

JUSTICE IN AGING

FIGHTING SENIOR POVERTY THROUGH LAW

Access to SSI – Improving Language Access for SSI and Social Security Beneficiaries

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Justice in Aging is a national organization that uses the power of law to fight senior poverty by securing access to affordable health care, economic security, and the courts for older adults with limited resources.

Since 1972 we've focused our efforts primarily on fighting for people who have been marginalized and excluded from justice, such as women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people with limited English proficiency.

Justice in Aging's Commitment to Advancing Equity

To achieve Justice in Aging, we must:

- Advance equity for low-income older adults in economic security, health care, housing, and elder justice initiatives.
- Address the enduring harms and inequities caused by systemic racism and other forms of discrimination that uniquely impact low-income older adults in marginalized communities.
- Recruit, support, and retain a diverse staff and board, including race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and presentation, sexual orientation, disability, age, and economic class.

Housekeeping

- All on mute. Use Questions function for substantive questions and for technical concerns.
- Problems with getting on to the webinar? Send an e-mail to trainings@justiceinaging.org.
- Find materials for this training and past trainings by searching the [Resource Library](https://justiceinaging.org/resource-library), justiceinaging.org/resource-library. A recording will be posted to [Justice in Aging's Vimeo page](https://www.vimeo.com/justiceinaging) at the conclusion of the presentation, [vimeo.com/justiceinaging](https://www.vimeo.com/justiceinaging).

Key Takeaways

- For individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP), language access is an additional barrier that can make it harder to access benefits.
- Improving language access should happen at multiple levels, including legislative expansions and operational updates.



How It Works

Language Access Needs

- **Type of contact**
in-person, by phone, online
- **Contact point**
Social Security office, state disability determination service, hearings office
- **Activity**
apply for benefits, review ongoing eligibility, file appeal or waiver request

Language Access Plan

- The Social Security Administration's (SSA) [language access plan](#) describes how they provide assistance to individuals who have limited English proficiency.
 - Update of the language access plan is in process
- LEP Steering Committee provides oversight on language access issues.

Written Notices and Forms

- Written notices to applicants and beneficiaries in English and Spanish
- Forms are available in English, and a number are available in Spanish; selected forms are [available online](#)

Oral Interpretation

- Free oral interpretation when an individual needs an interpreter in-person or over the phone.
 - In more than 200 languages, through multilingual employees and a national telephone interpreter service
- National Telephone Interpreter Services (TIS) Requests data set now available
 - Shows call counts by language

SSA Language Access Outreach

- Website available in English and Spanish
 - Includes [multi-language gateway](#) with selected info in 13 languages
- Facebook ads campaign launched earlier this year promoting the use of free interpreter services and the multi-language gateway
- SSA in process of developing LEP Toolkit in multiple languages



Reducing Barriers to Access

Provide Written Notices in Additional Languages

- Consider setting criteria for providing written notices in threshold languages
- Review all notices for plain language and readability
 - Improves understanding for both individuals receiving English language notices and individuals receiving translated notices

Increase Availability of Forms in Non-English Languages

- Add more forms in non-English languages to SSA's website
- Make forms that have already been translated available throughout the agency
 - Example: Spanish-language forms currently available in Puerto Rico

Policy Expansions

- Extend SSI to residents of Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories
 - Residents of Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands currently cannot receive SSI.
- Restore SSI eligibility for immigrant categories that lost eligibility due to federal legislation in the 1990s
 - Proposed legislation: [LIFT the BAR Act](#)

Consider Proficiency in English When Evaluating Disability

- In 2020, SSA removed consideration of the “inability to communicate in English” as an education category when evaluating whether an individual is disabled.

Review Interpreter Access Across All Points of Contact

- Language access policies can vary for different parts of the agency, making it difficult at times to identify the applicable policy and resolve problems.

Strengthen Administrative Structure

- Improve collection and reporting of language access data
 - Combined with a regular review of language access policies and how they are implemented throughout the agency
 - SSA [Open Government Data](#) webpage
- Create a language access coordinator role at SSA



Questions?

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