

Communicating with People with Limited English Proficiency



The National Center on Elder Abuse is committed to spreading elder abuse awareness and providing quality information and referrals to people around the nation. Over the years, we have become more widely known and have conversed with people who come from various ethnic backgrounds and speak language(s) outside of English. Therefore, we have expanded our communications practices in speaking with people who have limited English language proficiency.

We encourage the use of these best practice tips to aid your communication efforts:

- When anticipating a need to hire a new role on your team, screen for bilingual or multilingual candidates.
- Identify members among your team who speak other languages who you know can assist with outreach when connecting with people who speak different languages.
- Establish a list of translated basic phrases, such as “Do you speak English?”.
- If someone is contacting you by phone and has reception issues [Are they trying to reach you from somewhere remote or out of the country?], try to obtain as much information as possible to contact the person back, in the hopes of establishing a clearer second communication attempt.
- For people requesting information with language barriers or who may be hard-of-hearing, slow down your speaking pace, pronounce words clearly, and repeat phrases when necessary.
- While communicating, have a list of apps, online translators, and quick access reference guides to use.
- Offer multiple contact options such as phone, email, or hand-written correspondence. When communicating by phone, many people with limited English proficiency have difficulty explaining what they need and often find it easier to elaborate in writing.



- For written correspondence in the person's native language, try to use basic language. Keep in mind that people with limited English proficiency may be able to speak fluently in their native language, but may have a basic reading or writing level.
- When speaking with people with limited English proficiency, try not to use jargon, slang, acronyms, or specialized words. Use simple words that are easily translated. Also keep in mind that there may be many dialects associated with a language.
- Try to add expression and use appropriate pitch in your voice. Make it clear, for example, when you are asking a question.
- Speak slowly, not loudly. Articulate your words in shorter phrases rather than just speaking loudly.
- Speak in relatively short segments. Include pauses when transitioning from one topic to another.
- In certain cultures, addressing people by their first name can be a mark of disrespect. Address people with a title or honorific until invited to do otherwise.
- If your efforts to communicate are challenged, consider language interpretation and document translation services that work within your budget.



We always appreciate resource suggestions that enhance communication efforts with ethnically diverse communities.

Please contact us with additional suggestions at:

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