

Promoting Equitable Access to Language Services in Health & Human Services

Fort Bend County Project Narrative

LEP Language Access and Health Literacy

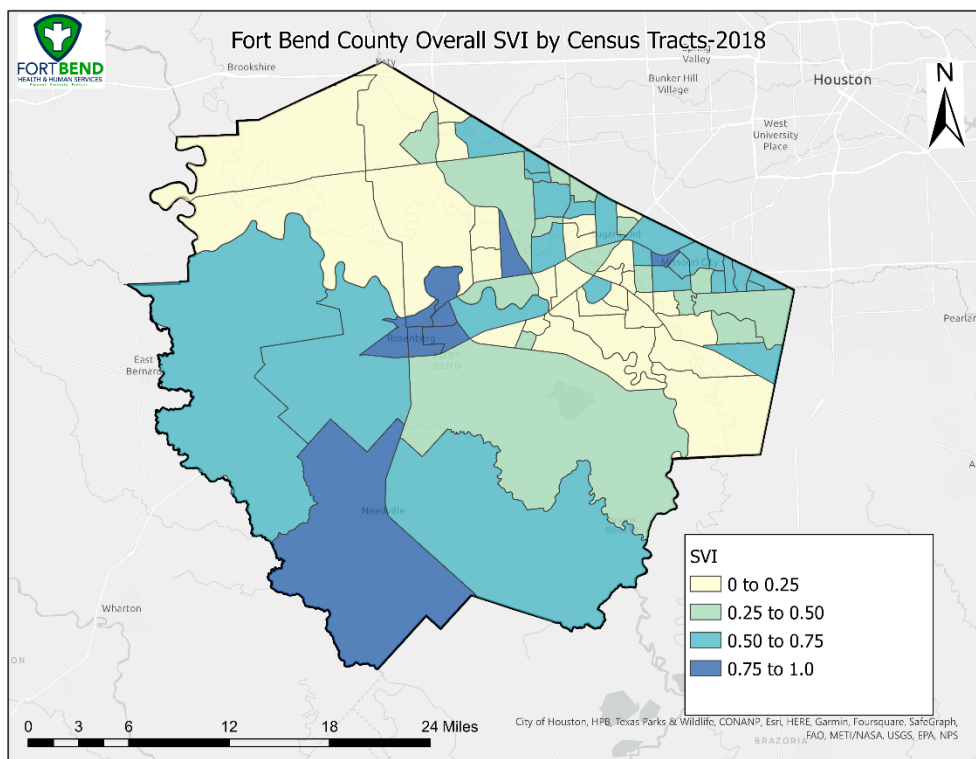
Statement of Need

Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals can understand and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others. (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], n.d.). Individuals whose primary language is not English and have difficulty communicating effectively are referred to as having Limited English Proficiency (LEP). LEP individuals are faced with language barriers in the healthcare system leading to impaired patient comprehension, a decrease in access to preventative services, and decreased patient adherence to medication instructions and treatment plans (Wilson, 2005). On average, individuals with LEP have longer lengths of stay than individuals who speak English, regardless of socioeconomic status (Squires, 2017). Medical interpreters and other language access services can help to improve and bridge the gap for patients with LEP, leading to improved health outcomes for these individuals. The proposed geographical area of focus is Fort Bend County, Texas. Fort Bend County is a diverse county with a minority population making up over 60% of the residential population and over 28% being foreign-born residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). About 40% of Fort Bend County residents stated they spoke a language other than English at home, meaning that some of these individuals may have limited English proficiency. This is important to consider when creating culturally and linguistically competent programs and services within Fort Bend County Health & Human Services.

Additionally, in a 2019 community health assessment conducted by Memorial Herman Sugar Land Hospital, about 13% of Fort Bend County residents stated they had difficulty speaking English. This is important to address as language proficiency is a major barrier to access and quality within healthcare.

The population of focus includes individuals with limited English proficiency and those who have lower levels of health literacy. Based on the community health assessment conducted by Oakbend Medical Center in 2021, the county's key needs were a lack of health knowledge regarding how to access health services, health education, and language barriers that prevented needs from being met (Oakbend Medical Center, 2021). Although when comparing Fort Bend County to other counties in proximity, Fort Bend has a higher median income and lower need level on the SocioNeed ® Index. By taking a deeper look at Fort Bend County, certain zip codes have much higher levels of SocioNeed ® which are associated with poorer health outcomes, educational attainment, and linguistic barriers which affect access to care (Memorial Herman Sugar Land Hospital, 2019). The zip codes with higher vulnerable populations include 77083, 77498, 77053, and 77489. By targeting these specific areas, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will focus on these areas to improve their health literacy and language access to services.

The following map shows the Social Vulnerability Index levels for Fort Bend County by census tracts. The higher SVI scores match up to the zip codes listed above while also highlighting some areas of lower population and more rural areas in the west and south portions of the County. These areas include farming areas where there is poverty noted in other studies as well as a lack of health care coverage.



Language barriers between healthcare professionals and service consumers can impact both party's satisfaction and decrease the quality of healthcare delivery. To overcome these barriers organizations must take multiple steps to create a health-literate organization. Interpretation and translation services can be costly for parties but are recommended especially in organizations that serve a diverse community, like Fort Bend County. Furthermore, translation resources are important, but it is also important to consider the literacy level of an individual in their native language. Individuals may not be literate or health literate in their native language, so if they are presented with only translated materials, they may have difficulty understanding. An ideal way to decrease the language barrier is to encourage native speaking individuals in the health care community or in the community where the clients of the health care entity reside to become certified medical interpreters. This training not only increases the opportunity

for clients to hear their medical information in their own language, but also decreases the frequency of inadequate or inappropriate translation by family members and friends. By increasing language access services, certified interpreters or by use of contracted language and document translation in Fort Bend County Health & Human Services, and in community partners, will provide the opportunity for the resident of the county to understand their health information and make properly informed decisions regarding their health.

Organizational Capability

- Fort Bend County Health & Human Services (FBCHHS), has the organizational capability to successfully implement the proposed project to improve the health literacy and language access services for the target population. The department has successfully implemented many grant programs to assist with specific needs of the community and includes an Epidemiology division, a Communications, Equity and Engagement section and a Performance and Innovation section which together allow for appropriate community assessment, performance management and evaluation components to support this proposed project. Within the CEE section there is an outreach team consisting of Community Health Education Specialist and Community Health Workers who have become familiar with the needs of the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and will be an important support to implementing this new initiative.
- The methodological approach to assessing and analyzing policies will consist of an environmental scan before program implementation. The environmental scan will include a language translation need assessment amongst health care

providers in the county, a community health literacy assessment, to assess the health literacy activities currently provided within FBCHHS and our partners, staff health literacy practices, and the health literacy of the community members as well. Through this language and literacy assessment, FBCHHS will have all the data from both primary sources and secondary sources to start the implementation of the program.

- Fort Bend County Health & Human Services' mission and vision were developed with key core values that we strive to uphold. Some of these core values include quality, respect, compassion, collaboration, and equity. Fort Bend County Health & Human Services utilizes a health equity advisory committee to ensure that all divisions within the department are using an equity lens when providing services to community members.
- One of the main aspects of this program will be the creation of a language access team. Overseeing this team, one Language Access Coordinator will oversee staff training, connecting language access services to individuals who request them and helping to create the language access plan internally for Fort Bend County. A second Language Access Coordinator will work externally to the health care providers in the community to develop partnerships, assess the strengths and needs of the health care entities in the areas of the county where language needs are identified, and assisting with developing the external portion of the language access plan. Community health workers will act as patient navigators to assist community members with navigating the Fort Bend County health systems, teaching and emphasizing health literacy for all providers and

staff. The community health workers will also work with the language access coordinators in creating the language access plan. Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will encourage training of native speaking health related staff to become certified medical interpreters to serve community members with LEP.

The above individuals will make up the department's language access team, and they will oversee improving equitable access to service within Fort Bend County Health & Human Services and the community health provider partners.

- The environmental scan which will include the community language and health literacy assessment will be used to determine potential gaps in language proficiency and health literacy in the community members. This process will take about three months, and after the data has been conducted program implementation will begin. A continuous evaluation process will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of health literacy activities for both community members and staff and language access service utilization. These evaluations will include pre-and post-assessments for FBCHHS staff and community health providers after health literacy training has been completed, pre and post assessments for community partners after language access services are implemented or enhanced, and an review of the availability of language access services offered and utilized by community members.

Project Plan

a. Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes

- SMART GOALS

- **S** - Fort Bend County Health & Human Services plans to improve access to access to language services for residents with limited English and increased health literacy in the identified populations, both internally to the FBCHHS services and externally with health care provider partners.
- **M** – Data surveillance will be conducted before the implementation of enhanced language access services, this data will be used as a baseline for reference to measure increases in access to appropriate and accurate language translation services internally and in the community. By using pre and post-test assessments in health literacy training for both staff and residents, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will be able to measure improvement in health literacy. Appropriate achievement goals will be determined as the initial surveillance is completed.
- **A** – Once the language access plan has been created, implementation of the programs (language access services and health literacy training) will be implemented. Achievable objectives will be established within County programs and will community partners.
- **R** – At this time Fort Bend County Health & Human Services does not have the resources to implement this plan. With funding secured from this initiative, a language access team will be established to create the

language access plan and carry out the stated objectives and program implementation.

- **T** – The first three months, will be used to conduct the environmental scan of Fort Bend County and to begin established improvement goals. During this time, the required staff will be hired. After the required staff is hired, and an evaluation of data is conducted, goals and objectives will be established and program implementation will begin. The data conducted from the environmental scan will be used to implement any needed language access services within Fort Bend County Health & Human Services. An ongoing review of the program implementation will continue simultaneously, to determine the effectiveness of the program. Additionally, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will engage with community partners to encourage their implementation of language access and health literacy measures. Continuous feedback will be vital for all proposed programs or policy implementation.

- **Measurable Outcomes**

- With The implementation of both the language access services and health literacy training, Fort Bend County will see an increase in the utilization of services, especially for LEP residents. A pre and post-test assessment of health literacy will be conducted before and after every training for both residents and staff to evaluate the effectiveness of the training; this data will be used to make any needed changes in training modules or style. To evaluate the language access services, Fort Bend County Health &

Human Services will assess how many individuals start using and requesting language access services within each division. Additionally, a sustained participation rate for individuals with low health literacy, especially in the target vulnerable population zip codes, will be used to measure program success.

- Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will start by creating a language access team within Health & Human Services. The language access team will be comprised of the Language Access Coordinators, Community Health Workers, and certified medical interpreters. The language access team will primarily be responsible for creating a language access plan that will be used to guide the language access services offered within Fort Bend County Health & Human Services and within the medical provider community of the county. Translation services and health literacy training will be implemented according to the plan. Community health workers will also act as patient navigators to bridge the gap between patients and healthcare provider partners within Fort Bend County. The community health workers will work directly with the language access coordinator to create health literacy training for all Fort Bend County Health & Human Services staff. The staff training will be implemented for staff to be able to know when and how to request language translation services and to be both culturally and linguistically competent.

b. Policy Intervention

- Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will conduct an environmental scan before the creation of the language access plan. The environmental scan will

help to gather all data on county residents, specifically those with LEP.

Additionally, through this environmental scan, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will identify any language barriers and gaps within the offered services and divisions. Currently, the Fort Bend County Courts have a language access plan and offer language access services to those in the community. Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will use their current plan, as an example for the implementation of language access services for clients of FBCHHS. Using both the current data and data that will be collected during the environmental scan, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will create a language access team and plan, to improve access and equitable care for LEP individuals.

- One of Fort Bend County Health & Human Services' communications objectives is to use plain language in all communication to help increase the audience's level of health literacy. Additionally, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services ensures equitable access for individuals who may have speech disabilities, and/or limited English proficiency. These provisions are a standard that has been implemented department-wide and stated in the communications policy. These policy objectives are implemented to ensure that individuals with LEP are made aware of the federal protections from national origin discrimination.
- Individuals with LEP may have difficulty accessing programs and services within Fort Bend County Health & Human Services. Fort Bend County Health & Human Services strives to be a health-literate organization to establish equity in all divisions. To ensure equitable access, FBCHHS will

identify, develop, and test evidence-informed practices to inform LEP individuals about the availability of language access services within FBCHHS. All divisions within FBCHHS utilize iSpeak cards, for LEP individuals to identify their chosen language and request appropriate language access services.

- One of the major barriers to implementing a project of this nature has been the initial financial investment of creating a language access team to drive the effort. Fort Bend County Health & Human Services plans to use this grant to create the language access team to inform the implementation and enhancement of language access services. A second potential barrier is the number of languages used in the immigrant populations in Fort Bend County. The County will need to contract with an outside interpreting service(s) to be able to provide language access services to residents with languages identified as needed.
 - During the development of the language access plan, the team will create or revise any existing or needed policies for the FBCHHS to ensure language access is included in all services provided by the department. Along with the policies, appropriate procedures will be developed in each division to accommodate the requirements of the policies.
- c. Work Plan – Please see the Objective Work Plan attachment.
- Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will leverage multi-sector collaborations both within the department and outside community partnerships to achieve the proposed project activities. By engaging with community members,

and key partners within Fort Bend, strategies to address increased language access and improved health literacy will be created.

- To monitor and track the progress of health literacy and language access services Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will continually check access request services and use the pre-and post-survey tests as a tool to monitor progress. The language access team will continually monitor and track any obtained data. Additionally, continual engagement with community members at outreach events will help to find any gaps in language access and health literacy for residents. By continually checking the progress of the program, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will evaluate successes and barriers and make any needed updates.

Evaluation Plan

- Documentation of the increase in the number of individuals with LEP who are made aware and understand the Federal protections from national origin discrimination.
- Documentation of the increase in knowledge and availability of training opportunities for staff and community members regarding health literacy and medical interpreter certifications.
- Documentation of the increase in accurate health communication between healthcare professionals and community members. This can be achieved with the use of interpretation and translating services that will be provided when requested.

- Documentation of the decrease in the use of untrained interpreters, and rather increase the use of accurate and accessible interpreter services.

Dissemination Plan

- Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will document and disseminate data in a timely manner through a monthly report of health literacy training provided, training completed, and language access service requests. The target audience of this proposed project is individuals with limited health literacy and limited English proficiency (LEP). Other parties who might be interested in the results of our project include community stakeholders and partners that Fort Bend County currently works with.
- The monthly report will be posted on the Fort Bend County Health & Human Services website, for public access. Additionally, key stakeholders will be made aware of the reports through various communication channels.

Sustainability Approach

To sustain language access services after the project period, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will use strategic planning to build the program into the organizational structure and align it with organizational goals to achieve equitable access for all. Organizational and individual behavior change will be essential to effectively integrate health literacy and health equity into organizational goals and

policies. Additionally, Fort Bend County Health & Human Services will continue to engage and collaborate with local community partners to sustain the program.

References

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