessment of the Total Benefits and Costs of Implementing Executive Order No. 13166: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency." The report made several recommendations designed to minimize confusion and ensure that funds dedicated to LEP services will provide meaningful access for LEP individuals. One significant recommendation was the adoption of uniform guidance across all Federal agencies, with flexibility to permit tailoring to each agency's specific recipients.

In a memorandum to all Federal funding agencies, dated July 8, 2002, Assistant Attorney General Ralph Boyd of the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Civil Rights Division requested that agencies model their agency-specific guidance for recipients after Sections I-VIII of DOJ's June 18, 2002 guidance. Therefore, this proposed guidance is modeled after the language and format of DOJ's revised, final guidance, "Guidance to Federal Financial Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons", published June 18, 2002, 67 FR 41455.

Because this Guidance must adhere to the Federal-wide compliance standards and framework detailed in the model DOJ LEP Guidance issued on June 18, 2002, VA specifically solicits comments on the nature, scope and appropriateness of the VA specific examples set out in this guidance explaining and/or highlighting how those consistent Federal-wide compliance standards are applicable to recipients of Federal financial assistance through VA.

It has been determined that the guidance does not constitute a regulation subject to the rulemaking requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act, 5 U.S.C. 553.

The text of the complete guidance document appears below.

Approved: May 28, 2003.

Anthony J. Principi,
Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Guidance on Executive Order 13166, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Title VI Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination In Federally Assisted Programs

I. Introduction

Most individuals living in the United States read, write, speak and understand English. There are many individuals, however, for whom English is not their primary language. For instance, based on the 2000 census, over 26 million individuals speak Spanish and almost 7 million individuals speak an Asian or Pacific Island language at home. If these individuals have a limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English, they are limited English proficient (LEP). While detailed data from the 2000 census has not yet been released, 26% of all Spanish-speakers, 29.9% of all Chinese-speakers, and 28.2% of all Vietnamese-speakers reported that they spoke English "not well" or "not at all" in response to the 1990 census.

Language for LEP individuals can be a barrier to accessing important benefits or services, understanding and exercising important rights, complying with applicable responsibilities, or understanding other information provided by Federally funded programs and activities. The Federal Government funds an array of services that can be made accessible to otherwise eligible LEP persons. The Federal Government is committed to improving the accessibility of these programs and activities to eligible LEP persons, a goal that reinforces its equally important commitment to promoting programs and activities designed to help individuals learn English. Recipients should not overlook the long-term positive impacts of incorporating or offering English as Second Language (ESL) programs in parallel with language assistance services. ESL courses can serve as an important adjunct to a proper LEP plan. However, the fact that ESL classes are made available does not obviate the statutory and regulatory requirement to provide meaningful access for those who are not yet English proficient. Recipients of Federal financial assistance have an obligation to reduce language barriers that can preclude meaningful access by LEP persons to important government services.¹

¹ VA recognizes that many recipients had language assistance programs in place prior to the issuance of Executive Order 13166. This guidance provides a uniform framework for a recipient to

This policy guidance clarifies responsibilities, under existing law, of recipients of Federal financial assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide meaningful access to LEP persons. The purpose is to assist recipients in fulfilling their responsibilities to provide meaningful access to LEP persons under existing law. In certain circumstances, failure to ensure that LEP persons can effectively participate in or benefit from Federally assisted programs and activities may violate the prohibition under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. 2000d and Title VI regulations against national origin discrimination. This policy guidance clarifies existing legal requirements for LEP persons by providing a description of the factors recipients should consider in fulfilling their responsibilities to LEP persons.² These are the same criteria VA will use in evaluating whether recipients are in compliance with Title VI and Title VI regulations.

As with most government initiatives, this requires balancing several principles. While this Guidance discusses that balance in some detail, it is important to note the basic principles behind that balance. First, we must ensure that Federally assisted programs aimed at the American public do not leave some behind simply because they face challenges communicating in English. This is of particular importance because, in many cases, LEP individuals form a substantial portion of those encountered in Federally assisted programs. Second, we must achieve this goal while finding constructive methods to reduce the costs of LEP requirements on small businesses, small local governments, or small non-profits that receive Federal financial assistance.

There are many productive steps that the Federal Government, either collectively or as individual grant agencies, can take to help recipients reduce the costs of language services without sacrificing meaningful access for LEP persons. Without these steps, certain smaller grantees may well

integrate, formalize, and assess the continued vitality of these existing and possibly additional reasonable efforts based on the nature of its program or activity, the current needs of the LEP population it encounters, and its prior experience in providing language services in the community it serves.

² This policy guidance is not a regulation but rather a guide. Title VI and its implementing regulations require that recipients take responsible steps to ensure meaningful access by LEP persons. This guidance provides an analytical framework that recipients may use to determine how best to comply with statutory and regulatory obligations to provide meaningful access to the benefits, services, information, and other important portions of their programs and activities for individuals who are limited English proficient.

choose not to participate in Federally assisted programs, threatening the critical functions that the programs strive to provide. To that end, the VA, in conjunction with the Department of Justice (DOJ), plans to continue to provide assistance and guidance in this important area. In addition, the VA plans to work with DOJ, recipients, and LEP persons to identify and share model plans, examples of best practices, and cost-saving approaches and to explore how language assistance measures, resources and cost-containment approaches developed with respect to its own Federally conducted programs and activities can be effectively shared or otherwise made available to recipients, particularly small businesses, small local governments, and small non-profits. An interagency working group on LEP has developed a Web site, <http://www.lep.gov>, to assist in disseminating this information to recipients, Federal agencies, and the communities being served.

Many commentators have noted that some have interpreted the case of *Alexander v. Sandoval*, 532 U.S. 275 (2001), as impliedly striking down the regulations promulgated under Title VI that form the basis for the part of Executive Order 13166 that applies to Federally assisted programs and activities. The Department of Justice and the VA have taken the position that this is not the case, and will continue to do so. Accordingly, we will strive to ensure that Federally assisted programs and activities work in a way that is effective for all eligible beneficiaries, including those with limited English proficiency.

VA is comprised of three distinct benefits administrations: Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Each of these administrations has programs that provide Federal financial assistance to recipients. Each has existing Title VI program responsibilities that are administered independent of each other.

VHA administers several programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance from the VA. With more than 163 VA medical centers nationwide, VHA manages one of the largest health care systems in the United States. VA medical centers within a Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) work together to provide efficient, accessible health care to veterans in their areas. VHA also conducts research and education and provides emergency medical preparedness.

VBA is responsible for ensuring compliance in proprietary, non-college

educational institutions approved to train veterans and/or their beneficiaries. VBA also provides benefits and services to veterans and their beneficiaries through more than 50 VA regional offices. Some of the benefits and services provided by VBA include compensation and pension, education, loan guaranty, and insurance.

NCA provides Federal assistance to States to establish, expand, or improve state owned or established veterans cemeteries. The State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) provides these services to eligible state veterans cemeteries. NCA is responsible for providing burial benefits to veterans and eligible dependents. The delivery of these benefits involves operating 120 national cemeteries in the United States and Puerto Rico, providing headstones and grave markers worldwide, administering the State Cemetery Grants program that complements the national cemeteries, and administering the Presidential Memorial Certificate Program, which provides certificates bearing the President's signature to the next of kin of honorably discharged, deceased veterans.

II. Legal Authority

Section 601 of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. 2000d, provides that no person shall on the grounds of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. Section 602 authorizes and directs Federal agencies that are empowered to extend Federal financial assistance to any program or activity to effectuate the provisions of [section 601] * * * by issuing rules, regulations, or orders of general applicability. 42 U.S.C. 2000d-1.

VA regulations implementing Title VI, provide in 38 CFR at part 18.3(b) that

(1) A recipient under any program to which this part applies may not, directly or through contractual or other arrangements, on grounds of race, color, or national origin:

(i) Deny an individual any service, financial aid, or other benefit provided under the program;

(ii) Provide any service, financial aid, or other benefit to an individual, which is different, or is provided in a different manner, from that provided to others under the program.

(2) A recipient, in determining the types of services, financial aid, or other benefits, or facilities which will be provided under any such program, or the class of individuals to whom, or the situations in which such services,

financial aid or other benefits, or facilities will be provided may not directly, or through contractual or other arrangements, utilize criteria or methods of administration which have the effect of subjecting individuals to discrimination, because of their race, color or national origin, or have the effect of defeating or substantially impairing accomplishment of the objectives of the program as respects to individuals of a particular race, color or national origin.” (Emphasis added. 104(b)(2)).

The Supreme Court, in *Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974), interpreted regulations promulgated by the former Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, including a regulation similar to that of DOJ, 45 CFR 80.3(b)(2), to hold that Title VI prohibits conduct that has a disproportionate effect on LEP persons because such conduct constitutes national-origin discrimination. In *Lau*, a San Francisco school district that had a significant number of non-English speaking students of Chinese origin was required to take reasonable steps to provide them with a meaningful opportunity to participate in Federally funded educational programs.

Executive Order 13166, “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency,” 65 FR 50121 (August 16, 2000), was issued on August 11, 2000. Under that order, every Federal agency that provides financial assistance to non-Federal entities must publish guidance on how their recipients can provide meaningful access to LEP persons and thus comply with Title VI regulations forbidding funding recipients from “restrict[ing] an individual in any way in the enjoyment of any advantage or privilege enjoyed by others receiving any service, financial aid, or other benefit under the program” or from “utiliz[ing] criteria or methods of administration which have the effect of subjecting individuals to discrimination because of their race, color, or national origin, or have the effect of defeating or substantially impairing accomplishment of the objectives of the program as respects individuals of a particular race, color, or national origin.”

On that same day, DOJ issued a general guidance document addressed to Agency Civil Rights Officers setting forth general principles for agencies to apply in developing guidance documents for recipients pursuant to the Executive Order and enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, “National Origin Discrimination Against Persons With Limited English Proficiency,” 65 FR 50123 (August 16, 2000) (“DOJ LEP Guidance”). The

Department of Justice’s role under Executive Order 13166 is unique. The Order charges DOJ with responsibility for providing LEP Guidance to other Federal agencies and for ensuring consistency among each agency-specific guidance. Consistency among Departments of the Federal Government is particularly important. Inconsistency or contradictory guidance could confuse recipients of Federal funds and needlessly increase costs without rendering the meaningful access for LEP persons that this Guidance is designed to address.

Subsequently, Federal agencies raised questions regarding the requirements of the Executive Order, especially in light of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Alexander v. Sandoval*, 532 U.S. 275 (2001). On October 26, 2001, Ralph F. Boyd, Jr., Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division, issued a memorandum for “Heads of Departments and Agencies, General Counsels and Civil Rights Directors.” This memorandum clarified and reaffirmed the DOJ LEP Guidance in light of *Sandoval*.³ The Assistant Attorney General stated that because *Sandoval* did not invalidate any Title VI regulations that proscribe conduct that has a disparate impact on covered groups—the types of regulations that form the legal basis for the part of Executive Order 13166 that applies to Federally assisted programs and activities—the Executive Order remains in force.

VA’s policy guidance is consistent with and is issued under the Title VI and the Title VI regulations, and is also consistent with the August 11, 2000, DOJ “Policy Guidance Document on Enforcement of National Origin Discrimination Against Persons With Limited English Proficiency,” 65 FR 50123 (August 16, 2000); Executive

³ The memorandum noted that some commentators have interpreted *Sandoval* as impliedly striking down the disparate-impact regulations promulgated under Title VI that form the basis for the part of Executive Order 13166 that applies to federally assisted programs and activities. See, e.g., *Sandoval*, 532 U.S. at 286, 286 n.6 (“[W]e assume for purposes of this decision that section 602 confers the authority to promulgate disparate-impact regulations; * * * We cannot help observing, however, how strange it is to say that disparate-impact regulations are inspired by, at the service of, and inseparably intertwined with “Sec. 601 * * * when Sec. 601 permits the very behavior that the regulations forbid.”). The memorandum, however, made clear that DOJ disagreed with the commentators’ interpretation. *Sandoval* holds principally that there is no private right of action to enforce Title VI disparate-impact regulations. It did not address the validity of those regulations or Executive Order 13166 or otherwise limit the authority and responsibility of federal grant agencies to enforce their own implementing regulations.

Order 13166; and the DOJ LEP guidance issued on June 18, 2002. 67 FR 41457 (June 18, 2002).

III. Who Is Covered?

All entities that receive Federal financial assistance from the VA, either directly or indirectly, through a grant, contract or subcontract, are covered by this policy guidance (see list 38 CFR, part 18, appendix A). Covered entities include (1) any state or local agency, private institution or organization, or (2) any public or private individual that operates, provides, or engages in activities, and that receives Federal financial assistance.⁴

The term Federal financial assistance to which Title VI applies includes, but is not limited to, grants and loans of Federal funds, grants or donations of Federal property, details of Federal personnel, or any agreement, arrangement, or other contract which has as one of its purposes the provision of assistance. Title VI prohibits discrimination in any program or activity that receives Federal financial assistance. What constitutes a program or activity covered by Title VI was clarified by Congress in 1988, when the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987 (CRRA) was enacted. The CRRA provides that, in most cases, when a recipient/covered entity receives Federal financial assistance for a particular program or activity, the recipient’s entire operation is covered. This is true even if only one part of the recipient receives the Federal assistance.

Example: VA provides assistance to a state agency to improve a particular cemetery. All of the operations of the entire state agency, not just the particular cemetery are covered.

Finally, some recipients operate in jurisdictions in which English has been declared the official language.

Nonetheless, these recipients continue to be subject to Federal non-discrimination requirements, including those applicable to the provision of Federally assisted services to persons with limited English proficiency.

VHA administers several programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance from the VA. All entities that receive Federal financial assistance from VA are listed in 38 CFR, part 18, appendix A, either directly or indirectly, through a grant, contract, or subcontract, are covered by this policy guidance. Covered entities include (1)

⁴ Pursuant to Executive Order 13166, the meaningful access requirement of the Title VI regulations and the four-factor analysis set forth in the VA LEP Guidance are to additionally apply to the programs and activities of federal agencies, including the VA.

any state or local agency, private institution or organization, or (2) any public or private individual that operates, provides, or engages in health, or social service programs and activities, and that receives Federal financial assistance from VA directly or through another recipient/covered entity.

Examples of covered entities include, but are not limited to hospitals; nursing homes; home health agencies; managed care organizations; universities and other entities with health or social service research programs; state, county, and local health agencies; state Medicaid agencies; state, county, and local welfare agencies; programs for families, youth and children; Head Start programs; physicians; and other providers who receive Federal financial assistance from VA.

VBA is responsible for ensuring compliance in proprietary, non-college degree granting educational institutions approved to train veterans and/or their beneficiaries. In 1968, the Attorney General ruled that recipients of tuition or other payments from veterans for education programs are receiving Federal financial assistance. The U.S. District Court upheld this principle in *Bob Jones University, et al, v. Donald E. Johnson*, 396 F. Supp. 597 (D.S.C. 1974), aff'd 529 F.2d 514 (4th Cir. 1975).

VBA is also responsible for ensuring Title VI compliance in certain education and training programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Under a delegation agreement, VA has Title VI compliance responsibilities for ED-funded proprietary educational institutions, except those operated by a hospital. VA is also delegated Title VI responsibility for post-secondary, nonprofit educational institutions, other than colleges and universities, except if operated by a college, university, hospital, or a unit of State or local government. VA's LEP guidance applies only to recipients for whom VA has compliance responsibility.

VBA's Title VI compliance responsibility also applies to recognized national service organizations whose representatives assist veterans in the preparation, presentation and prosecution of claims for VA benefits. In December 1975, DOJ's "Interagency Report: Evaluation of Title VI Enforcement at the Veterans Administration," concluded that representatives of recognized service organizations afforded the use of Federally-owned property provided by VA without charge are recipients of Federal assistance. These service organizations are considered recipients within the meaning of Title VI. Recognized national veterans' service

organizations and State employment services both use VA office space and, therefore, VA's LEP guidance applies to those entities.

VBA recipients receiving Federal financial assistance, and covered by the LEP policy guidance include but are:

- Educational institutions whose programs are approved for training under 38 U.S.C., chapters 30, 31, 32, 35 and 10 U.S.C., chapter 1613.
- Representatives of recognized national veterans service organizations who utilize VBA space and office facilities (38 U.S.C. 5902(a)(2)).
- Representatives of State employment services who utilize VBA space and office facilities (38 U.S.C. 7725(1)).

NCA administers the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP). Examples of covered entities include, but are not limited to: Cemeteries; state, county and local agencies; and other providers who receive Federal financial assistance from VA.

IV. Who Is a Limited English Proficient Individual?

Individuals who do not read, write, speak, or understand English can be limited English proficient, or "LEP" entitled to language assistance with respect to a particular type of service, benefit, or encounter.

Examples of populations likely to include LEP persons who are encountered and/or served by VA recipients and should be considered when planning language services include, but are not limited to, for example:

- Persons seeking healthcare services or benefits;
- Persons seeking access to veterans cemeteries, including family members and friends of deceased veterans and others who are eligible for burial in such cemeteries;
- Persons seeking educational, training, including spouses and children;
- Persons seeking assistance in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims for VA benefits;
- Other persons who encounter or seek services, benefits, or information from entities receiving Federal financial assistance from VA.

V. How Does a Recipient Determine the Extent of Its Obligation To Provide LEP Services?

Recipients are required to take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access to their programs and activities by LEP persons. While designed to be a flexible and fact-dependent standard, the starting point is an individualized assessment that balances the following

four factors: (1) The number or proportion of LEP persons eligible to be served or likely to be encountered by the program or grantee; (2) the frequency with which LEP individuals come in contact with the program; (3) the nature and importance of the program, activity, or service provided by the program to people's lives; and (4) the resources available to the grantee/recipient and costs. As indicated above, the intent of this guidance is to find a balance that ensures meaningful access by LEP persons to critical services while not imposing undue burdens on small business, small local governments, or small nonprofits.

After applying the above four-factor analysis, a recipient may conclude that different language assistance measures are sufficient for different types of programs or activities. For instance, some of a recipient's activities will be more important than others and/or have greater impact on or contact with LEP persons, and thus may require more in the way of language assistance. The flexibility that recipients have in addressing the needs of the LEP populations they serve does not diminish, and should not be used to minimize, the obligation that those needs be addressed. VA recipients should apply the following four factors to the various kinds of contacts that they have with the public to assess language needs and decide what reasonable steps they should take to ensure meaningful access for LEP persons.

(1) The Number or Proportion of LEP Persons Served or Encountered in the Eligible Service Population

One factor in determining what language services recipients should provide is the number or proportion of LEP persons from a particular language group served or encountered in the eligible service population. The greater the number or proportion of these LEP persons, the more likely language services are needed. Ordinarily, persons "eligible to be served, or likely to be directly affected, by" a recipient's program or activity are those who are served or encountered in the eligible service population. This population will be program-specific, and includes persons who are in the geographic area that has been approved by a Federal grant agency as the recipient's service area. However, where, for instance, a VA facility serves a large LEP population, the appropriate service area is most likely the area serviced by the facility, and not the entire population served by the department. Where no service area has previously been approved, the relevant service area may

be that which is approved by state or local authorities or designated by the recipient itself, provided that these designations do not themselves discriminatorily exclude certain populations. When considering the number or proportion of LEP individuals in a service area, recipients should consider LEP parent(s) when their English-proficient or LEP minor children and dependents encounter the legal system.

Recipients should first examine their prior experiences with LEP encounters and determine the breadth and scope of language services that were needed. In conducting this analysis, it is important to include language minority populations that are eligible for their programs or activities but may be under served because of existing language barriers. Other data should be consulted to refine or validate a recipient's prior experience, including the latest census data for the area served, data from school systems and from community organizations, and data from state and local governments.

The focus of the analysis is on lack of English proficiency, not the ability to speak more than one language. Note that demographic data may indicate the most frequently spoken languages other than English and the percentage of people who speak those languages speak or understand English less than well. Some of the most commonly spoken languages other than English may be spoken by people who are also overwhelmingly proficient in English. Thus, they may not be the languages spoken most frequently by limited English proficient individuals. When using census data, for instance, it is important to focus in on the languages spoken by those who are not proficient in English. Community agencies, school systems, religious organizations, legal aid entities, and others can often assist in identifying populations for whom outreach is needed and who would benefit from the recipients' programs and activities were language services provided.

(2) The Frequency With Which LEP Individuals Come in Contact With the Program

Recipients should assess, as accurately as possible, the frequency with which they have or should have contact with an LEP individual from different language groups seeking assistance. The more frequent the contact with a particular language group, the more likely that enhanced language services in that language are needed. The steps that are reasonable for a recipient that serves a LEP person

on a one-time basis will be very different than those expected from a recipient that serves LEP persons daily. It is also advisable to consider the frequency of different types of language contacts. For example, frequent contacts with Spanish-speaking people who are LEP may require certain assistance in Spanish. Less frequent contact with different language groups may suggest a different and less intensified solution. If a LEP individual accesses a program or service on a daily basis, a recipient has greater duties than if the same individual's program or activity contact is unpredictable or infrequent. But even recipients that serve LEP persons on an unpredictable or infrequent basis should use this balancing analysis to determine what to do if an LEP individual seeks services under the program in question. This plan need not be intricate. It may be as simple as being prepared to use one of the commercially available telephonic interpretation services to obtain immediate interpreter services. In applying this standard, recipients should take care to consider whether appropriate outreach to LEP persons could increase the frequency of contact with LEP language groups.

(3) The Nature and Importance of the Program, Activity, or Service Provided by the Program

The more important the activity, information, service, or program, or the greater the possible consequences of the contact to the LEP individuals, the more likely language services are needed. The obligation to communicate with a person seeking medical services differs, for example, from those to provide voluntary recreational programming. A recipient needs to determine whether denial or delay of access to services or information could have serious or even life-threatening implications for the LEP individual. Decisions by a Federal, state, or local entity to make an activity compulsory, such as access to important benefits and services can serve as strong evidence of the program's importance.

(4) The Resources Available to the Recipient and Costs

A recipient's level of resources and the costs that would be imposed on it may have an impact on the nature of the steps it should take. Smaller recipients with more limited budgets are not expected to provide the same level of language services as larger recipients with larger budgets. In addition, "reasonable steps" may cease to be reasonable where the costs imposed substantially exceed the benefits.

However, resource and cost issues can often be reduced by technological

advances, the sharing of language assistance materials and services among and between recipients, advocacy groups, and Federal grant agencies, and reasonable business practices. Where appropriate, training bilingual staff to act as interpreters and translators, information sharing through industry groups, telephonic and videoconferencing interpretation services, pooling resources and standardizing documents to reduce translation needs, using qualified translators and interpreters to ensure that documents need not be late and that inaccurate interpretations do not cause delay or other costs, centralizing interpreter and translator services to achieve economies of scale, or the formalized use of qualified community volunteers, for example, may help reduce costs. Recipients should carefully explore the most cost-effective means of delivering competent and accurate language services before limiting services due to resource concerns. Large entities and those entities serving a significant number or proportion of LEP persons should ensure that their resource limitations are well-substantiated before using this factor as a reason to limit language assistance. Such recipients may find it useful to be able to articulate, through documentation or in some other reasonable manner, their process for determining that language services would be limited based on resources or costs. Small recipients with limited resources may find that entering into a bulk telephonic interpretation service contract will prove cost effective.

This four-factor analysis necessarily implicates the "mix" of LEP services required. Recipients have two main ways to provide language services: Oral interpretation either in person or via telephone interpretation service (hereinafter "interpretation") and written translation (hereinafter "translation"). Oral interpretation can range from on-site interpreters for critical services provided to a high volume of LEP persons to access through commercially available telephonic interpretation services. Written translation, likewise, can range from translation of an entire document to translation of a short description of the document. In some cases, language services should be made available on an expedited basis while in others the LEP individual may be referred to another office of the recipient for language assistance.

The correct mix should be based on what is both necessary and reasonable in light of the four-factor analysis. For instance, a healthcare recipient

operating in a largely Hispanic neighborhood may need immediate oral interpreters available and should give serious consideration to hiring some bilingual staff. (Of course, many have already made such arrangements.) In contrast, there may be circumstances where the importance and nature of the activity and number or proportion and frequency of contact with LEP persons may be low and the costs and resources needed to provide language services may be high—such as in the case of a voluntary general public tour of a veterans' social facility—in which pre-arranged language services for the particular service may not be necessary. Regardless of the type of language service provided, quality and accuracy of those services can be critical in order to avoid serious consequences to the LEP person and to the recipient. Recipients have substantial flexibility in determining the appropriate mix.

VI. Selecting Language Assistance Services

Recipients have two main ways to provide language services: Oral and written language services. Quality and accuracy of the language service is critical in order to avoid serious consequences to the LEP person and to the recipient.

Oral Language Services (Interpretation)

Interpretation is the act of listening to something in one language (source language) and orally translating it into another language (target language). Where interpretation is needed and is reasonable, recipients should consider some or all of the following options for providing competent interpreters in a timely manner:

Competence of Interpreters. When providing oral assistance, recipients should ensure competency of the language service provider, no matter which of the strategies outlined below are used. Competency requires more than self-identification as bilingual. Some bilingual staff and community volunteers, for instance, may be able to communicate effectively in a different language when communicating information directly in that language, but not be competent to interpret in and out of English. Likewise, they may not be able to do written translations.

Competency to interpret, however, does not necessarily mean formal certification as an interpreter, although certification is helpful. When using interpreters, recipients should ensure that they:

—Demonstrate proficiency in and ability to communicate information accurately in both English and in the

other language and identify and employ the appropriate mode of interpreting (e.g., consecutive, simultaneous, summarization, or sight translation);

- Have knowledge in both languages of any specialized terms or concepts peculiar to the entity's program or activity and of any particularized vocabulary and phraseology used by the LEP person;⁵
- Understand and follow confidentiality and impartiality rules to the same extent the recipient employee for whom they are interpreting and/or to the extent their position requires.
- Understand and adhere to their role as interpreters without deviating into a role as counselor, legal advisor, or other roles.

Some recipients may have additional self-imposed requirements for interpreters. Where individual rights depend on precise, complete, and accurate interpretation or translations, particularly in the contexts of hearings, the provision of healthcare, or the provision of other vital services or exchange of vital information, the use of certified interpreters is strongly encouraged. For those languages in which no formal accreditation or certification currently exists, such entities should consider a formal process for establishing the credentials of the interpreter. Where such proceedings are lengthy, the interpreter will likely need breaks and team interpreting may be appropriate to ensure accuracy and to prevent errors caused by mental fatigue of interpreters.

While quality and accuracy of language services is critical, the quality and accuracy of language services is nonetheless part of the appropriate mix of LEP services required. The quality and accuracy of language services in a prison hospital emergency room, for example, must be extraordinarily high, while the quality and accuracy of language services in a bicycle safety class need not meet the same exacting standards.

Finally, when interpretation is needed and is reasonable, it should be provided

⁵ Many languages have "regionalisms," or differences in usage. For instance, a word that may be understood to mean something in Spanish for someone from Cuba may not be so understood by someone from Mexico. In addition, because there may be languages, which do not have an appropriate direct interpretation of some medical or benefits-related terms, the interpreter should be so aware and be able to provide the most appropriate interpretation. The interpreter should likely make the recipient aware of the issue and the interpreter and recipient can then work to develop a consistent and appropriate set of descriptions of these terms in that language that can be used again, when appropriate.

in a timely manner. To be meaningfully effective, language assistance should be timely. While there is no single definition of "timely" applicable to all types of interactions at all times by all types of recipients, one clear guide is that the language assistance should be provided at a time and place that avoids the effective denial of the service, benefit, or right at issue or the imposition of an undue burden on or delay in important rights, benefits, or services to the LEP person. For example, when the timeliness of services is important, such as with certain activities of DOJ recipients providing law enforcement, health, and safety services, and when important legal rights are at issue, a recipient would likely not be providing meaningful access if it had one bilingual staff person available one day a week to provide the service. Such conduct would likely result in delays for LEP persons that would be significantly greater than those for English proficient persons. Conversely, where access to or exercise of a service, benefit, or right is not effectively precluded by a reasonable delay, language assistance can likely be delayed for a reasonable period.

Hiring Bilingual Staff. When particular languages are encountered often, hiring bilingual staff offers one of the best, and often most economical, options. Recipients can, for example, fill public contact positions, such as 911 operators, police officers, guards, or program directors, with staff that are bilingual and competent to communicate directly with LEP persons in their language. If bilingual staff is also used to interpret between English speakers and LEP persons, or to orally interpret written documents from English into another language, they should be competent in the skill of interpreting. Being bilingual does not necessarily mean that a person has the ability to interpret. In addition, there may be times when the role of the bilingual employee may conflict with the role of an interpreter. Effective management strategies, including any appropriate adjustments in assignments and protocols for using bilingual staff, can ensure that bilingual staff are fully and appropriately utilized. When bilingual staff cannot meet all of the language service obligations of the recipient, the recipient should turn to other options.

Hiring Staff Interpreters. Hiring interpreters may be most helpful where there is a frequent need for interpreting services in one or more languages.

Contracting for Interpreters. Contract interpreters may be a cost-effective

option when there is no regular need for a particular language skill. In addition to commercial and other private providers, many community-based organizations and mutual assistance associations provide interpretation services for particular languages. Contracting with and providing training regarding the recipient's programs and processes to these organizations can be a cost-effective option for providing language services to LEP persons from those language groups.

Using Telephone Interpreter Lines. Telephone interpreter service lines often offer speedy interpreting assistance in many different languages. They may be particularly appropriate where the mode of communicating with an English proficient person would also be over the phone. Although telephonic interpretation services are useful in many situations it is important to ensure that, when using such services, the interpreters used are competent to interpret any technical, medical, or legal terms specific to the program that may be important parts of the conversation. Nuances in language and non-verbal communication can often assist an interpreter and cannot be recognized over the phone. Video teleconferencing may sometimes help to resolve this issue where necessary. In addition, where documents are being discussed, it is important to give telephonic interpreters adequate opportunity to review the document prior to the discussion and any logistical problems should be addressed. Depending on the facts, sometimes it may be necessary and reasonable to provide on-site interpreters to provide accurate and meaningful communication with an LEP person.

Using Community Volunteers. In addition to consideration of bilingual staff, staff interpreters, or contract interpreters (either in-person or by telephone) as options to ensure meaningful access by LEP persons, use of recipient-coordinated community volunteers, working with, for instance, community-based organizations may provide a cost-effective supplemental language assistance strategy under appropriate circumstances. They may be particularly useful in providing language access for recipients' less critical programs and activities. To the extent the recipient relies on community volunteers, it is often best to use volunteers who are trained in the information or services of the program and can communicate directly with LEP persons in their language. Just as with all interpreters, community volunteers used to interpret between English speakers and LEP persons, or to orally

translate documents, should be competent in the skill of interpreting applicable confidentiality and impartiality rules.

Use of Family Members or Friends as Interpreters. Although recipients should not plan to rely on an LEP person's family members, friends, or other informal interpreters to provide meaningful access to important programs and activities, where LEP persons so desire, they should be permitted to use, at their own expense, an interpreter of their own choosing (whether a professional interpreter, family member, or friend) in place of or as a supplement to the free language services expressly offered by the recipient. LEP persons may feel more comfortable when a trusted family member or friend acts as an interpreter. In addition, in exigent circumstances that are not reasonably foreseeable, temporary use of interpreters not provided by the recipient may be necessary. However, with proper planning and implementation, recipients should be able to avoid most such situations.

Recipients, however, should take special care to ensure that family legal guardians, caretakers, and other informal interpreters are appropriate in light of the circumstances and subject matter of the program, service or activity, including protection of the recipient's own administrative interest in accurate interpretation. In many circumstances, family members (especially children), or friends are not competent to provide quality and accurate interpretations. Issues of confidentiality, privacy, or conflict of interests may also arise. LEP individuals may feel uncomfortable revealing or describing sensitive, confidential, or potentially embarrassing medical, mental health, family, or financial information to a family member, friend, or member of the local community. In addition, such informal interpreters may have a personal connection to the LEP person or an undisclosed conflict of interest. For these reasons, when oral language services are necessary, recipients should generally offer competent interpreter services free of cost to the LEP person. For VA recipient programs and activities, this is particularly true in situations in which health, safety, or access to important benefits and services are at stake, or when credibility and accuracy are important to protect an individual's rights and access to important services.

An example of such a case is when an LEP person seeks medical care from a VA funded recipient. In such a case, use of family members or neighbors to

interpret for the LEP patient may raise serious issues of competency, confidentiality, and conflict of interest and be inappropriate. While issues of competency, confidentiality, and conflicts of interest in the use of family members (especially children), or friends often make their use inappropriate, the use of these individuals as interpreters may be an appropriate option where proper application of the four factors would lead to a conclusion that recipient-provided services are not necessary.

An example of this is a voluntary educational tour of a VA facility offered to the public. There, the importance and nature of the activity may be relatively low and unlikely to implicate issues of confidentiality, conflict of interest, or the need for accuracy. In addition, the resources needed and costs of providing language services may be high. In such a setting, a LEP person's use of family, friends, or others may be appropriate.

If the LEP person voluntarily chooses to provide his or her own interpreter, a recipient should consider whether a record of that choice and of the recipient's offer of assistance is appropriate. Where precise, complete, and accurate interpretations or translations of information and/or testimony are critical for adjudicatory, medical, administrative, or other reasons, or where the competency of the LEP person's interpreter is not established, a recipient might decide to provide its own, independent interpreter, even if an LEP person wants to use his or her own interpreter as well. Extra caution should be exercised when the LEP person chooses to use a minor as the interpreter. While the LEP person's decision should be respected, there may be additional issues of competency, confidentiality, or conflict of interest when the choice involves using children as interpreters. The recipient should take extra care to ensure that the LEP person's choice is voluntary that the LEP person is aware of the possible problems if the preferred interpreter is a minor child, and that the LEP person knows that a competent interpreter could be provided by the recipient at no cost.

Written Language Services (Translation) Translation is the replacement of a written text from one language (source language) into an equivalent written text in another language (target language).

What Documents Should be Translated? After applying the four-factor analysis, recipients may determine that an effective LEP plan ensures that certain vital written materials are translated into the

language of each frequently encountered LEP group eligible to be served and/or likely to be affected by the recipient's program. Such written materials could include, for example:

- Consent and complaint forms
- Forms with the potential for important consequences
- Written notices of rights, denial, loss, or decreases in benefits or services, and hearings
- Notices advising LEP persons of free language assistance
- Written tests that do not assess English language competency, but test competency for a particular license, job, or skill for which knowing English is not required
- Applications to participate in a recipient's program or activity or to receive recipient benefits or services.

Whether or not a document is "vital" may depend upon the importance of the program, information, encounter, or service involved, and the consequence to the LEP person if the information in question is not provided accurately or in a timely manner. For instance, applications for certain recreational programs should not generally be considered vital, whereas applications for drug and alcohol counseling should be considered vital. Where appropriate, recipients are encouraged to create a plan for consistently determining, over time and across its various activities, what documents are "vital" to the meaningful access of the LEP populations they serve.

Classifying a document as vital or non-vital is sometimes difficult, especially in the case of outreach materials like brochures or other information on rights and services. To have meaningful access, service, benefit, or information, LEP persons may need to be aware of their existence. Thus, vital information may include, for instance, documents indicating how to obtain oral assistance in understanding other information not contained in the translated documents. Lack of awareness that a particular program, right, or service exists may effectively deny LEP individuals meaningful access. Thus, where a recipient is engaged in community outreach activities in furtherance of its activities, it should regularly assess the needs of the populations frequently encountered or affected by the program or activity to determine whether certain critical outreach materials should be translated. Community organizations may be helpful in determining what outreach materials may be most helpful to translate. In addition, the recipient should consider whether translations of

outreach material may be made more effective when done in tandem with other outreach methods, including utilizing the ethnic media, schools, religious, and community organizations to spread a message. Sometimes a document includes both vital and non-vital information. This may be the case when the document is very large. It may also be the case when the title and a phone number for obtaining more information on the contents of the document in frequently-encountered languages other than English is critical, but the document is sent out to the general public and cannot reasonably be translated into many languages. Thus, vital information may include, for instance, the provision of information in appropriate languages other than English regarding where a LEP person might obtain an interpretation or translation of the document.

Into What Languages Should Documents be Translated? The languages spoken by the LEP individuals with whom the recipient has contact determine the languages into which vital documents should be translated. A distinction should be made, however, between the more frequent languages encountered by a recipient and less common languages. Many recipients serve communities in large cities or across the country. These recipients may serve LEP persons who speak dozens and sometimes over 100 different languages. To translate all written materials into all of those languages is unrealistic. Although recent technological advances have made it easier for recipients to store and share translated documents, such an undertaking would incur substantial costs and require substantial resources. Nevertheless, well-substantiated claims of lack of resources to translate all vital documents into dozens of languages do not necessarily relieve the recipient of the obligation to translate those documents into at least several of the more frequently encountered languages and to set benchmarks for continued translations over time. As a result, the extent of the recipient's obligation to provide written translations of documents should be determined by the recipient on a case-by-case basis, looking at the totality of the circumstances in light of the four-factor analysis. Because translation is a one-time expense, consideration should be given to whether the up-front cost of translating a document (as opposed to oral interpretation) should be amortized over the likely life span of the document when applying this four-factor analysis.

Safe Harbor. Many recipients would like to ensure with greater certainty that

they comply with their obligations to provide written translations in languages other than English. Paragraphs (a) and (b) outline the circumstances that can provide a "safe harbor" for recipients regarding the requirements for translation of written materials. A "safe harbor" means that if a recipient provides written translations under these circumstances, such action will be considered strong evidence of compliance with the recipient's written-translation obligations.

The failure to provide written translations under the circumstances outlined in paragraphs (a) and (b) does not mean there is non-compliance. Rather, they provide a common starting point for recipients to consider whether, and at what point the importance of the service, benefit, or activity involved; the nature of the information sought; and the number or proportion of LEP persons served call for written translations of commonly-used forms into frequently-encountered languages other than English. Thus, these paragraphs merely provide a guide for recipients that would like greater certainty of compliance than can be provided by a fact-intensive, four-factor analysis.

Example: Even if the safe harbors are not used, if written translation of a certain document(s) would be so burdensome as to defeat the legitimate objectives of a recipient's program, the translation of the written materials is not necessary. Other ways of providing meaningful access, such as effective oral interpretation of certain vital documents, might be acceptable under such circumstances.

Safe Harbor. The following actions will be considered strong evidence of compliance with the recipient's written-translation obligations:

(a) The recipient provides written translations of vital documents for each eligible LEP language group that constitutes five percent or 1,000, whichever is less, of the population of persons eligible to be served or likely to be affected or encountered. Translation of other documents, if needed, can be provided orally; or

(b) If there are fewer than 50 persons in a language group that reaches the five percent trigger in (a), the recipient does not translate vital written materials but provides written notice in the primary language of the LEP language group of the right to receive competent oral interpretation of those written materials, free of cost.

These safe harbor provisions apply to the translation of written documents only. They do not affect the requirement to provide meaningful access to LEP individuals through competent oral

interpreters where oral language services are needed and are reasonable.

Competence of Translators. As with oral interpreters, translators of written documents should be competent. Many of the same considerations apply. However, the skill of translating is very different from the skill of interpreting, and a person who is a competent interpreter may or may not be competent to translate.

Particularly where legal or other vital documents are being translated, competence can often be achieved by use of certified translators. Certification or accreditation may not always be possible or necessary. Competence can often be ensured by having a second, independent translator "check" the work of the primary translator. Alternatively, one translator can translate the document, and a second, independent translator could translate it back into English to check that the appropriate meaning has been conveyed. This is called "back translation."

Translators should understand the expected reading level of the audience and, where appropriate, have fundamental knowledge about the target language group's vocabulary and phraseology. Sometimes direct translation of materials results in a translation that is written at a much more difficult level than the English language version or has no relevant equivalent meaning. Community organizations may be able to help consider whether a document is written at a good level for the audience. Likewise, consistency in the words and phrases used to translate terms of art, legal, or other technical concepts helps avoid confusion by LEP individuals and may reduce costs.

There may be languages that do not have an appropriate direct translation of some terms, and the translator should be able to provide an appropriate translation. The translator should likely also make the recipient aware of this. Recipients can then work with translators to develop a consistent and appropriate set of descriptions of these terms in that language that can be used again, when appropriate. Recipients will find it more effective and less costly if they try to maintain consistency in the words and phrases used to translate terms of art and legal or other technical concepts. Creating or using already-created glossaries of commonly used terms may be useful for LEP persons and translators and cost effective for the recipient. Providing translators with examples of previous accurate translations of similar material by the

recipient, other recipients, or Federal agencies may be helpful.

While quality and accuracy of translation services is critical, the quality and accuracy of translation services is nonetheless part of the appropriate mix of LEP services required. For instance, documents that are simple and have no legal or other consequence for LEP persons who rely on them may require translators that are less skilled than important documents with technical legal, medical, or other information upon which reliance has important consequences. The permanent nature of written translations, however, imposes additional responsibility on the recipient to ensure that the quality and accuracy permit meaningful access by LEP persons.

VII. Elements of Effective Plan on Language Assistance for LEP Persons

After completing the four-factor analysis and deciding what language assistance services are appropriate, a recipient should develop an implementation plan. The development and maintenance of a periodically-updated written plan on language assistance for LEP persons ("LEP plan") for use by recipient employees serving the public will likely be the most appropriate and cost effective means of documenting compliance and providing a framework for the provision of timely and reasonable language assistance. Moreover, such written plans would likely provide additional benefits to a recipient's managers in the areas of training, administration, planning, and budgeting. These benefits should lead most recipients to document in a written LEP plan their language assistance services, and how staff and LEP persons can access those services. Despite these benefits, certain recipients, such as recipients serving very few LEP persons and recipients with very limited resources, may choose not to develop a written LEP plan. However, the absence of a written LEP plan does not obviate the underlying obligation to ensure meaningful access by LEP persons to a recipient's program or activities. Accordingly, in the event that a recipient elects not to develop a written plan, it should consider alternative ways to articulate in some other reasonable manner their plan for providing meaningful access. Entities having significant contact with LEP persons, such as schools, religious organizations, community groups, and groups working with new immigrants can be very helpful in providing important input into this planning process from the beginning.

The following five steps may be helpful in designing an LEP plan and are typically part of an effective written implementation plan, however, the absence of them does not necessarily mean there is non-compliance.

(1) Identifying LEP Individuals Who Need Language Assistance

The first two factors in the four-factor analysis require an assessment of the number or proportion of LEP individuals eligible to be served or encountered and the frequency of encounters. This requires recipients to identify LEP persons with whom it has contact.

One way to determine the language of communication is to use language identification cards (or "I speak cards"), which invite LEP persons to identify their language needs to staff. Such cards, for instance, might say "I speak Spanish," in English and Spanish or "I speak Vietnamese in English and Vietnamese", etc. To reduce costs of compliance, the Federal Government has made a set of these cards available on the Internet. The Census Bureau "I speak card" can be found and downloaded at <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/13166.htm>. When records are normally kept of past interactions with members of the public, the language of the LEP person can be included as part of the record. In addition to helping employees identify the language of LEP persons they encounter, this process will help in future applications of the first two factors of the four-factor analysis. In addition, posting notices in commonly encountered languages notifying LEP persons of language assistance will encourage them to self-identify.

(2) Language Assistance Measures

An effective LEP plan includes information about the ways in which language assistance will be provided. For instance, recipients may want to include information on at least the following:

- Types of language services available.
- How staff can obtain those services.
- How to respond to LEP callers.
- How to respond to written communications from LEP persons.
- How to respond to LEP individuals who have in-person contact with recipient staff.
- How to ensure competency of interpreters and translation services.

(3) Training Staff

Staff should know their obligations to provide meaningful access to information and services for LEP

persons. An effective LEP plan includes training to ensure that:

- Staff knows about LEP policies and procedures.
- Staff having contact with the public is trained to work effectively with in-person and telephone interpreters.

Recipients may want to include this training as part of the orientation for new employees. It is important to ensure that all employees in public contact positions are properly trained. Recipients have flexibility in deciding the manner in which the training is provided. The more frequent the contact with LEP persons, the greater the need will be for in-depth training. Staff with little or no contact with LEP persons may only have to be aware of an LEP plan. However, management staff, even if they do not interact regularly with LEP persons, should be fully aware of and understand the plan so they can reinforce its importance and ensure its implementation by their staff.

(4) Providing Notice to LEP Persons

Once an agency has decided, based on the four factors, that it will provide language services, it is important for the recipient to let LEP persons know that those services are available and that they are free of charge. Recipients should provide this notice in a language LEP persons will understand. Examples of notification that recipients should consider include:

Posting signs in intake areas and other entry points. When language assistance is needed to ensure meaningful access to information and services, it is important to provide notice in appropriate languages in intake areas or initial points of contact so that LEP persons can learn how to access those language services. This is particularly true in areas with high volumes of LEP persons seeking access to services or activities provided by VA recipients. For instance, signs in intake offices could state that free language assistance is available. The signs should be translated into the most common languages encountered. They should explain how to get the language. The Social Security Administration has made such signs available on their Web site. These signs could be modified for recipient use.

Stating in outreach documents that language services are available from the agency. Announcements could be in, for instance, brochures, booklets, and in outreach and recruitment information. These statements should be translated into the most common languages and could be “tagged” onto the front of common documents.

Working with community-based organizations and other stakeholders to inform LEP individuals of the recipient.

Using a telephone voice mail menu. The menu could be in the most common languages encountered. It should provide information about available language assistance services and how to get them.

Including notices in local newspapers in languages other than English.

Providing notices on non-English-language radio and television stations about the available language assistance services and how to get them.

Presentations and/or notices at schools and religious organizations.

(5) Monitoring and Updating the LEP Plan

Recipients should, where appropriate, have a process for determining, on an ongoing basis, whether new documents, programs, services, and activities need to be made accessible for LEP individuals, and they may want to provide notice of any changes in services to the LEP public and to employees. In addition, recipients should consider whether changes in demographics, types of services, or other needs require annual reevaluation of their LEP plan. Less frequent reevaluation may be more appropriate where demographics, services, and needs are more static. One good way to evaluate the LEP plan is to seek feedback from the community.

In their reviews, recipients may want to consider assessing changes in:

- Current LEP populations in service area or population affected or encountered.
- Frequency of encounters with LEP language groups.
- Nature and importance of activities to LEP persons.
- Availability of resources, including technological advances and sources of additional resources, and the costs imposed.
- Whether existing assistance is meeting the needs of LEP persons.
- Whether staff knows and understands the LEP plan and how to implement it.
- Whether identified sources for assistance are still available and viable.
- In addition to these five elements, effective plans set clear goals, management accountability, and opportunities for community input and planning throughout the process.

VIII. Voluntary Compliance Effort

The goal for Title VI and Title VI regulatory enforcement is to achieve voluntary compliance. The requirement

to provide meaningful access to LEP persons is enforced and implemented by VA through the procedures identified in the Title VI regulations. These procedures include complaint investigations, compliance reviews, efforts to secure voluntary compliance, and technical assistance.

The Title VI regulations provide that VA will investigate whenever it receives a complaint, report, or other information that alleges or indicates possible noncompliance with Title VI or its regulations. If the investigation results in a finding of compliance, VA will inform the recipient/covered entity in writing of this determination, including the basis for the determination. If the investigation results in a finding of noncompliance, VA must inform the recipient/covered entity of the noncompliance through a Letter of Findings that sets out the areas of noncompliance and the steps that must be taken to correct the noncompliance must attempt to secure voluntary compliance through informal means. If the matter cannot be resolved informally, VA must secure compliance through: (a) Federal assistance after the recipient/covered entity has been given an opportunity for an administrative hearing and/or (b) referral to a DOJ litigation section to for injunctive relief or other enforcement proceedings; or (c) any other means authorized by law.

As the Title VI regulations set forth above indicate, VA has a legal obligation to seek voluntary compliance in resolving cases and cannot seek the termination of funds until it has engaged in voluntary compliance efforts and has determined that compliance cannot be secured voluntarily. VA will engage in voluntary compliance efforts, and will provide technical assistance to recipients at all stages of its investigation. During these efforts to secure voluntary compliance, VA will propose reasonable timetables for achieving compliance and will consult with and assist recipient/covered entities in exploring cost-effective ways of coming into compliance. In determining a recipient's compliance with Title VI and the regulations, VA's primary concern is to ensure that the recipient's policies and procedures provide meaningful access for LEP persons to the recipient's programs and activities.

While all recipients must work toward building systems that will ensure access for LEP individuals, VA acknowledges that the implementation of a comprehensive system to serve LEP individuals is a process and that a system will evolve over time as it is implemented and periodically

reevaluated. As recipients take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to Federally assisted programs and activities for LEP persons, VA will look favorably on intermediate steps recipients take that are consistent with this Guidance, and that, as part of a broader implementation plan or schedule, move their service delivery system toward providing full access to LEP persons. This does not excuse

noncompliance but instead recognizes that full compliance in all areas of a recipient's activities and for all potential language minority groups may reasonable require a series of implementing actions over a period of time. However, in developing any phased implementation schedule, recipients should ensure that the provision of appropriate assistance for significant LEP populations or with

respect to activities having a significant impact on the health, safety, legal rights, or livelihood of beneficiaries is addressed first. Recipients are encouraged to document their efforts to provide LEP persons with meaningful access to Federally assisted programs and activities.

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