

Language Access Report

TO: Equity Committee of the Assembly

THRU: Uluao “Junior” Aumavae, Chief Equity Officer

FROM: N. Michael El-Khoury, Language Access Liaison, Mayor’s Office

OVERVIEW

Chief Equity Office Uluao “Junior” Aumavae, OEO Director Erica Barry, and Language Access Liaison N. Michael El-Khoury met with the Anchorage Equity Committee-of-the-Assembly on May 23, 2024. At that meeting, Assemblymember Kameron Perez-Verdia and other Commission members requested a report on the Language Access Program.

NARRATIVE

Per the Mayor, Chief Equity Officer Aumavae, and Chief of Staff Mario Bird, N. El-Khoury became the Municipality’s Language Access Liaison in late November 2023. El-Khoury researched Language Access, the exact scope of the previous program, and what information was left to this Administration by the prior Language Access Liaison. Establishing the state of the program after 3-4 years of being dormant proved difficult, as very little resources were handed over from the prior liaison(s).

In December 2023, El-Khoury and Bird met with Acting Internal Audit Director Scott Lee to review Internal Audit’s preliminary findings. El-Khoury and Aumavae began physically visiting front facing departments to establish a baseline. From these interviews, it was clear the program was no longer up to the standard set forth in P&P 16-6, as almost no departments were even aware of the program, and most did not have the resources necessary to provide the service to Limited-English-Proficiency (LEP) constituents.

In January 2024, Bird met with El-Khoury, Aumavae, and Barry regarding response to the Internal Audit findings. El-Khoury followed through with visiting other MOA departments, and reached out to Language Link, the Municipality’s contractor for on-demand translation, for account numbers and other necessary resources.

In February 2024, El-Khoury communicated with the previously contacted departments and began updating Language Access Plans on the Municipal website.

In March 2024, El-Khoury had retrieved the account codes for Language Link, along with an out-of-date spreadsheet containing past department representatives and other useful resources from Language Link, which allowed us to begin planning the Language Access training for MOA employees.

In April 2024, the training was planned, a presentation was put together, MOA department heads were contacted, and language access representatives from each department were chosen to attend the training. El-Khoury also created a new Language Access Program master list (attached).

In May 2024, front-facing department heads were notified by El-Khoury, and he conducted Language Access Training on May 17, 2024. Account codes were disbursed to departments at this meeting.

ANALYSIS

The Language Access Program is much larger than the Language Link posters and telephonic interpretation services. When El-Khoury began his administration of the Language Access Program in November 2023, the Muni was in compliance with federal law, with a federally approved Title VI plan and LAP plan. It should be noted that in September of 2022, it was ensured all departments had a LanguageLink poster and were informed the OEJ was in the process of updating this program. Due to Municipal turnover, however, most department heads and municipal employees had little awareness of the duties and responsibilities set forth in P&P 16-6. Most departments were missing their representative from when the program was first implemented *circa* 2018, and no department had secured a replacement. There were notable exceptions, such as AWWU, the Ombudsman (Darrel Hess), and Property Appraisal (Jack Gadamus), which managed to keep their Language Access plans updated, but did not have clear direction where or to whom to report with data or complaints. Other than these departments, it is El-Khoury's opinion that, if a LEP person had walked into most other municipal departments before May 2024, they would not have been able to access municipal services due to the language barrier.

ACTIONS TAKEN

Phase One – Walk-Ins Accommodated, Master List Compiled

The first phase was to ensure that if a LEP individual walked into any municipal department, the individual would be able to access Municipal services. This meant ensuring each front facing department had a Language Access Representative (i.e., someone who was aware of the Language Access Program and who could provide the service, via Language Link, to constituents). The next step was to ensure they were knowledgeable on how to provide the service and then to get them their account codes and any other necessary resources. This process was entirely internal; it is not recommended to advertise a product or service in its "Beta" stage.

There was also never any sort of "master list" made (or at least retained) by anyone in the Municipality which would inform the Language Access Liaison as to who department representatives were, what was their contact information, or any department account codes or any other useful information. There is now such a master list that exists both digitally and

physically and is fully updated. This list allows the Liaison to stay in contact with all representatives for the purposes of reporting, answering questions, complaints, etc.

Phase Two – Data, Advertising, Reporting

The next phase that the Language Access Program needs to move through involves identifying public-facing documents from each department, updating the census information the program is based off of, ensuring municipal documents and services are fully available to the blind and hard of hearing (braille, sign language, subtitles, etc.), promoting the service to the general public, and establishing a standardized reporting system for the purposes of gathering data.

It is currently difficult to quantify how many people have utilized any Language Access services since 2017. Though there is a reporting template, no standardized reporting procedure was ever made or followed. Since his department visits in early 2024, El-Khoury has since received a few reports from a couple outstanding Language Access Representatives, but this is not enough data to be useful in honing the program in any way. The only data collected thus far has been in reestablishing the program, nearly from the ground up.

- Upon first investigation, 3-5 front-facing departments out of 29 had a language access representative or someone who knew of its existence. Currently, **24 out of 29 front-facing departments have a language access representative, with some having more than one as a backup.**
- Upon first investigation, only 3 departments were aware of their department account number, which is crucial to providing telephonic interpretation services. **Currently, all 29 departments have access to a code, with all representatives who attended the training having received their codes directly.**
- Not a single department had been reporting any utilization of the LanguageLink service, any use of translated documents, etc. **Currently, all departments who sent a representative to the training (24/29) are aware of the monthly reporting procedure and are primed to send their first report.**

CONCLUSION

From El-Khoury: “I am not concerned with who or how the program was handled before I acquired it. I am only concerned with ensuring it is running to standard. The state the program was in when it was given to me was not up to standard, according to P&P 16-6. I am proud of the work we have made toward reaching that standard and would be more than willing to work with the Anchorage Equity Committee-of-the-Assembly on not only maintaining but improving the standards of the Language Access Program.”

MOA Language Access Liaison

N. Michael El-Khoury Hanna