

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

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Neel Saxena, Program Coordinator



Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs

441 4th Street, NW 721 N • Washington, DC 20001

Introduction

As the limited English and non English proficient (LEP/NEP) population booms in the country, the language access movement gains momentum and no place is this more prevalent than in Washington, DC. From Executive Order 13166, "Improving Access to Service for Persons with Limited English Proficiency" to the District of Columbia's local Language Access Act of 2004, equity in service to LEP and NEP constituents is becoming a part of the government service landscape. The inclusion of these emerging populations is changing the way District government conducts business and requiring Agencies to adapt new measures to ensure meaningful access to services.

LEP and NEP individuals access government services and programs through frontline centers. Strong efforts are being made at the central Agency level to set up interpretation and translation services, train staff on cultural competency, and change the culture of the workforce to meet the ever changing, diverse constituency. Efforts at the frontline centers across the District are an important component to addressing the needs of the LEP/NEP communities as well. A key to ensuring this meaningful access at the frontline centers is the maintaining a welcoming servicing environment where LEP and NEP constituents feel comfortable. OAPIA contends this is one of the first steps in providing efficient and effective services.

The purpose of this assessment is 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. The recommendations will encompass a wide range of areas with simple, manageable solutions.

Design

Assessment Period

The assessments took place from June 2008 – August 2008 at various times during the day.

Assessment Criteria/Questions

The criteria was broken down into two major sections, the first assessing the environment and the second on observed interactions. This breakdown of questions is similar to the previous the assessment conducted in FY 2007. The questions were re-visited to reduce any bias that may arise from interpretation of the questions and remove un-related or duplicated questions. Below is a chart comparison of the questions.

Improved Questions:

FY2007 Question	FY 2008 Question
Improved Questions	
Were there signs or displays in languages other than English that shows there is a bilingual staff that could help?	Was the availability of multilingual services clearly advertised at the initial points of contact?
Were there displays for language line?	Was there a language identification poster/desktop display where customer points to his/her language?
Were the hours of operations posted and apparent to customers?	Were there translated signs or use of symbols indicating center operations (i.e., no smoking, ticket, other processes, hours of operation, etc.)?

Were the documents/forms necessary to conduct the primary business of the agency readily available to customers with limited English? Were alternate service access options published, posted and apparent to customers in languages other than English (i.e., web address, fax number, etc.)?	Were there translated materials easily accessible such as documents/forms necessary to conduct the primary business of the agency? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If so, were the LEP materials available in non-electronic format? (i.e., not limited to electronic forms/applications; paper form) Was there a sign indicating the location of these materials?
Was the appropriate signage with the descriptions of services displayed for services and bilingual customers?	Was the appropriate signage with the descriptions of services provided for LEP or NEP customers
Unchanged	
Did the front desk staff have easy access to a phone?	Did the front desk have easy access to a phone?
Added	
	Was there a clear multilingual staff directory provided?
Removed	
Was the environment clean and free of litter?	
Were there materials to help assist the staff in communicating with the customer (i.e. visuals, dictionaries)?	
Were there visual displays not in English that were not posted?	

Table 1: Comparison of FY2007 and FY2008 Questions

Each question was formulated based on a set of criteria that are explained below:

Question/Criteria	Meaning/Rationale
Was the availability of multilingual services clearly advertised at the initial points of contact?	Demonstrates the availability of assistance to LEP/NEP clients.
Was there a language identification poster/ desktop display where customer points to his/her language?	Language Line sign is a basic step in assisting LEP/NEP individuals in identifying the language they speak.
Were there translated signs or use of symbols indicating center operations (i.e., no smoking, ticket, other processes, hours of operation, etc.)?	Signs to help LEP/NEP customers in understanding the center operations
Were there translated materials easily accessible such as documents/forms necessary to conduct the primary business of the agency? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If so, were the LEP materials available in non-electronic format? (i.e., not limited to electronic forms/applications; paper form) Was there a sign indicating the location of these materials? 	Translated forms and documents are important for LEP/NEP customers to understanding the information they are completing appropriately.
Was the appropriate signage with the descriptions of services provided for LEP or NEP customers	Signs to help LEP/NEP customers in understanding the services available at the center.

Did the front desk have easy access to a phone?	Availability of phone is key tool to providing instant interpretive services.
Was there a clear multilingual staff directory provided?	Availability of directory is key tool to providing instant interpretive services if available.

Table 2: Environment criteria of Servicing Area assessment

In addition to these main areas of assessment, the following addressed subjective observations of interactions with LEP/NEP individuals and agency staff.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Were there LEP customers seeking assistance? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the staff offer an interpreter when assisting LEP customers?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the staff provide eye contact when communicating with customers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was there multilingual staff present?(REMINDER: if you hear them speak) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did at least one of them serve the primary purpose as an interpreter?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the staff modify their spoken language to the level of the customer using various techniques (i.e. speaking slowly, repeating information when necessary)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the customer given help in his or her language?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the staff explain what LEP services were available in the office when assisting LEP customers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the customer referred to additional resources that were available in languages other than English?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the staff offer use of a language line when assisting LEP customers? 	

Table 3: Interaction criteria of Servicing Area assessment

Assessment Procedure

One representative from OAPIA visited each center and noted the servicing environment based on above criteria. Using one representative to conduct all the assessments was used to equalize any potential biases that may occur due to human nature. The representative was provided an extensive training on maintaining an unbiased assessment for the Environment portion of the survey. OAPIA arranged the schedule and transportation to the centers and visited them often with OLA and OAA. If there were interactions with LEP/NEP populations and Agency staff, the OAPIA representative noted it as an observation based on the seven main 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 21 different centers based on use by Asian populations, accessibility by metro, and time constraints of staff. The following are the centers visited:

- Child and Family Services Agency, 400 6th Street, SW
- DC Public Libraries, 901 G Street, NW
- DC Public Libraries, 4200 Kansas Ave., NW
- DC Public Libraries, 3160 16th Street
- Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, 941 North Capitol St, NE
- Department of Housing and Community Development, 801 North Capitol Street, NE
- Department of Human Services – IMA – 645 H Street 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 Motor Vehicles, 301 C Street, NW
- Department of Motor Vehicles, 3222 M Street NW
- Department of Employment Services, 1480 Girard Street, NW
- Department of Employment Services, 1500 Franklin Street NE
- Department of Employment Services, 601 H Street NE
- Department of Parks and Recreation, 1480 Girard Street, NW
- Department of Parks and Recreation, 3300 Q Street NW
- Department of Parks and Recreation, 3149 16th Street, NW
- Metropolitan Police Department 1st District Station, 415 1st St, NW
- Metropolitan Policy Department 3rd District Substation, 750 Park Road, NW
- Office of Tax and Revenue, 941 North Capitol Street, NW

Assignment of Numerical Value

In an effort to quantify the assessment, a numerical value was calculated based on the number of 'Yes' and 'No' responses for each question. As there are two sets of questions, each center received 2 scores: Environment Score and Interaction Score. The numerical values assigned to each Center are intended as a reference point and may be used as a comparison tool.

The Environment Score was calculated based on, total percentage of 'Yes' responses calculated using this formula:

$$[(total\ number\ 'Yes')/(9 - total\ number\ 'N/A')] * 100,$$

and the Interaction Score was calculated in a similar method using this formula:

$$[(total\ number\ 'Yes')/(10 - total\ number\ 'N/A')] * 100$$

Findings

The results were as expected for most of the centers visited during the assessment period. Overall, there was a lack of Yes responses to some of the basic questions posed in the assessment. While the results need improvement, the positive aspect is that many of the problem areas have relatively simple solutions. This year the results looked promising and Agencies provided strong effort in:

- Access to a Phone for telephonic interpretation.
- Availability of non-electronic translated materials
- Displaying of the Language ID Card

The various frontline centers experienced many of the same issues – the common deficiencies in the centers include:

- Lacks 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.
- A multilingual directory was not available at most Centers.

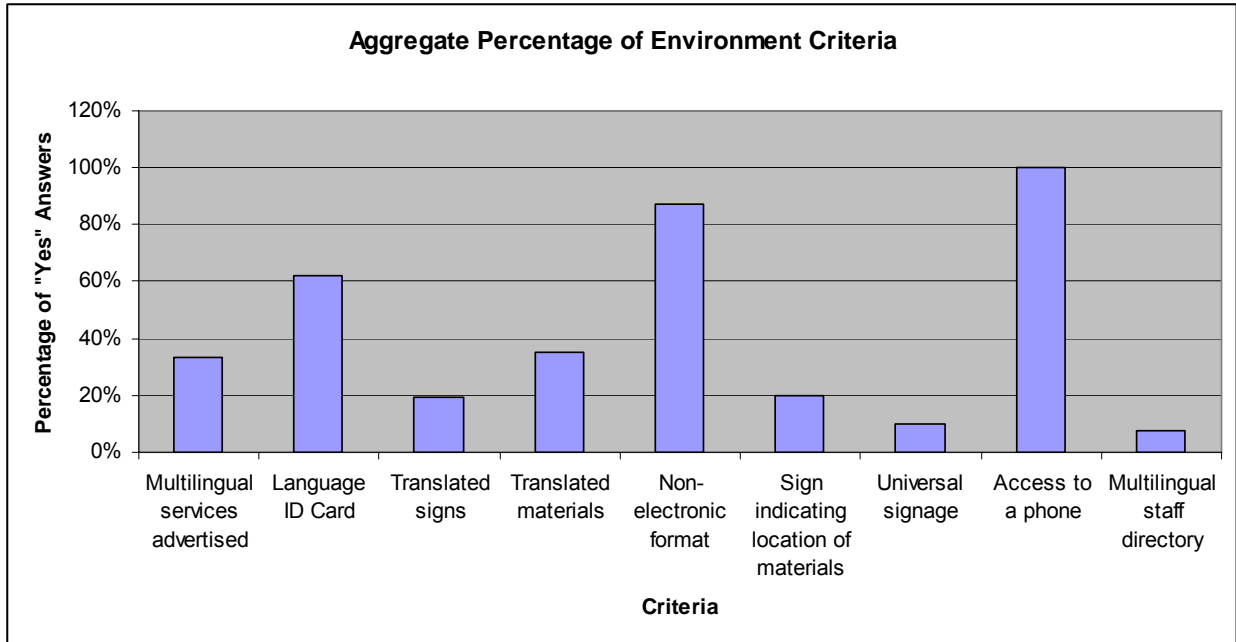


Figure 1: Aggregate results of main criteria of Servicing Area

The data suggests some positive results in some key areas such as 100% of the centers has access to a phone indicating the ability to provide telephonic interpretation. Over 60% had a Language identification card and over 80% had translated documents in a non-electronic format. The main area that needs improvement is in signage where the percentage of centers with signs indicating service availability, instructions, and location of translated materials fell below 20%.

DCPL at Mt. Pleasant and MLK and MPD 3rd District all did well on the Environment criteria. DHS at H Street, DMV at C Street, DOES at H Street, DPR HQ and MPD 1st District also did a good job. Most of the agencies had demonstrated an ability to provide language access, but need improved capacities to more effectively and efficiently structure their centers as models for access to services by LEP/NEP clients.

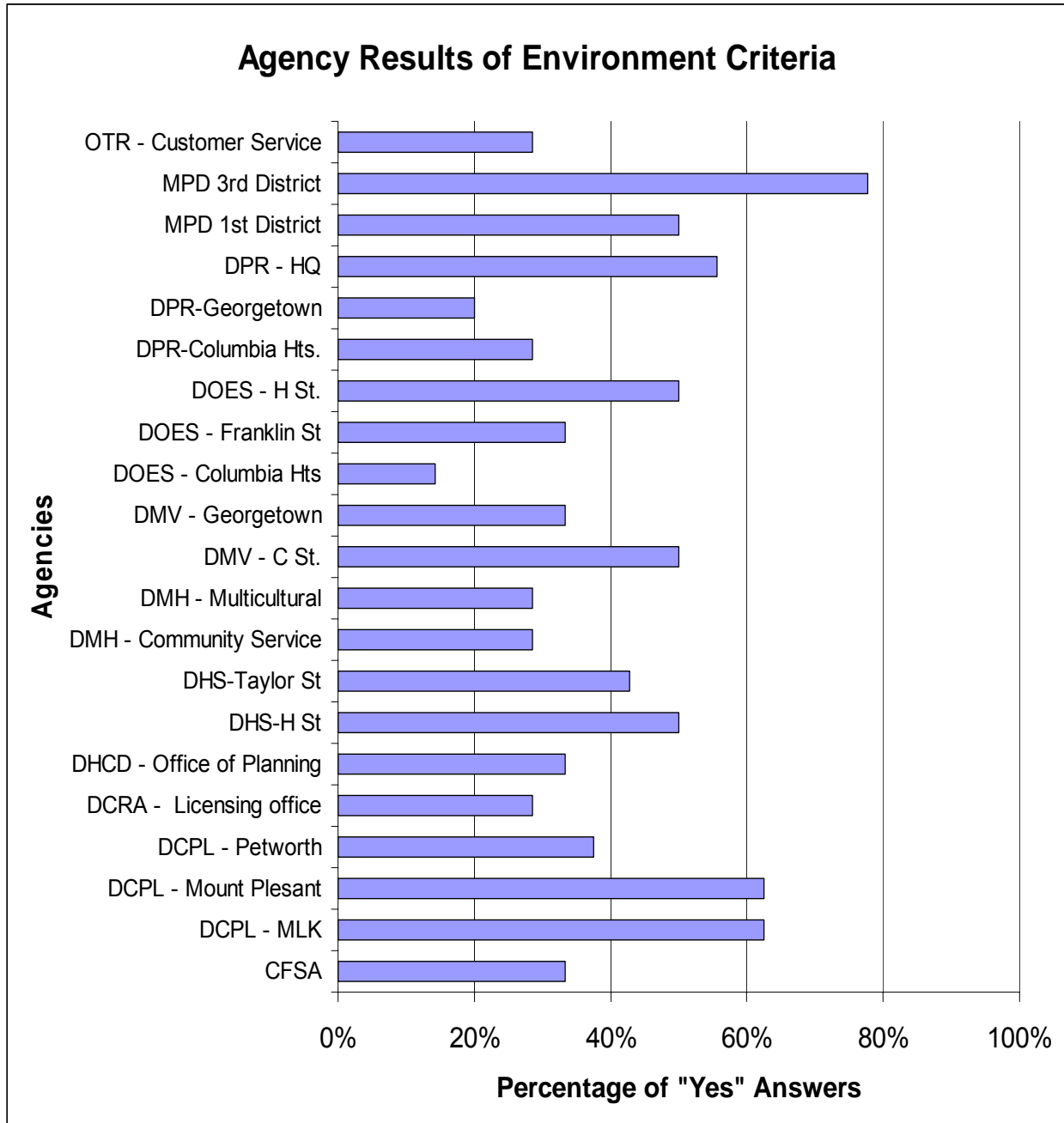


Figure 2: Results by Agency from main criteria

In looking at the other criteria, because the results are more subjective, conclusions and interpretations are for the purposes of 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
Were there LEP customers seeking assistance?	4	22%
Did the staff provide eye contact when communicating with customers?	2	50%
Did the staff modify its spoken language to the level of the customer using various techniques (i.e.	1	50%

speaking slowly, repeating information when necessary)?		
Did the staff explain what LEP services were available in the office when assisting LEP customers?	0	0%
Did the staff offer use of a language line when assisting LEP customers?	1	25%
Did the staff offer an interpreter when assisting LEP customers?	1	50%
Was there multilingual staff present?	0	0%
Did at least one of them serve the primary purpose as an interpreter?	0	0%
Was the customer given help in his or her language?	2	67%
Was the customer referred to additional resources that were available in languages other than English?	1	17%

Table 4: Additional criteria assessed

The results from this data are more appropriately assessed on a center to center level, because percentages may be skewed due to the fact that an interaction was not observed at all the centers. There were only a total of four interactions observed and based on that information it is difficult to formulate a conclusion about all the centers. However, we can get a general sense of one interaction and while we cannot make a generalization about the Center's interaction with LEP/NEP clients, we can gain an understanding of how clients may be treated at the Centers.

The data alone for this year provides a snapshot into the operations of frontline centers in the District. An improved picture comes from comparing results from the FY2007 assessment and the FY2008 assessment. This analysis will provide a trend on the areas that are improving in the Agencies and the areas they need to focus on to improve the environment for LEP/NEP residents and merchants.

Comparative Analysis

As noted in Table 1, six of the criteria remained the same aside from changes in wording. A comparison of those six found two criteria: language id card and translated signs on operations to be lower overall amongst all agencies. However, in the remaining four criteria saw an increase in the percentage at the various centers.

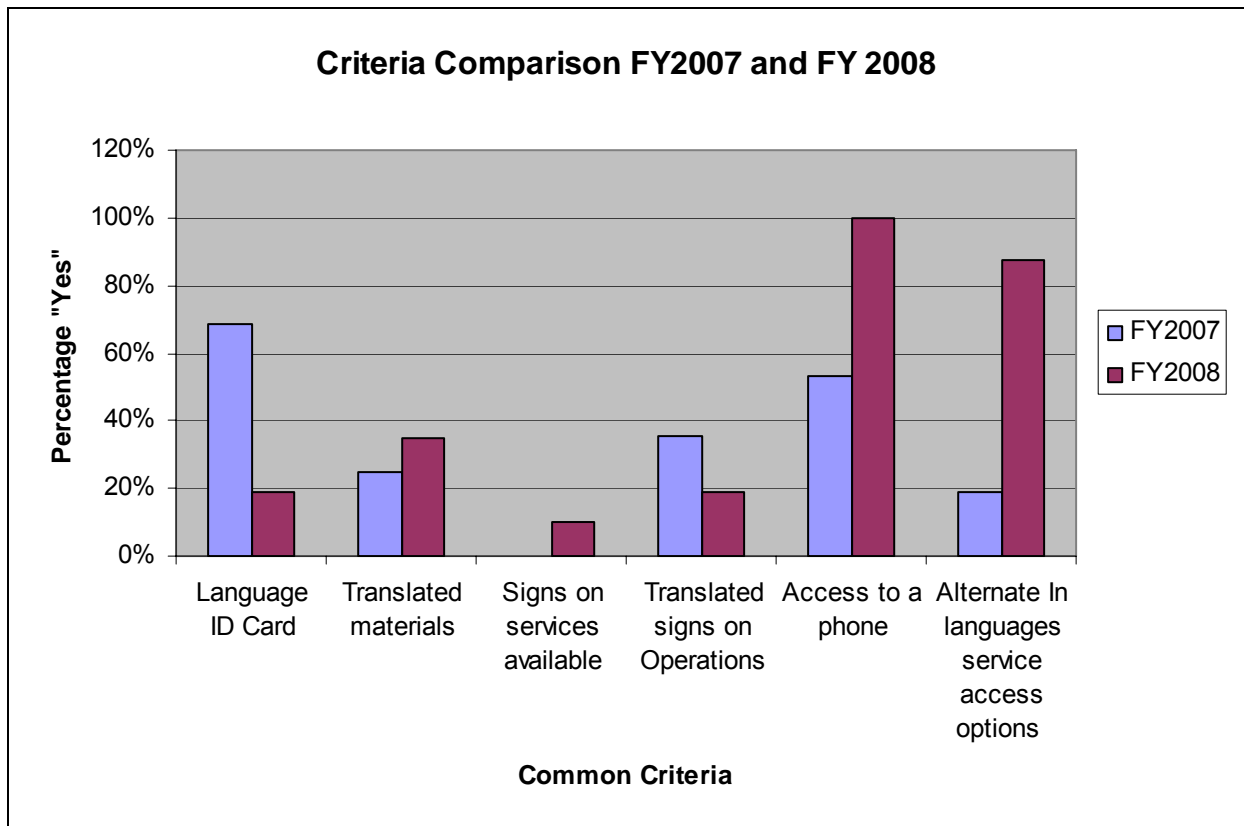


Figure 3: Comparison from FY2007 to FY2008

Limitations

The limits of this assessment are rooted in its use as a true comparative tool across Agencies because each Center varies in the services available. A more appropriate comparison can be made within Agency frontline centers under the assumption that similar services are being provided at each center. The individual results of each center provide greater utility for the intended purpose of this assessment – improving the environment of the frontline centers. This report provides a high level overview of the environment, however limits information on the interaction score.

Unbiased reporting on interaction is not the focus of this assessment and thus is limited as an assessment tool for Agencies. In addition to un-tested questions, the bias of the assessor plays a role because the answers are based on observations not direct interactions. The usefulness of this portion of the assessment is as supplementary information for Agencies to get a glimpse of perception by various immigrant communities. Perception, while not scientifically rigorous, plays a key role in how much trust the immigrant community has with an Agency. Beyond these two limitations in the environment and interaction portion of the assessments, the Frontline center assessment does provide valuable information on the District as a whole and individually by Agency.

Conclusion

The frontline centers continue to serve as an important entry for all District residents and the need to a welcoming, friendly environment is important to the utilization of District government programs and services. This idea rings true in the LEP/NEP community as internet and other non-traditional forms of government are increasingly difficult because of their limited English abilities. This assessment seeks to provide Agencies a baseline on the environment of their Centers to determine how welcoming they are to

LEP/NEP constituents they serve. In the second year of the assessment there were many improvements in the Centers, however there remain areas that need improvement.

In an effort to improve the environment for the Asian and Pacific Islander population, OAPIA recommends the following, low cost solutions to creating an LEP/NEP friendlier environment:

1. Display language identification signs in easy to locate space, if large center then display poster sized displays of language line or multiple signs.
2. Translate instructional signs into appropriate language (i.e. "Please take a number and wait to be called")
3. 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")
4. Identify area(s) where translated materials are located.

In addition to these low cost solutions, other useful methods of improving the environment include:

1. Promote the availability of interpretation services through community outreach efforts such as community meetings and events, visits to community groups, and collaboration with other Agencies and OAPIA in conducting outreach.
2. Utilize ethnic media to promote availability of in-language services and include messaging as such with all media releases.

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 21 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.