

National Capital Region
Transportation Planning Board (TPB)
Access for All Advisory Committee

Subcommittee on Transit Information for Limited
English Proficiency (LEP) Customers

Report on Major Findings and
Recommendations to Improve Transit
Information for Limited English Proficiency
(LEP) Customers

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Major Findings and Recommendations to Improve Transit Information for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Customers

Background and Purpose

The National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board¹ (TPB) created the Access for All (AFA) Advisory Committee in 2001. The mission of the committee is to identify concerns of low-income and minority populations and persons with disabilities, and to determine whether and how these issues might be addressed within the TPB process. The Access for All Advisory Committee is comprised of diverse community leaders.

In its 2001 report, the Access for All Advisory (AFA) Committee identified *transit information for those with limited English proficiency as a priority* and a subcommittee was created on this topic. The subcommittee was chaired by Kim Propeack of CASA of Maryland, Inc. and met for the first time in October 2002. The subcommittee recommended that as a first step toward implementation of this priority, a focus group be conducted to engage a broader language community and to gather more information on the best ways of communicating with LEP groups. *The goal of the subcommittee was to create a prioritized list of ways to improve language access for LEP groups in both the short- and long-term.* The purpose of this document is to provide background information and present the major findings and recommendations for improving access to transit for LEP communities in the short- and long-term.

A Complex and Diverse Region

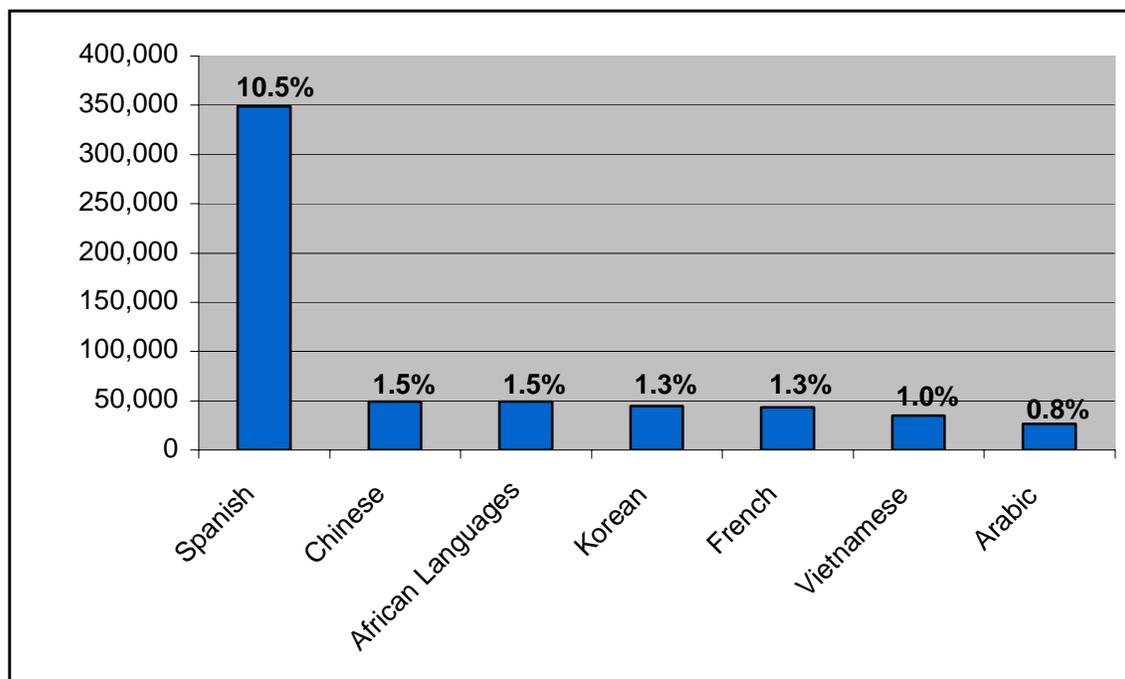
The difficulty of providing transit information for LEP customers in a complex and diverse region needs to be recognized. Several different types of transit service are owned and operated by numerous transit agencies within the region. Regional transit service is provided by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), which operates Metrorail and Metrobus in the District of Columbia, Suburban Maryland and Northern Virginia. Many jurisdictions operate local bus services in addition to the Metrobus system. These include Montgomery County's Ride-On, the Fairfax County Connection, Prince George's The Bus, Arlington Transit (ART), Alexandria's DASH and the City of Fairfax CUE systems. In addition, Virginia Rail Express (VRE) and Maryland Area Transit Authority (MARC) provide commuter rail services. Commuter bus services are also provided by several counties, such as OmniRide in Prince William County.

Furthermore, a diverse set of languages is spoken in the region. The 2000 U.S. Census shows that the Washington region includes more than 800,000 people who

¹ The TPB is responsible for coordinating the long-range transportation plan in the Washington region, which includes Suburban Maryland, Northern Virginia and the District of Columbia. The membership is comprised of local elected officials, state transportation agencies, and WMATA. For more information, go to <http://www.mwcog.org/trans.html>.

are foreign born. The 2000 Census also indicates that twenty-three percent of the region's population speaks a language other than English at home, ten percent of which speak English less than "very well". The languages other than English most often spoken at home are Spanish, Chinese, African languages (including Amharic, the language spoken in Ethiopia), Korean, French, Vietnamese and Arabic, as shown in Figure 1 below. Non-English speaking groups in the region are not only diverse; they are also geographically dispersed throughout the region. Therefore, regional information about LEP language access may not be as useful as information from a smaller geographic area. For example, on a regional scale, the most commonly spoken LEP languages are different than the most commonly spoken languages on a local scale. Attachment C provides information on the most commonly spoken languages other than English identified by the District of Columbia, Fairfax County, Montgomery County and Prince George's County. This information is similar to the 2000 Census data provided here, but differences do exist. Spanish, Vietnamese and Chinese were all listed by the local jurisdictions as the most commonly spoken languages by LEP individuals.

Figure 1: Languages Other Than English Most Often Spoken at Home in Jurisdictions Currently Served by Metrorail



Source: 2000 Census. Jurisdictions include Arlington County, the City of Alexandria, the District of Columbia, the City of Fairfax, the City of Falls Church, Fairfax County, Montgomery County and Prince George's County.

Moreover, the Washington region experiences a constant stream of international tourists who may not speak English proficiently. The Washington region has become one of the top immigrant destinations in the country. Illiteracy, even among English speakers, is a barrier to transit information and needs to be considered when transit

materials are developed.

Existing Transit Information Services for LEP Customers

A short description of existing transit language information services is provided here to create a context for recommendations to improve those services. At an AFA Committee meeting held in the spring of 2001, WMATA reported that it provides a live translation service capable of translating 140 languages which receives approximately 80 calls a month. Of these requests, 96 percent are for Spanish. The Metro Pocket Guide is available in eight languages and is available on the WMATA website. WMATA recently worked with an organization involved in the AFA Committee, the Boat People, SOS, Inc., and published a Metro Pocket Guide in Vietnamese. The Metro system map instructions are provided in English and Spanish. Three bus schedules are printed in Spanish. WMATA has 12 bilingual customer service employees. Local bus systems, such as Ride-On in Montgomery County, Fairfax Connector, and Arlington Transit, all have some bilingual customer service agents, and a few have recorded bilingual messages; Ride-On provides some translated written materials.

The Focus Group

A focus group was held in January 2003 with non-profit agencies from various language communities to have a broad conversation reflecting the geographic and national origin diversity of the region's LEP communities to further understand how LEP communities obtain information on services and which methods of communication are the most effective. Over 30 non-profit agencies that work with LEP populations participated in the focus group – including representatives from community/advocacy organizations and social service agencies in the District of Columbia, Suburban Maryland and Northern Virginia. A list of the participants is provided in Attachment A. Gustavo Torres, Executive Director of CASA of Maryland, Inc, facilitated the focus group.

A summary of findings of the focus group and a complete list of ideas and recommendations generated at the meeting are provided in Attachment B. The next section will review the major findings and recommendations for improving access to transit for LEP communities based on the input received. All of the recommendations are scalable; a recommendation could be tested in a small community or with one language first, and if it is successful, implemented on a larger scale. The first two sets of recommendations focus on short-range and relatively low cost priorities that would improve language access to regional transit services. The last set of recommendations focus on long-range priorities for expanding language access programs.

Major Findings and Recommendations

Promote and Improve Existing Language Assistance Services

The focus group identified several barriers for LEP populations in using transit in the region. One barrier is a lack of awareness of the existing language assistance services provided by transit agencies. Ineffectiveness of the existing language assistance services was also reported as a barrier. Given the suburban location of many LEP groups, the lack of frequent or convenient transit service also is a barrier. The first two barriers are addressed in this set of recommendations.

Transit information can be difficult for people who speak English to understand, and for those with limited English skills comprehending the materials is all the more challenging. Improving transit information with clear, concise language and the use of symbols helps not only those with limited English skills, but people who are illiterate and the general public as well.

Furthermore, the availability of translated transit information is not widely known among LEP communities. Written materials, such as schedules and guides, are not broadly distributed. Awareness of phone translation services, such as WMATA's language assistance line, is low. Few people were aware that WMATA's language assistance line can also provide information on local bus systems, such as Ride-On and Fairfax Connector. Participants reported that their clients have been frustrated with using transit information translation services. For instance, some clients have had difficulty trying to obtain translated information with an agency representative who spoke only English. Sometimes people had to wait long periods to obtain translated information which made transit trip planning hard to do on the same day.

Recommendations

- ✓ Improve the existing phone transit information services for LEP populations by making the service more attentive to customer demand.
- ✓ Advertise phone information services more widely.
 - Advertise the services available from the WMATA transit information line, such as translation services and information on local transit systems, in English and other languages.
 - It would be beneficial if both WMATA and the local transit systems advertised the phone services provided by WMATA.
- ✓ Add multilingual greetings and options on WMATA's general information line.
- ✓ Improve existing transit information provided in English by using clear, concise language with pictures, graphics and symbols.
- ✓ Provide written translated materials in Metro stations and bus stops in heavily LEP-populated transit areas.
- ✓ Establish a community or citizen advisory group to help transit agencies reach

language access goals.

- ✓ Ensure that LEP individuals can understand and follow instructions and procedures within a transit system in the event of an emergency.

Provide Additional Language Assistance Services and Materials

The focus group discussed the best methods of communicating with people who have limited English skills. Verbal communications were found to be much more effective than written communications. Social networks and word of mouth are the primary sources of information used by LEP groups. The Internet was not felt to be as helpful as other sources of information, such as verbal information provided via the phone assistance services or written information using simple and clear language provided in transit areas, social service agencies and community organizations. Effective written materials use simple language and lots of visuals, and rely more on universal symbols and images rather than words. Grants and other resources to augment transit agency funding could be explored to assist in implementing the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- ✓ Provide education, training, and tools for social service providers, churches and other organizations that work with LEP and English as Second Language (ESL) communities.
- ✓ Produce a video on how to use transit, which should be distributed widely to community organizations, social service agencies and employment centers. Produce the video in English and Spanish first, and then translate to other languages when more resources are available.
- ✓ Improve multilingual information at bus stops incrementally. Experiment with adding information in Spanish at a few bus stops in a heavily Hispanic area, for example. Post large maps at bus stops displaying routes, Metro stations and instructions on how to use the bus system in a language other than English in one specific language community. Use landmarks and universally understood symbols on the map. If these services are successful, provide them in more transit areas.
- ✓ Transit agencies should use a survey of riders to determine which language translations need to be provided, and the Census data should be used until surveys can be completed.
 - The regional 2000 Census data indicates that Spanish, African languages, Chinese, Korean, French and Vietnamese are most often spoken at home in the region. However, local surveys, local 2000 Census data and other sources should be used to determine appropriate languages for a smaller geographic area, like for certain Metro stations and bus routes.

- ✓ Given the complex set of languages spoken, the frequent international visitors in the metropolitan Washington region, and to assist illiterate individuals, universal symbols and pictures should be used to communicate with transit customers more often than written language.
 - A standard set of symbols could be developed to communicate emergency procedures, how to use rail and bus systems, and for navigation within a transit system.

Long-Range Recommendations for Expanding Language Assistance Services

Recognizing that limited resources are available for language assistance services, the preceding recommendations were short-range and relatively low-cost priorities that could greatly improve language access to vital transit services in the region. Below are recommendations for expanding services available to ensure greater access and more meaningful transit information to LEP customers.

Recommendations

- ✓ Recruit bilingual transit agency employees for positions with frequent customer contact with the public. Ensure that they are compensated fairly for their skills and job responsibilities.
- ✓ Provide cultural sensitivity training for bus drivers, transit police and other transit agency employees who have customer contact.
- ✓ Implement “Try Transit Week” focusing on LEP with language-appropriate tours.
- ✓ Improve language assistance for people with physical and cognitive disabilities. People that do not speak English and have a visual or hearing impairment, face an even more difficult challenge in understanding and using transit services.

Attachment A
Focus Group Participants

Name	Affiliation
Jocelyn Barbour	Fairfax County Department of Family Services
Elizabeth Binckes	Aging and Disability Services Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services
Greg Chen	DC Mayor's Office on Asian & Pacific Islander Affairs
Zoie Cheng	Greater Washington Urban League
Nora Eidelman	The Law Foundation of Prince George's County
Tammy Fenton	Latin American Youth Center
Rosa Garcia	Councilmember Tom Perez Montgomery County Council
Marlnon Grande	Independence Now
Joe Heiney-Gonzalez	Hispanic Customer Service Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services
Angela Hsu	Chinese Culture and Community Service Center
Luis Hurtado	Montgomery County Police Department, Community Relations
Gie Kim	Korean American Coalition- Washington DC
Dawn Le	Aging and Disability Services Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services
Carlos Loureiro	Carlos Rosario School
Heather McClure	Council of Latino Agencies
Lillian Perdomo	Multicultural Community Service
Kim Propeack	CASA of Maryland, Inc.
Wanda Ramos	Langley Park Community Center
Harriet Shapiro	Connect-A-Ride Jewish Council for the Aging
Nguyen Dinh Thang	Boat People S.O.S., Inc.
Gustavo Torres	CASA of Maryland, Inc.
Enrique Torrico	Calvary Multicultural Learning Center
Myriam Torrico	Montgomery County Government Hispanic/Latino Initiative
Scott Wang	Chinese Culture and Community Service Center
Susan Worton Ereraha	(none)

WMATA Participants

Patricia Tomczyszyn WMATA

Angela Martin WMATA

David Erion WMATA

COG Staff and Other Observers

Tracey France Federal Highway Administration

Wendy Klancher COG Staff

Jerry Miller COG Staff

John Swanson COG Staff

Attachment B

Focus Group Summary on Transit Information for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Communities January 7, 2003

What are the Current Barriers and Needs for LEP communities to Use the Transit System?

Barriers

The purpose of this question was to identify barriers specific to LEP communities that can be addressed in part with better information, services and marketing. The focus group participants identified a range of barriers, including geographic, cultural, language, transit service limitations and limitations certain individuals face—physical limitations for disabled and elderly persons, literacy challenges and unique challenges for immigrants and refugees. Below is a condensed list of the major barriers for LEP individuals to use the transit system as identified by the focus group.

- Lack of translated transit information, usefulness of current translated information and lack of awareness of existing translation services and materials
- Complex transit information is hard to understand even in English, and the multiple transit systems in the region adds another layer of complexity
- Unfamiliarity with the transit system
- Safety concerns—at bus stops, in the rail system and fear of not being able to communicate with police and others if problem does occur
- Varying levels of literacy in English and all other languages

Needs

The needs identified by the focus group fall into four broad categories. The specific needs raised by the focus group are listed here. The categories are used to frame the priorities in the last section of this summary.

- ***Promote existing language assistance services***
 - Provide practical training and produce orientation materials for social service agencies to assist clients
 - Advertise the language line translation service more widely
 - Make hard copies of translated materials more readily available
 - Improve access to translated materials on the website

- ***Improve the existing language assistance services and materials***

Translation services that are currently available do not convey openness to language access—little things, like not having automated menus with different language options, can minimize the effectiveness of providing any language access services.

- More user-friendly translation service
- Information provided needs to be uniform, clear and simple with visual and verbal components
- Transit service limitations, such as bus frequency, need to be conveyed to LEP people
- Provide more bus maps and distribute more thoroughly
- Metrorail train delay and other messages in Spanish (verbal and on electronic message boards in stations)

- ***Expand the language assistance program***

- Cultural competency and diversity sensitivity training for transit agency employees with customer contact
- Develop additional materials and services for LEP customers

- ***Improve and expand transit service***

- Reverse commute transit service
- More suburban service

How do people in our communities obtain information about services, including transit information?

- Social Network
- Word of mouth
- Social service agencies
- Bilingual people at transit stations and bus stops
- Bilingual employees
- Community-based and ethnic organizations
- Employment centers
- Place of work
- Church
- Local TV stations and radio
- Ethnic/Foreign Language media: radio, television, and newspapers
- Family members—children of LEP people play an important role
- Public Parks
- Community based events such as fairs and festivals
- Hotlines Advertised and Answered in that language
- Internet
- Kiosks

- Golden Triangle street information
- Libraries
- Schools

What are the main communication sources?

- Social network
- Word of mouth
- Bilingual people at transit stations and bus stops
- Ethnic/Foreign Language media: radio, television, and newspapers
- Employment centers
- Place of work
- Community-based and ethnic organizations
- Church
- Social service agencies

What are the most effective methods of communicating transit information to LEP customers?

- Images and symbols that are universally understood
- Interpersonal interaction through social networks, employers and bilingual employees
- Ethnic radio and cable stations
- Spoken word rather than written communication
- Simple messages that use lots of visuals

What are the priorities?

Promote existing language assistance services and use of transit

- Use verbal communication methods to promote transit use and transit information to LEP communities
- Simplify information to use basic language and more visuals
- Provide education, training, and tools for social service providers, churches and other organizations that work with LEP and ESL communities
- Conduct surveys of riders, LEP related community based organizations and social service agencies to find out more about the needs

- Promote transit services in educational settings, K-12 and adult ESL and literacy classes schools
- Advertise transit information in various languages with visuals, in places such as:
 - Interior space in buses and subways;
 - Churches, ethnic grocery stores, check-cashing stores, phone card stores and beauty shops; and
 - Community events and festivals.
- Advertise and answer help lines in languages other than English
- In the event of an emergency, limited English proficiency (LEP) customers need to understand transit related evacuation plans and procedures
- Use bi-lingual volunteers (like students needing to volunteer) to hand out translated information and greet customers at high-volume Metrorail stations and bus stops

Improve the existing language assistance services and materials

- Produce more materials to assist LEP customers, such as:
 - A basic newsletter or pamphlet in simple English on using the transit system (“How to Catch a Bus”), then translate to other languages and widely publish and distribute
 - A simple resource guide in several languages describing metropolitan transit resources for LEP communities
 - Make WMATA’s website more user friendly and put posters in all regional libraries on how to access information
- Improve phone translation services
 - Transit information greeting on phone line needs to be in more than one language
 - Invest in a phone system in which customers can push # for English, # for Spanish, # for Vietnamese, etc...
- Develop buddy systems to introduce the transit system to new LEP users
- Make bus stops language accessible
- Produce a video in several languages on how to use the transit system and distribute widely to community organizations, social service agencies and community organizations
- Create a community or citizen advisory board to help transit agencies reach language access goals

Expand the language assistance program

- Create large metropolitan bus maps and post at bus shelters and other spaces (Paris Transit is good example)
- Hire more bilingual transit agency employees who work with the public and assure that they are compensated fairly for their skills and job responsibilities
- Provide cultural sensitivity training for bus drivers, transit police and other transit agency employees who have customer contact
- Implement “Try Transit Week” focusing on LEP with language appropriate tours

Attachment C

Information from Local Jurisdictions on Languages Commonly Spoken by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Individuals

February 2003

Fairfax County

1. Spanish
2. Vietnamese
3. Korean
4. Farsi
5. Arabic
6. Urdu
7. Chinese and American Sign language

Source: Jocelyn Barbour and Angie Carrera. Based on surveys done by the Fairfax County Government and included in information for government agency publications and language access services.

Montgomery County

1. Spanish
2. Vietnamese
3. Korean
4. Chinese

Source: Montgomery County library system. Based U.S. Census information for Montgomery County residents.

Note: Montgomery County Ride-On found from a triennial survey of riders that the most common languages other than English that riders spoke were Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese and French.

District of Columbia

1. Spanish
2. Amharic
3. Korean
4. Vietnamese
5. Mandarin Chinese

Source: From Councilmember Jim Graham's office and based on community testimony at a public hearing on language access. Not an official list.

Prince George's County

1. Spanish
2. French
3. Krio
4. Amharic
5. Vietnamese
6. Liberian English
7. Yoruba
8. Mandarin Chinese
9. Urdu
10. Jamaican English

Source: Top 10 languages spoken by students enrolled in the ESOL program in the Prince George's County Public Schools.