



County of San Mateo

Inter-Departmental Correspondence

Department: BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
DISTRICT 4
File #: 16-276

Board Meeting Date: 6/27/2017

Special Notice / Hearing: None
Vote Required: Majority

To: Honorable Board of Supervisors
From: Supervisor David Canepa
Supervisor Warren Slocum
Subject: Resolution adopting a Language Access Policy

RECOMMENDATION:

Adopt a resolution directing the County Manager's Office to develop a Language Access Policy for the County of San Mateo.

BACKGROUND:

At its March 28th meeting, the Board formed an ad-hoc committee consisting of Supervisors Slocum and Canepa to study the County's need to develop a Language Access Policy for its departments. Together with staff from the Office of Immigrant Support and County Counsel's office, the ad hoc committee undertook research of existing national and state law, a Countywide assessment of existing language services, and initial research into wayfinding systems for County buildings.

The committee started by researching existing federal and state law and surveying County departments to determine what language access resources exist. The survey indicated a few County departments have language access policies and many have at least one type of service geared towards language access. However, most departments noted they would like more support for additional or more robust language access services.

The survey responses and legal research informed a draft policy, which includes three main components: (1) universal signage and wayfinding; (2) spoken interpretation; and (3) written translation. These components are commonly found in other language access plans. Once a policy was drafted, staff from County departments with robust language access policies were invited to review and provide feedback.

DISCUSSION:

According to the 2009-2013 U.S. Census Data, nearly half of San Mateo County residents (46%) speak a language other than English in their homes. Collectively, the County's residents speak more than 100 different languages from across the world with the most prevalent being English, Spanish,

Chinese, Tagalog, Russian, and Arabic. Several San Mateo County departments and agencies already have language access policies in place. In particular, two large agencies, Behavioral Health and Recovery Services (BHRS) and the Human Services Agency (HSA), have had policies in place for over 10 years and can serve as leaders and models for Countywide policies. The purpose of a Countywide Language Access Policy is to achieve consistency across departments and to facilitate the use of language services.

The adoption of this Language Access Policy is the first step in supporting access to County resources for all residents. The Policy is comprised of three initiatives, which provide subsequent steps in improving access: (1) universal signage and wayfinding; (2) spoken interpretation; and (3) written translation. While these three initiatives are related, they may be phased in independently, allowing for flexibility. Ideally, the County can gather data through each phase which will inform and support later phases-resulting in a responsive and effective language access approach.

Providing consistent, universal signage across County buildings and departments will enable visitors to County Campuses and buildings to understand and access important services. The committee has identified wayfinding as a critical and cost-effective way of improving access to all residents, regardless of language spoken, and has therefore prioritized it as the first component.

Spoken interpretation is the second component, and while many departments have interpretation services in place, the committee is exploring options for providing more consistent and robust services. Similarly, the third component, written translation, is available to individual departments, but County departments may benefit from centralized services. For both interpretation and translation, having a central Countywide contract could improve consistency, be more cost-efficient, and make additional services available which otherwise may be inaccessible to smaller departments.

The resolution directs the County Manager's office to adopt a Language Access Policy to affirm the County's aspiration of meeting the language needs of residents, regardless of their English proficiency, as stated in the attached Resolution.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Adopting the proposed resolution has no direct financial impact. Subsequent initiatives, which would be presented to the Board before implementation with the costs of specific language access initiatives, will be detailed in subsequent measures and set forth in the FY 2017-18 Recommended Budget.