



Build Trust With Community-Focused Comms:
A How-To Guide for Organizations & Local Governments

BRIEF 1

WHY: MAKE THE CASE FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

With more than 400 languages spoken across the U.S., local governments and organizations must ensure information is accessible, inclusive, and reflects the rich linguistic diversity of their communities.

As municipal governments and organizations serve growing numbers of multilingual and multicultural audiences, including newcomers,¹ many are prioritizing communications approaches that promote trust, information, engagement, and access. For example:

- Sharing information in multiple languages on government websites helps everyone understand local laws and access important forms and permits.
- Offering fliers and social media posts written in multiple languages and reflective of community voices to help all residents feel comfortable visiting places like libraries, museums, or community organizations.
- Building communication strategies that directly engage community members fosters trust and opens the door for two-way conversations with local government.
- Using visuals that reflect the diversity of your local community so residents feel seen and welcomed.
- Using clear, multilingual messages during emergencies can help protect people and save lives.



Many local government agencies and institutions are required to comply with federal language access laws that advance multilingual communication and services; others voluntarily embrace inclusive communication as a core strategy to advance access, trust, and engagement. If any of these scenarios apply to you, this brief will help you understand your office or organization’s responsibilities for language access and the benefits of inclusive communications to advance access, trust, and engagement in your community.

¹ This guide uses the term “newcomer” as a general term that includes immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and numerous other multilingual, multicultural groups that have recently arrived in a local community.

UNDERSTAND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE U.S.

While English is the most commonly spoken language in the country, the U.S. has no official language. In fact, the U.S. is one of the most linguistically diverse places in the world.

Newcomers to the U.S. hail from [nearly every country](#) and speak as many as [430](#) languages, creating growing and rich linguistic diversity. The number of people who spoke a language other than English [nearly tripled](#) from 23.1 million (approximately 1 in 10) in 1980 to 67.8 million (nearly 1 in 5) in 2019. [\(See Figure 1.\)](#)

Multilingualism gives nations like the U.S. numerous economic and cultural advantages, including innovation, economic growth, and strong global trade relations and connectivity.

Figure 1: Growing Linguistic Diversity in the U.S.



While a [large majority](#) of newcomers in the U.S. actively strive to learn English, the country’s adult education system currently serves [just 4%](#) of adult English learners, contributing to a reality where [over 45 million people](#)—nearly [half](#) of the country’s immigrants and refugees—self-identify as “speaking English less than very well.” These residents may struggle to access timely information and critical services in monolingual English environments.



Credit: Arleni Carreno

In response, many local governments and organizations are taking steps to optimize their communications strategies—adapting materials, translating content, and partnering with community members to ensure that essential information reaches everyone.

RECOGNIZE LANGUAGE ACCESS LAWS

While many local government offices and community-based organizations opt to voluntarily embrace inclusive communications for the reasons detailed above, it is important to note that certain institutions must also comply with laws that promote language access. Starting as far back as 1964, these laws have ensured that speakers of languages other than English are able to access multilingual interpretation and translation to remove barriers to information, tools, and resources:

- [The Civil Rights Act of 1964 \(Title VI\)](#) requires agencies that receive federal funding to have written language access procedures, notify speakers of languages other than English of their right to free language assistance, provide staff training, and monitor and evaluate language needs and services.
- [The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act \(ACA\)](#), signed in 2010, expands language access requirements to include healthcare providers and insurers.

Building on these federal mandates, a growing number of [state and local laws](#) require language access across the public services they provide. Many of these laws also advance the concept of language justice, which recognizes language as a fundamental human right and empowers residents through linguistic inclusion.

Understanding these laws helps ensure compliance, and more importantly, demonstrates a commitment to inclusion and equity.. All federally funded programs, along with many other entities including law enforcement agencies, school districts, hospitals and healthcare providers, financial institutions, and many businesses and nonprofits, are required to prioritize language access. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: Who Do Language Access Laws Apply To?



Beyond complying with language access laws, inclusive communications can help you build relationships with residents and advance welcoming and inclusion across your office or organization. The [Resource Box](#) below outlines how the [Welcoming Standard](#), a set of benchmarks developed by Welcoming America, offers a framework for inclusive communications and language access to help institutions meet and exceed these goals.



Resource

THE WELCOMING STANDARD FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

The Welcoming Standard is a benchmark developed by Welcoming America to build more inclusive, welcoming communities. Local governments that want to be recognized as Certified Welcoming must meet the criteria in the Standard, but the Welcoming standard also provides a roadmap for organizations looking to build community welcome in places without local government support. Inclusive communications benchmarks are part of many criteria in the Welcoming Standard from expanding access to public meetings to building relationships between immigrant and non-immigrant residents. Get the full details on inclusive communications in the [Welcoming Standard](#) and how your community can become [Certified Welcoming](#).

PUTTING STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE

Investing in inclusive communication strengthens access to services, builds trust, and encourages meaningful engagement from all residents. In Louisville, KY, local leaders rallied community members to expand the city's language access capabilities to reach these goals. [Read how](#) this collective effort strengthened the local infrastructure for inclusive communications.



Read Case Study:
Louisville, KY



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Return to Toolkit
Landing Page