

An Assessment of Servicing Area of District Front Line Centers: Improving customer service to Limited/Non English Proficient populations

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Neel Saxena, Language Access Coordinator
Michelle Kim, Language Access Intern



Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs

441 4th Street, NW 805 S • Washington, DC 20001

Executive Summary

The purpose of this assessment is to provide District Agencies recommendations on improving the servicing area of their frontline centers to limited and non-English proficient Asian speaking populations in the District of Columbia. Assessments were conducted using a seven main criteria and three secondary criteria assessment tool from June 2007 to July 2007; in addition to seven criteria assessing the interactions observed at the centers. Seventeen different centers were visited; one center was excluded from the results because of the nature of the intake in the center. They were assessed in the following areas:

1. Quality of servicing area for LEP/NEP individuals which made up of seven different criteria (main criteria).
2. Generic assessment of quality of servicing environment made up of three criteria
3. Seven criteria assessing interactions between clients and Agency staff.

One center met near 50% of the main criteria and three centers met over 25% of the main criteria. Most of the centers had language line displays, but needed improvement in the other areas. Overall the results demonstrated a need for improvement in the servicing area of the centers and the following recommendations should help guide the Agencies to improve their servicing environment:

1. Translate instructional signs into appropriate language (i.e. "Please take a number and wait to be called")
2. Use symbols used to communicate the message (i.e. instead of saying "No cell phone use", replace with a sign of a picture of a cell phone with a cross through it")
3. Identify area(s) where translated materials are located.
4. Inform individuals that interpretation is available and instructions on how clients may request those services. If it means going to special counter or just waiting and requesting it at any counter, appropriate signage should instruct them to do so.
5. Display language line signs in easy to locate space, if large center then display poster sized displays of language line.

The centers need to closely examine how they provide customer service to the constituents of the District and keep in mind the unique needs of the LEP/NEP population. These assessments can serve as a baseline measure for upcoming assessments and a guide for Agencies on the areas that need improvement.

In FY2008, the assessment tool will be enhanced to better assess the servicing environment and the information gathered will be used to improve the Centers. Using the assessment results coupled with additional research each center will receive recommendations on improving their servicing environment so that LEP/NEP constituents will feel welcome when they come to the centers.

Introduction

The frontline centers of District Agencies are entry points for many residents in the District of Columbia to accessing government services. Technological advances in the District through E-services are positive movements in service delivery however the centers continue to be a primary gateway for numerous low-income individuals in the City. For limited English proficient (LEP) / non English proficient (NEP) residents and merchants, they serve as a primary vehicle for obtaining information on District programs and services. The centers are located all throughout the city and cover a variety of services, from providing housing vouchers to getting a driver's license all the way to getting a permit to re-do the façade of a business. The servicing environment of these front line centers is important to providing a comfortable, safe, welcoming atmosphere for those seeking services.

Assessing the "servicing environment" is a basic component in determining if a center is friendly to LEP/NEP constituents. In assessing the centers, OAPIA believes that it can provide recommendations for improving the "servicing environment", making it more accessible to LEP/NEP clients. Servicing environment is an important component to high quality delivery of services; staff interaction and follow through on cases are two other factors that contribute to the high quality of service delivery. Because the focus of the assessment is servicing environment the focus is on translated signs and materials and resources to assist LEP/NEP clients. Additional supplementary criteria were established to begin to provide insights into interactions with LEP/NEP individuals.

Currently the efforts by Customer Service Operations provide data on staff interaction, a useful tool for Agencies to improve their Customer Service. OAPIA built upon the successes of the Customer Service Operations Foreign language testing for servicing area and expanded the scope to focus in more on the environment for LEP/NEP individuals. OAPIA developed the assessment mechanism and shared information with the Office on Latino Affairs of its effort to assess the frontline centers. Shortly thereafter one representative from OAPIA and three from OLA visited centers assessing them on their respective language communities

The purpose of this assessment was to assess the current servicing environment and provide recommendations on improving the environment of these centers for the Asian language speaking communities in the District of Columbia. In taking a look at the design and results, the recommendations will encompass a wide range of areas with simple, manageable solutions.

Design

Assessment Period

The assessments took place from June 2007 – August 2007 at various times during the day. Two sites were visited by staff and the remaining visited by an OAPIA intern. Training was provided to the intern by OAPIA staff and results were collected regularly.

Assessment Criteria/Questions

The criteria was based on existing criteria from the Office of Customer Service Operations and applied to the LEP/NEP population. Overall, the criteria can be broken down into three major sections:

1. The first section contains the main components of this assessment which assesses the servicing area for LEP/NEP individuals made up of seven different criteria.
2. The second section consists of three criteria that address servicing environment in a generic manner.
3. The final section consists of seven criteria assessing interactions between clients and Agency staff.

Below are the questions and rationale behind choosing the seven main criteria questions:

Question/Criteria	Meaning/Rationale
Was the appropriate signage with the descriptions of services displayed for services and bilingual customers?	Signs to help LEP/NEP customers in understanding the services available at the center.

Were the documents/forms necessary to conduct the primary business of the agency readily available to customers with limited English?	Translated forms and documents are important for LEP/NEP customers to understanding the information they are completing appropriately.
Were there displays for language line?	Language Line sign is a basic step in assisting LEP/NEP individuals in identifying the language they speak.
Were alternate service access options published, posted and apparent to customers in languages other than English (i.e., web address, fax number, etc.)?	Information on other ways to get services for LEP/NEP customers can be a method of providing services.
Were there materials to help assist the staff in communicating with the customer (i.e., visuals, dictionaries)?	Tools to assist the frontline staff in communicating or interacting with LEP/NEP individuals can make the experience more pleasant for everyone.
Were there visual displays not in English that were not posted?	Indicated translated materials were on site but not posted or available to LEP/NEP clients.
Were there signs or displays in languages other than English that shows there is a bilingual staff that could help?	Demonstrates the availability of assistance to LEP/NEP clients.

Table 1: Rationale of Criteria

In addition to these questions, the three italicized criteria addressed servicing area in a generic manner and were taken from other assessments. The remaining seven criteria were subjective observations of interactions with LEP/NEP individuals and agency staff.

- *Clean Environment*
- *Were the hours of operations posted and apparent to customers?*
- *Did the front desk staff have easy access to a phone?*
- Did the staff provide clear directions/information?
- Was there a proportionate number of bilingual staff to the number of customers?
- Did the agency offer a bilingual staff or use language line to help NEP/LEP customers?
- Was there dedicated space where bilingual staff could work with LEP/NEP customers?
- Did the staff modify its spoken language to the level of the customer by using various techniques (i.e., speaking slowly, repeating information)?
- Was the customer referred to additional resources and were those additional resources available in languages other than English?
- Was there a long wait time for a bilingual staff to be present?

Table 2: Secondary criteria of Servicing Area assessment

Assessment Procedure

One representative from OAPIA visited each center and noted the servicing environment based on above criteria. OAPIA coordinated the schedule and transportation for centers visited with OLA. If there were interactions with LEP/NEP populations and Agency staff, the OAPIA representative noted it as an observation based on the appropriate criteria and provided subjective observations of the interactions.

Agencies Frontline Centers Assessed

The Office on Asian and Pacific Islander requested a list of frontline centers from the Office on Human Rights that were used for Customer Service’s Foreign Language Quality Assurance Testing. In collaboration with OLA, a list of centers was compiled. From the list of Agency centers, OAPIA selected 17 different centers based on use by Asian populations, accessibility by metro, and time constraints of staff. The following are the centers visited:

- DC Public Libraries, 4200 Kansas Ave., NW
- DC Public Libraries, 3160 16th Street
- Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration, 941 North Capitol Street, NE, #7200
- Child and Family Services Agency, 400 6th Street, SW
- Office of Human Rights, 3220 Pennsylvania Ave.
- Department of Human Services – RSA, 810 First Street, NE
- Department of Human Services – FSA, 2146 24th Place, NE*
- Department of Human Services – Strong Family, 920 Rhode Island Ave, NE
- Department of Human Services – IMA – Taylor Street Service Center
- Department of Mental Health – Community Services Agency, 1125 Spring Road, NW
- Department of Mental Health – Multicultural Community Support, 1250 U Street, NW
- Department of Employment Services – One Stop Center, 1704 Euclid Street, NW
- Department of Motor Vehicles, 3222 M Street NW
- Department of Parks and Recreation, 3149 16th Street, NW
- Department of Parks and Recreation, 1480 Girard Street, NW
- Office of Tax and Revenue
- Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

* DHS-FSA was visited but was not able to be assessed because of the nature of the center.

Findings

Overall, there was a lack of ‘Yes’ responses to some of the questions posed in the assessment. While the results need improvement, the positive aspect is that many of the problem areas have relatively simple solutions. The various frontline centers experienced many of the same issues – the common deficiencies in the centers include:

- Lack of translated signs both instructional and informational signs were missing in the Asian languages.
- Availability of Asian language translated materials was often difficult to locate or unavailable.
- Language Line signs were up not up in all the centers we visited.

Aggregate Results of Main Criteria of Servicing Area

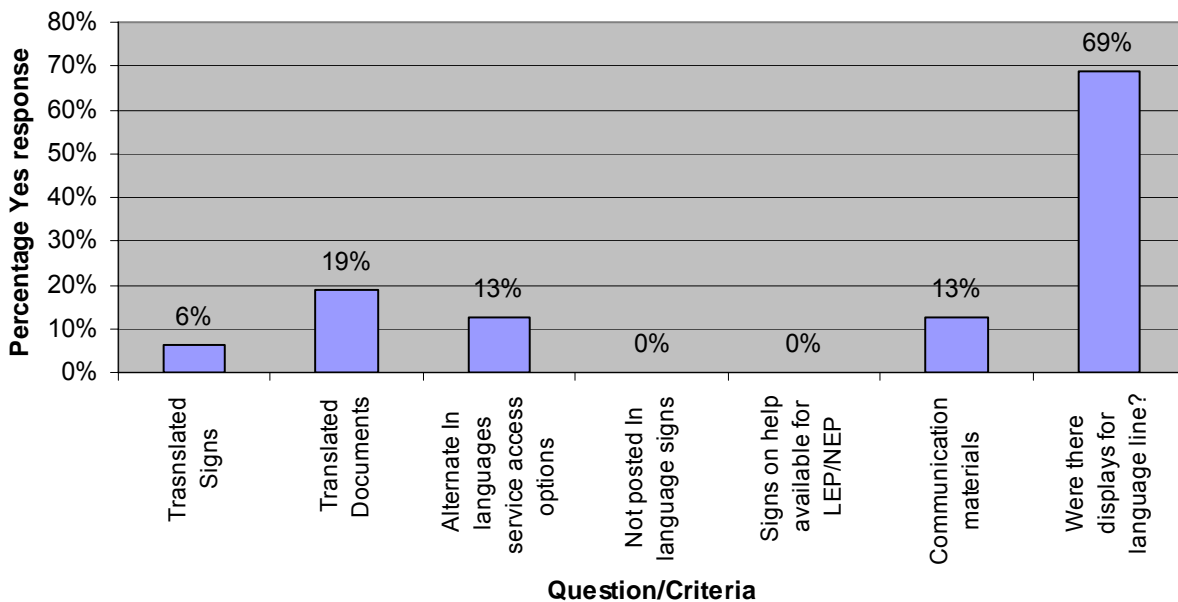


Figure 1: Aggregate results of main criteria of Servicing Area

Nearly 70 percent of the centers had signs indicating they have language line, but failed to demonstrate significant outputs for the remaining criteria. In looking at the individual centers, none of the centers met at least 50% of the main criteria. The DOES center in Columbia Heights performed the best out of all the centers, with DCRA, DMH, and DCPL scoring the next highest.

Agency Results of Main Criteria

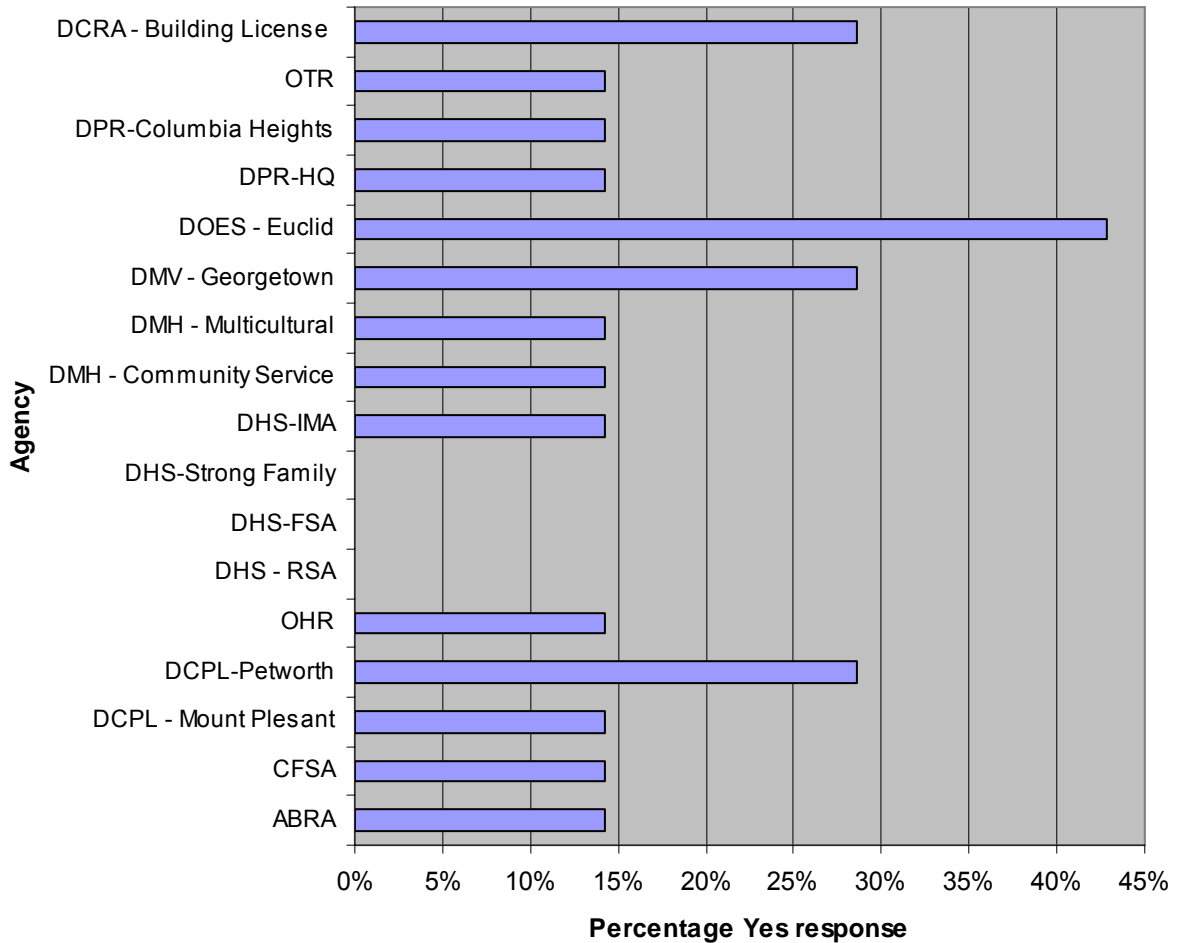


Figure 2: Results by Agency from main criteria

Looking at the other criteria, because the results are more subjective, conclusions and interpretations are for the purposes providing the perspectives and perceptions of an LEP/NEP individual. Here are the results of those questions/criteria:

Question/Criteria	Number of Yes	Percentage of Yes
Did the front desk staff have easy access to a phone?	9	56%
Clean Environment	14	88%
Did the staff provide clear directions/information?	10	63%
Were the hours of operations posted and apparent to customers?	6	38%

Was there a long wait time for a bilingual staff to be present?	1	6%
Did the agency offer a bilingual staff or use language line to help NEP/LEP customers?	1	6%
Was there dedicated space where bilingual staff could work with LEP/NEP customers?	4	25%
Did the staff modify its spoken language to the level of the customer by using various techniques (i.e., speaking slowly, repeating information)?	1	6%
Was the customer referred to additional resources and were those additional resources available in languages other than English?	1	6%
Was there a proportionate number of bilingual staff to the number of customers?	0	0%

Table 3: Additional criteria assessed

The results from this data are more appropriately assessed on a center to center level, because percentages may appear skewed because an interaction was not observed which affects the overall score.

In spite of an overall needed improvement to the centers, there were positive aspects that came out of the assessment of the centers:

- Many centers had access to a phone if an individual needed service via telephonic interpretation.
- Signs in English were clear and easy to find, making them easily translatable.

Overall, the results were mixed by centers, the issues of signage was consistent in most all the centers.

Limitations

The limitations of the results mainly deal with the secondary criteria as they are more subjective than the seven main criteria. The results are for the purposes of gaining a better understanding of the interactions at the centers. The reasoning for including these results and the secondary criteria was for observation purposes. The focus of this assessment was on the servicing area, whereas results on the interactions are currently being handled by Customer Service.

Of the seven criteria, the two that may be in question when this assessment is conducted are: (1) "Were there visual displays not in English that were not posted" and (2) "Were there materials to help assist the staff in communicating with the customer (i.e., visuals, dictionaries)". The first question is more geared at the management of the center and the second to organization of the center which have effects on the LEP/NEP community, but a lesser effect than the other criteria. The secondary criteria need work as well to improve what is being observed and stronger guidelines to reduce the level of subjectivity in the observations. The questions posed can have some subjectivity to them and will be attached with stricter guidance to the testers.

Recommendations

The centers, located throughout the city, all have varying methods to delivering services, but there were some common attributes between the centers. It is for these commonalities, recommendations on service delivery to LEP/NEP clients will be provided.

1. Translate instructional signs into appropriate language (i.e. "Please take a number and wait to be called"
2. Rules and regulations of the location should be translated or symbols used to communicate the message (i.e. instead of saying "No cell phone use", replace with a sign of a picture of a cell phone with a cross through it"

3. Identify area(s) where translated materials are located.
4. Promote the availability of interpretation services – inform that interpretation is available and instruct how you wish for your clients to request those services – if it means going to special counter or just waiting and requesting it at any counter, please inform the clients with signage.
5. Display language line signs in easy to locate space, if large center then display poster sized displays of language line.

OAPIA will be conducting follow up and additional assessments during the Summer 2008 and looks forward to seeing the progress of the Agencies. Input from the community and Agencies is welcome to improve the assessment tool. The assessment of the servicing area of frontline centers is a tool to be used to improve the service delivery to LEP/NEP clients. Much of the focus is often on customer service delivery, however before clients interact with Agency staff, the environment must be inviting. Translated signs and written materials are simple improvements to creating an inviting space for LEP/NEP clients. The 17 centers provide different services and have different customer service methods, but the servicing area is the common thread and most all the centers demonstrated a need for improvement. Agencies should examine their centers building upon the successes in their own centers, exploring best practices of other District centers, and get a better understand of the LEP/NEP experience to provide a high level of customer service to all those who walk through those Center's doors.