Phase Two - Final Report - Multilingual Notifications Bet

Summary

If a member of the public receives a notification from the government they don't understand, they may as well have not received it at all. This means people may miss important deadlines, voters might miss out on important information, or that folks are never informed they are eligible for government benefits. Notifications need to be easy to understand in English, yes, but also need to be translated appropriately for every member of the public. **People have the right to receive government information in a language they can understand. The public is empowered when government information is in their language.**

This project explored the multilingual notifications space from the perspective of Community Based Organizations (CBOs). When a government sends notifications by text, email, or other means, who is translating that for non-English speakers? What is that process like? What makes an effective text notification in any language?

We also explored the potential of running a Challenge.gov prize competition to solicit ideas from CBOs on how they were solving the challenges of translating government information.

We did this by chatting with the staff of various CBOs and folks from other government agencies who had run a Challenge. While we recommended that the Studio did a Challenge in addition to running an additional research increment, efforts did not progress due to programmatic constraints.

Context + background

If you're reading this, you've been staffed to, are helping with, or just want to know more about the [Benefits Studio Multilingual Support efforts.](#)

Where to find the basics:

- Project folder: 🖼 Multilingual Support > 🏷 Project Tracker : includes interview tracker, phase 3 research estimates, etc.
- 🖼 Challenge : docs of our brainstorming sessions around doing a Challenge and what type of Challenges we could launch
- 🖼 User Compensation : we tried to compensate the CBOs we chatted with but we're having a hard time going through the process when this was written
- 🖼 Stakeholder Interviews : folder of all the notes we took from the various interviews we conducted
- How the studio team works: [Background items on the Benefits Studio Program](#)

Work context

This work started in **August 2023** as an effort by the studio to explore other bet opportunities around the benefits space. The team heard of interests in exploring the multilingual space through its ongoing conversations with Notify partners and so decided to explore this opportunity space.

In addition, the Studio had earmarked program funding at the time for conducting a Challenge prize competition. So an additional requirement in this research was to learn more about Challenge.gov itself and how it could be used in this multilingual space.

What was your problem statement?

- How might we leverage challenge.gov to build financial relationships/incentives with community based organizations who can help SLTTs improve their ability to deliver effective multilingual text notifications?

How did you break down this research?

Research stream 1 - Challenge.gov
- What are the pros/cons of Challenge.gov?
- What makes a successful Challenge?
- 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?
- What makes effective partnerships with CBOs?
- Which CBO's would make good partners for us/challenge?
- What would CBO's want to get out of a challenge?

Research stream 3 - Effective multilingual text notifications
- What makes an effective multilingual text notification?
- What current processes do SLTTs use to create effective multilingual text notification services?
- What do non-English language speakers experience or care about?

You can find more information on the studio's bet hypothesis framework on this effort here: 📄 Multilingual Support - Bet Hypothesis

 Sheev Dave - Q2AAFD explored how governments at various levels (federal, state, and local) operated it's language translation services. From these learnings, Dave Luetger - Q2ADAACF from 18F was brought in from **November 2023** to partner with Sheev to learn how community-based organizations operated in this space. This research sprint ended in **January 2024** as the studio was going through a stage of transition and wanted to revisit the work at a later time.

Here's the synthesis map that was drafted based on the first phase of research conversations with various governments.

How did you recruit people to interview?

- We reached out to the Multilingual Community of Practice to see if any feds knew CBOs that would be interested in chatting with us. In addition, we've sometimes just cold emailed interesting looking organizations to see if they'd be open to talking.

Who did you chat with?

- CBO
    - Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS)
    - AARP Foundation
    - National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC)
    - Community Catalyst
    - International Organization for Migration
- Government Challenge Leads
    - SAMHSA
    - EPA Small Governments Challenge Team
    - FTC Voice Cloning Challenge Team
    - DHS FRTF

Method

Our main method was a series of semi-structured interviews with anywhere from 1-4 participants. We recruited using cold-emails, blast outreach emails to various listservs, and snowball using references from participants.

Who worked on this, who might know stuff

- Primary POCs/researchers: Sheev Dave - Q2AAFD   Dave Luetger - Q2ADAACF
- Other studio stakeholders: Amy Ashida - Q2AAFD
  Alexandra Pandel - Q2AAFD
- 18F/Studio connect: Kelley Confer - Q2ADABA

Background items on the Benefits Studio Program

🟧 IE&E 101
🟧 Summer '23 Studio Intro Deck
🔵 Studio Theory of Change

📄 Mission and Vision Statement

Outcomes

Recommendations

Here were the recommendations on possible avenues after phase 2 research was completed. This includes potential staffing recommendations on the various efforts we could embark on: 📄 Multilingual Recommendation - Jan '24

- Do the challenge: 1-2 FTE
- Do the challenge and research: 4-5 FTE
- Just do research: 1-2 FTE
- Pivot Altogether

Multilingual Support:
- What has been approved/ shifted:
  - Challenge efforts will be paused for this quarter; we will revisit going into planning for next quarter.
  - We are interested in research efforts around the non-english text message recipient experience that have a refined scope, more closely tied to existing Notify partner relationships and potentially with a research partner like USDR. We sketched out a high-level research plan here and plan to connect and further discuss what this could look like.
- Why the change:
  - Challenge efforts and resources are currently hard to justify as we need support in other places and a clearer Studio opinion regarding our role in hosting/generating guidance.
  - We're focusing this quarter on developing a proposal to help us make an informed decision about what role, if any, the Studio should strategically play in publishing guidance moving forward, which will impact how many resources we put towards the multilingual work in the future.
- Staffing shifts:
  - We did not extend Dave's time from 18F
  - We would like to explore a partnership with USDR to have a collaboration partner - maybe through an Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) agreement (aka an external detail).

Research findings

Here's some of what we found, mapped back to the [original research questions](). For the full picture, see some of the following:

- 📄 Research Summary [Multilingual Support]
- 📄 Compiled interview takeaways

Challenge.gov

For this phase, we ultimately leaned toward pursuing a Challenge. The funds were available, there were several potential benefits, and overall it seemed like a "learn by doing" exercise. Due to various programmatic and staffing constraints, the Studio decided not to move forward at this time.

What are the pros and cons of Challenge.gov?

Pros, or why it could be a good fit

- A Challenge would incentivise ideas, particularly those we never would have thought of on our own. It would help move toward knowing our ideas are as community-informed as possible by going right to the source
- Similar-ish things have been done before at other agencies through Challenge, so there is a precedent for success
- We've seen clear, though general interest, from participants; several orgs we spoke with are quite used to applying for prizes or grants
- Can act as a catalyst for partnerships
- Act of goodwill or trust
- While the Challenge runs, can "free up" hands to do other work or research in the same area
- Most of the tools are included with the Challenge.gov app/site, so it could potentially be a low lift tools-wise
- Even working with a vendor, running a Challenge seems very affordable relative to other ventures

- According to a vendor we spoke with as well as some agencies who had done a a Challenge, the first time is always a bit difficult or bumpy
- There's always a risk we might get limited submissions or not great ideas
- The process can take nearly nine months from start to finish, and still requires FTE attention throughout, even if the effort ebbs and flows
- Finding judges and going through the judging process can be a bit of a pain
- Inherently limited in which sorts of orgs have the resources to apply; we'd still need to do more direct outreach to smaller CBOs
- Could be seen as more "asking to do free work" from CBOs who are already overburdened
- Might not create any long term incentive patterns that systemically change anything

What makes a successful Challenge?

Logistically, working with a vendor the first time was recommended by other agencies we spoke to who had done a Challenge. There are SMEs who have taken many agencies through the process. There would still need to be some level of FTE attention from the Studio on this, however, to manage the vendor and help with creative direction.

In terms of creating the challenge, it's important to:

- Specific about who can apply
- Specific about what we're looking for
- Especially in our context, short and sweet submissions should be encouraged. We recommended something like an abstract and 1-3 pages
- Be clear about what the idea will be used for, what outcomes will occur; our participants were very interested in knowing the ideas wouldn't just go into the void

Would it be strategic/who would be the best strategic stakeholders to partner with on a Challenge?

- Digital.gov Multilingual Community of Practice
- 10x Teams:

- ○ [Multilingual Glossary Tool](#)
- ○ [Improving Language Access](#)
- Vote.gov
- United States Digital Response

See also:

- 📄 Sample Challenge prompts [Multilingual Support]
- 📄 Challenge.gov Overview

CBOs

We found that there isn't necessarily one, single definition of a "community-based organization." Different organizations are working at different levels of community, funding, and structure. Three sorts of orgs emerged in our research, but this isn't necessarily a comprehensive list.

- **Direct services orgs:** On-the-ground, usually smaller, hyper-local organizations serving communities directly. Focused on grassroots effort.

  - ○ Typical Sentiment: "I'm overworked and underfunded."

- **Advocacy/education/other non-direct orgs:** Usually have more resources and staffing, but are more focused on awareness, or funding/supporting branches operating at the direct level throughout the world or the US. Act as the purse for smaller direct service orgs in which they will fill out large grants and distribute the funding down.

  - ○ Typical Sentiment: "We have 5000 people across 17 countries and are a UN associated CBO."

- **Coalition:** Groups of the above types of organizations, usually well funded, but not really doing any kind of service to community members, but instead to the orgs themselves; focused on sharing resources and knowledge among orgs working in the same domain or geographic area

What do CBO's/community care about in partnerships with the government? What makes effective partnerships with CBOs?

The CBOs we spoke with dealt with a variety of domains such as immigration and asylum (biometric appointments), healthcare navigation (signing up for Medicaid), legal representation, and general community awareness.

Respect, time, and trust

The groups we spoke to were concerned with respect, their time, and funding. When it came to any sort of government partnerships, it was important to know whether "the juice was worth the squeeze." Orgs want to know that partnerships will be worth their time as well as having measurable outcomes for the communities they serve. The smaller and more local an organization, the more crucial incentives and direct outcomes are.

Several folks we spoke to also reminded us that many communities are justifiably skeptical of government programs.

Overall, effective partnerships with CBOs are based on mutual trust and respect, and an eye toward measurable and lasting outcomes for the public.

Shouldn't y'all be doing this already?

Some of the people we spoke to expressed the general sentiment that the federal government should be doing much more *directly* in the translation space, and that they are only filling a gap out of necessity. Others saw translation services and notifications as a core part of their service they never really saw going away.

Which CBO's would make good partners for us/challenge?

While we had some great conversations with specific CBOs that would certainly make good partners, and many who were interested in applying to a future challenge, we only scratched the surface of potential leads.

Any challenge that we did would likely only be relevant for a subset of organizations, and we'd need to be specific about who should apply. We'd also only be able to really

get to the smallest, most hyper-local organizations by direct partnership, rather than a call for submissions type situation.

One thing we learned that stood out to us is that 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. This affects Arabic-language support (and other languages, presumably), and could represent a strategic opportunity area to prioritize.

What would CBOs want to get out of a Challenge?

Generally positive feedback, but is it "free work?"

We had a generally positive response from the orgs we spoke with about doing a Challenge. Several were familiar with prize competitions or had existing grant experience which would apply to a Challenge as well.

Some folks expressed concern that a Challenge would just be more "free work" with no real outcome.

Will it be a pain for CBOs to submit?

The other thing to consider is the level of effort required in submitting a Challenge. We leaned strongly toward making the submission a short paper (1-3 pages) based on work an org was already doing or had done to reduce the burden as much as possible.

What happens to our work? Our community?

In addition to the prize and the overall incentive to apply, the folks we spoke with were looking for some sense of action on their submission. Did their idea help? Or did it just go into a void forever? Will our community be helped on the basis of our submission?

What makes an effective multilingual text notification?

Meet communities where they are

The first thing we learned to consider was about meeting communities where they are. While it's true many folks served by the orgs we spoke with don't have an email address, we also learned many aren't using standard SMS texting either. Not everyone who needs information will have a US phone number. Many folks in non-English

speaking communities are using WhatsApp as their primary form of text communication.

Plain language

When it comes to messages themselves, it's important that they are "plain language" in the rules of said language. Different populations even within a language group have different dialects. This can come down to country or region of origin, education level, and generational differences. For instance, older Mandarin-speaking folks are using different language than younger speakers, and Dominican Spanish is different from Mexican Spanish. For blast messages, it might be possible to find a general standard that most speakers of a language will understand, even if it means being slightly less "plain."

Blasts versus conversations

Our participants, many of whom are doing lots of hands-on communication, also reminded us about the differences between "blast" messages and two-way communication, and wondered if Notify.gov supported the latter. One-way offers one set of tools, but might be limited when it comes to the sorts of hands-on help many of the CBOs we spoke with are giving.

Trust

Finally, and more on this below, messages can only be effective if they are trusted. In a land of scams and justifiable government skepticism, it's important that communities know beforehand that they might be getting notifications.

What current processes do SLTTs use to create effective multilingual text notification services?

Org landscape

Six sorts of players in the process have emerged in this research. There is overlap.

- **The sponsor of the info**
  - The one "sending" the message, like a state or federal gov
- **The technology / service layer**

- ○ In our context, us, Notify. Some service is being used to send the messages.
- **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
- **The community member, the text reader**
  - ○ The member of the public who ultimately receives the information

Hands-on, ongoing work

We didn't learn too much about what SLTTs were doing directly, but we did learn a lot about what our participant CBOs were doing and about the overall landscape.

Most of our participant CBOs were involved in very hands-on, one-on-one help to their communities. This involves phone calls, and when appropriate, follow-up emails and text messages. They build relationships over time with their communities and have repeated contact.

Handling non-written languages

Most of the organizations we spoke to in the immigration and resettlement space are dealing with relaying information in Indigenous languages (primarily those from Guatemala and Central America), many of which do not have a written component, making audio and phone call level communication absolutely crucial.

Translating docs

Other CBOs are focused on document or form translation, creating banks of commonly used government documents in the language of their communities, or offering one-on-one phone help to community members as they fill out the forms.

Role of CBOs

For many SLTTs, it seems like CBOs *are* the translation layer. The services are essentially passed down to these orgs or to the community at large, either through formal or informal means. The network of translators ranges from CBO employees to contractors to volunteers in the community.

Homegrown tools

Many CBOs are also building their own tools to handle translation, such as ACCESS' "Hustle" app, or, in one instance an AI-based translator that, despite our skepticism, does a "good enough" job for the participant that mentioned it. Other orgs are adapting existing platforms such as CloudTalk or TeleGenie.

What do non-English language speakers experience or care about?

Tricky topics

Non-English speakers are seeking government information over a wide variety of crucial and tricky topics: healthcare, legal, immigration, and general benefits eligibility or procedures.

Is this a scam?

Something that came up with almost all of our participants was the concern about scams. Sudden notifications from "the government" are often dismissed, and community members look to each other, family, or other trusted sources to verify government messaging, or ignore it altogether. Outreach through trusted sources that says "expect messages about x" are important to build that trust and to make sure community members engage with government notifications.

Do you have WhatsApp?

As mentioned above, it's important to reach readers where they are. This could mean email, text, WhatsApp, or even social media like Facebook or TikTok or other social sites (often depending on age group). While this project focused on "text messaging" and Notify, those are other angles worth exploring and some that Notify might even be able to support in some capacity.

One thing that stood out to us as concerning is that there are some resources that are *only* available in English despite their heavy use by non-English speaking folks. Immigration and asylum resources often fall into this category, unfortunately. While the root cause should be addressed here, this could represent an opportunity area to fill the gaps.

Language access plans

We also briefly looked at [Language Access Plans](). GSA doesn't seem to have one ready in an obvious place, but is, in theory, working on one for December of 2024. It was unclear to us who or what org within GSA is working on it. It was also unclear, even for agencies that have published a language access plan, whether they are actually complying with them or if anything is being enforced.

As to how LEPs intersect this effort, it's also unclear. Until we know what GSA's specific plan is, there's not necessarily a ton we can know to "comply" with it. But, overall, the conclusion seems to be that GSA should offer services in languages other than English, so multilingual notification efforts seem like it would support that goal.

Our findings might help contribute back to that effort, but it's also unclear if someone working on GSA LEP will seek us out, or if Notify or the Studio need to advertise somehow that they are a "program that interacts with the public" and that they do it via text.

Overall it seems like there wasn't much action required at this moment.

📄 [Notes] Language Access Plans

Notify.gov ideas

Our research pointed to a lot of things Notify might do to help solve some of these issues. Anything below would likely be a research spike and involve some sort of usability testing.

- Audio snippet support
- Some layer of "good enough" auto-translation for certain cases
- WhatsApp integration or generalized way to send messages through other apps
    - WhatsApp integration could get us a lot of things as WhatsApp includes things like audio snippets and auto-translate
- Use guidelines for non-English languages; e.g. "Translating your messages"
- Doc, multimedia, or attachment support (e.g. "do your application, here it is!")

What's next?

Research increment with text readers

The biggest area of interest we weren't able to get to in this phase was speaking with actual readers of non-English government texts. What's it like to receive government information in a language other than English? Is it understandable? Do readers have relationships with the CBOs? We estimate a 2-4 month research increment that would involve making connections, tracking down and recruiting participants, interviewing, synthesis, and analysis.

An additional angle is how folks who speak a non-written language even engage with their phones in the first place. Is it enough to say "here's an audio snippet," or should more be done?

Items that stood out to us during this phase

Throughout the project, a few items stood out to us that we think warrant further investigation or some flavor of urgent attention. The Benefits Studio might not be able to affect systemic change in these areas but could have a great opportunity to offer a "patch" or help even just a little.

Immigration + asylum info in Spanish

One thing that stood out to us as concerning is that there are some resources that are *only* available in English despite their heavy use by non-English speaking folks. Immigration and asylum resources often fall into this category, unfortunately. While the

root cause should be addressed here, this could represent an opportunity area to fill the gaps.

MENA census group

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. It affects Arabic-language support and presumably support for other languages spoken in the MENA community. MENA folks, or Arabic speakers, could represent a first area of interest for any multilingual notification efforts the Studio does.

Empowerment and "the right" to receive government info

One of our participants brought up the word "empowerment" as it related to language access, and that stuck with us. As mentioned in the summary, government information received in a language you don't understand might as well have not been delivered at all. We think it's critical, if not a right, for the public to receive government information that is readable and usable to them. At the very least, the public deserves not to have to go through multiple layers of translation burden to get what they need. This mindset could be a good way to help Studio prioritize in the future.

Re-investigate Challenge.gov

All said and done, we still think doing a Challenge is a good idea for this research area and possibly for others down the road. We also think it is very much a "learn by doing" exercise and we won't really know what it's like until doing it once. When priorities are different we think it would be great to revisit a Challenge once more.

Real partnership building with CBOs

This phase was research focused, and while we did make some loose connections, relationship building with CBOs will require a hand more specifically geared towards outreach and partnership building. But it would be excellent in the future for the Studio to have lasting relationships with CBOs throughout the country.