

Multilingual support

Research summary

January 2024

Original research questions

Research stream 1 - Challenge.gov

- What are the pros/cons of Challenge.gov?
- What makes a successful Challenge?
 - Specific, but interesting
 - For our audience: Non-burdening
 - Working with a vendor the first time seems advised
 - Knowing what we want to get out of it in advance
- Would it be strategic/who would be the best strategic stakeholders to partner with on a Challenge?

Research stream 2 - Community Based Partnerships

- What do CBO's /community care about in partnerships with the government?
 - *Respect, time spent, funding*
 - *Often wondering where gov services are that they think they shouldn't have to be doing*
- What makes effective partnerships with CBOs?
 - *Funding and making it worth their time*
 - *Actually having positive, measurable outcomes for the population they are serving; lasting change*
- Which CBO's would make good partners for us/challenge?
- What would CBO's want to get out of a challenge?
 - *Funding*
 - *Some sense of or action on the idea (does it just go into a void forever or will our community be helped)?*

Research stream 3 - Effective multilingual text notifications

- What makes an effective multilingual text notification?
 - *Plain language in the rules of that language*
 - *Different populations even within a language group have different dialects*
 - *Possibly fine to find a general standard (won't be as "plain" but still effective maybe)*
 - *Showing up where they are (does everyone involved have a US phone number? What about WhatsApp or other platforms?)*
 - *Age considerations (e.g. older Mandarin-speaking folks are using different language than younger)*
- What current processes do SLTTs use to create effective multilingual text notification services?
 - *Building their own translation tools (Hustle)*
 - *Calling / doing 1-1 audio help*
 - *Volunteer or in-house translation via CBOs*
 - *Pre-outreach (expect a call or text)*
 - *Filling out forms or making banks of translated forms*
- What do non-english language speakers experience or care about?
 - ***Is this a scam?***
 - *Outreach beforehand important*
 - *Domain areas of healthcare, legal, and benefits eligibility/procedures*

Other findings

Org landscape

Four sorts of players have emerged in this research

- **The sponsor of the info**
 - The one "sending" the message, like a state or federal gov
- **The translator**
 - The party actually doing the task of crafting the message in a new language
- **The community-based organization**

- Which can take many forms; the knowledge-haver about a language speaking group within an area
- **The subject matter expert**
 - As in "people who know about the benefit area, SNAP, nutrition, etc.;" sometimes this is one in the same with the gov or the CBO, but a role that should be considered

Three-ish “types” of CBOs have emerged in this line of research

- Direct service
- Advocacy/education/non-direct (more resources and staffing) (IOM, CC, ACCESS)
- Coalition

Medium to bigger orgs have more resources and time. Smaller, hyper-local, “on-the-ground” orgs are harder pressed and might need more direct engagement than something like a Challenge

- “[We’re a] UN related org [who have] been around for 80 years. [We have] 19K staff around the globe in 170 countries. The majority of staff are nationals/residents of the countries served.” - IOM
- Community Catalyst
- ACCESS

Vendor involvement, network of partnerships; contractors, especially for the Ind. language piece (it’s an entire network/world/industry)

- “We also work with a vendor that helps with other languages – Indigenous languages in Guatemala. We use them over the phone to help with translation.” - IOM
- DHS FRTF

CBOs often “exist to solve a clear, unmet need”; though vary on whether certain unmet needs are their core services or not (e.g. who is doing translation because they have to versus want to)

- “The confusion maybe comes from combo of actual CBOs and NPs just seeing a ton of issues in their communities and all trying solve them – a huge variety in the types of orgs responding to a clear unmet need – the focus for us has been access to care, especially for those who qualify for it.” - Community Catalyst

In the opinion of some participants, the government should really be leading this space because they have the money and infra to build it out

- “As a taxpayer this is government waste. With my IOM hat on it we’ll happily provide services but it would be easier if DHS provided this already in Spanish” - IOM
- Community Catalyst
- Together and Free

MENA (Middle Eastern/North African) folks are not recognized in the Census, meaning they don’t get the benefits normally given to minority groups such as small business designations, grant funding, and other government resources; affects Arabic-language support (and other languages, presumably)

- NNAAC
- “...it would be nice for the federal government to recognize us as a minority group so we get the grants and resources to do it more. ACCESS is the organization, but under it four research institutions, center for african american communities is policy and advocacy wing. They translate information into Arabic, we work with researchers, to translate research into arabic otherwise we wouldn’t have that information. We do this out of the kindness of our hearts but it would be nice to get more resources.” - ACCESS

Supporting non-English speakers

Indigenous languages are a unique concern, especially when it comes to immigration items. Many indigenous languages don’t have a written component. An audio component might be considered for notifications

- “[There are] lots of Indigenous languages. [Guatemala] has 22 national languages including Spanish.” - IOM
- DHS FRTF

- “Spanish is a *second* language for many folks in US, despite its prevalence as a first language” - Together and Free
- “Some people say Spanish because they think they have to.” - Together and Free

WhatsApp, it’s a thing! (and is used by many diaspora and non-English speaking communities as their main form of text-based communication)

- “The common thread is WhatsApp.” - IOM
- “The preference is for WhatsApp, specifically because you need to put money in your phone in Central America, [whereas] WhatsApp is free of charge.” - IOM
- NNAAC
- DHS FRTF

CBOs are using phone calls, personalized help, pro-active involvement, ad-hoc inquiries, and hands-on, repeated contact to support communities

- “[We] manage the help desk and respond to questions on the family reunion Program, mostly on the phone via a service called CloudTalk.” - IOM
- [Cloudtalk] also has text messaging, so sometimes we send, as a follow-up to the phone call, a very personalized text. [We] also use WhatsApp as an alternative. CloudTalk’s texting capabilities are not always great.” - IOM
- “We don’t really do campaigns; mostly the personalized communication.” - IOM
- Community Catalyst
- NNAAC
- “Right now – open enrollment: we usually do it one by one [with] phone calls.” - ACCESS
- Together and Free (not really on that side but that world exists)

Orgs are employing different tools and platforms to make this happen (CloudTalk, Hustle, AI etc.), and some are home-grown

- “[We] manage the help desk and respond to questions on the family reunion Program, mostly on the phone via a service called CloudTalk.” - IOM
- Together and Free
- “We had questions from our communities asking for clarifications, so we created personalized scripts through the **Hustle** app. We were able to launch these campaigns in Arabic. Our most successful campaigns were ones in Arabic, both on federal and state levels.” - ACCESS

Literal translation and Google translate loses context and meaning, and the concepts of plain language still apply in non-English languages; though sometimes necessary to fill the gaps

- “DHS is using a literal translator, so they’re not necessarily capturing the essence or meaning. It’s probably confusing. Many families don’t read. Spanish is their *second* language, so sending literal, translated legalese in Spanish is confusing. Then we get the follow-up questions asking ‘what does this mean?’”- IOM
- DHS FRTF

What is “plain” language depends on country of origin, dialect, and even age of members of the public (context, education level)

- IOM
- DHS FRTF
- AARP Foundation

Fliers and documents are not always supported with the communication methods available to CBOS. That said, some have built banks of pre-translated documents

- “One of the main CloudTalk obstacles is sharing multimedia texts. It’s important when communicating directly with beneficiaries and needing to send fliers and such; the documents they’ll need to have.” - IOM

Some resources are *only* available in English despite the heavy use by non-English speaking folks (immigration / asylum for instance; not great, Bob)

- “[Some forms] are *only* available in English, so we have to be the intermediary layer for things like when to go to City Hall and such... [those] forms are only in English. With things like where to write your name and date of birth and stuff... [It] would be great if USCIS offered ‘here’s an example’ in Spanish.” - IOM

Email is one option, though many folks do not have email addresses either

- “[There’s] also a push to direct people to my.uscis.gov, an electronic portal for ‘Where is my case? Is it pending? Is it denied?’ An email address required, and how many of our cases have an email address? Maybe a handful?” - IOM
- DHS FRTF

Additional angles exist beyond “texting”: TikTok, Facebook, social media

- “[There’s a] TikTok and social media angle. Visual representations are good versus paragraphs and paragraphs. The network varies by age demographic. Central America is mostly on Facebook.” - IOM

Text messaging happens in two contexts: blast, and two-way conversation

- “There’s two worlds that use text messaging: a world blast vs. a two-way conversation.” - Community Catalyst

There might be an AI angle here, though whether it’s “cooked” enough or any better than Google Translate is questionable

- Together and Free

Outreach and pre-notifying communities that the government will be communicating with them is crucial. Many folks are skeptical of government communication or are wary of scams

- “Folks think ACA is a scam. The mentality of our community – and even us – couldn’t believe the prices. [We] thought something fishy was happening. You want to be the trusted person. You don’t want to send false information just for the benefit of the organization or to get the grant. We never deliver false information.” - ACCESS
- AARP Foundation

Topics

Complex topics like: Immigration (biometric appointments), healthcare navigation (signing up for Medicaid), parole, {more}; specificity is very important; stressful and scary topics made more so by language access

- “A large amount of questions that come our way [are about] understanding letters sent to them in English, often notices for them to go to biometrics appointments. Like dates and times of when to be there.” - IOM
- “There’s a lot of utility in establishing a feedback loop with people on the ground and with folks putting out materials. Folks on the ground don’t have time to take down consistent errors unless it’s actually costing lives. You gotta be proactive about it. We set up warm lines to set up, as opposed to broad social media presence instead of community based relationships.” - Community Catalyst

- “We learned that health system navigation is difficult for people. We saw community members – they could send a text message to someone in Arabic which helps tremendously. Even if they have all the qualifications, it helps to know where they can spend their time to get the access they need to know in the system. We have scripts on medicaid outreach that we can share.” - Community Catalyst
- ACCESS
- DHS FRTF

Big picture

Empowerment, “why we do this;” the *right* to receive government information in their own language

- “[My wish would be for a] functional USCIS call center that provides info to non-native speakers. Most of the time they can't talk to a live agent; they can't complete the calls because they don't have all the information. A functional system that **empowers** them to help themselves.” - IOM
- “I believe our clients have the right to understand in their own language, their own [cultural] way.” - ACCESS

Challenge

General, positive interest in a Challenge; as long as isn't too resource or time intensive; and if there will be results; “free labor” problem; need to be aware of who we're gonna get at the table

- “Very interesting! [I'm] unsure what our barriers would be in that, but we have a nonprofit partner that supports us with outreach and such and might be interested.” - IOM
- “Overall we've found the higher the administrative burden and time commitment, the more established, white-led nonprofits are gonna be coming to the table. It might be worth thinking about what exactly you are looking to diversify.” - Community Catalyst
- “I like the idea of prize competition. Thinking about what type of material, translation is great if you have an understanding of geographic location and culture of language.” - Community Catalyst
- NNAAC
- Together and Free

- “1000%... Would love to do this, especially with Arabic-translated materials.” - ACCESS

Challenge: Defining “CBO” or who should apply; different definitions, we should be specific

- SAMHSA

Mechanics of community feedback

- IOM
 - *“working with people who are interested in services, we register them and then we send over to DHS, who then approves or denies the person, we then assign them a case worker for parole, constant feedback between family and caseworker on next steps, helpdesk is another feedback mechanism”*
 - *“We hear from HHS grantees about their process, Seneca with behavioral health, connecting fams with therapist and counselors, we hear feedback from them on EAD.”*
- Community Catalyst
 - *“The things that come from the govt might be stale, and lower the reading level, focus on what people do and how they applies to them. We also had some success with focus group a year ago in english and spanish on unwinding language. So focus group testing will help on how that thing will land, some folks respond to specific message, economics, something related to their family.”*
- “Focus groups – testing those messages with smaller groups of community members. I run through the document, review it myself, then host focus groups and have other, diverse groups (e.g. not just Lebanese) look it over. Sometimes a whole paragraph in English translated into Arabic could be one sentence. Sometimes things are too long or too short. If something is Google translated, it’s 100% reviewed by community members that speak that language.” - ACCESS