

TRANSFORMING RATEPAYERS INTO ALLIES

The Importance of Engaging Ratepayers in Their Own Language

BY BEVERLI A. MARSHALL | INDIO, CA

On August 11, 2000, President Clinton issued Executive Order 13166 requiring that all Federal agencies, and agencies receiving Federal funds, ensure that important documents and information were available to those with limited English proficiency (LEP). This meant that someone who does not speak English as their primary language must have meaningful access to critical information. Public agencies that do not receive Federal funding are not required to follow this rule unless their state has a similar requirement. So, why is the LEP program worth talking about?



Imagine, as a native English speaker, that you are visiting a country where the population speaks another language. You find yourself needing to have a detailed or technical conversation about something, but everything you look at seems indecipherable. What do you do? You could hope to find someone who speaks English, but they may not understand the technical terms needed. Wouldn't it be easier if you could find the information translated into English? That is the foundation of the Federal LEP program. For most water and wastewater agencies, this is not an issue because we do not receive federal funds.

Here is why it is a good business model even if you are not mandated to do so.

- Understanding what we do and why it is important is in the best interest of our customers (ratepayers).
- It shows that we are committed to transparency and community engagement.
- It encourages customers to be a part of the decision-making and democratic process.

The population representation does not need to be a majority to create a need for translation. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services issued guidance that a representation of 10% of the total population triggers the need to translate documents and websites into the non-English language for Qualified Health Plan issuers. In many states, the 10% total representation threshold may not be reached, but it could be reached within a county, city, or district service area. In California, the Bilingual Services Act

requires cities, counties, and districts that receive state funds to translate documents into another language if that language is represented by at least 5% of the population served.

Valley Sanitary District (VSD) serves a population of approximately 75,000 of which 73% identify as Hispanic and 57% speak Spanish at home. In recognition of this demographic representation, we started translating documents into Spanish last year. While this expands the size of our newsletters and rate change notices, it is well worth it to ensure that our residents and business owners understand what we do, why we do it, and how their rates are calculated.

In the past, many wastewater agencies were happy to stay below the radar – no attention is good attention. With the need for considerable rate increases to pay for ever-rising costs of operations and maintenance as well as significant capital improvement projects, it is no longer an option to stay in the shadows. We need to get out into the public and toot our own horns, showing how we are part of ensuring public health and environmental protection for our communities. We need to help the public understand why we need to continue the good work that we do and ensure that our services, and those that we serve, are a critical part of the decision-making process. The best way we can do this is in the languages of those that we serve.

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