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From Bilingual to Qualified: How Agencies Assess Language Proficiency

May 12, 2026 (1PM-3PM)

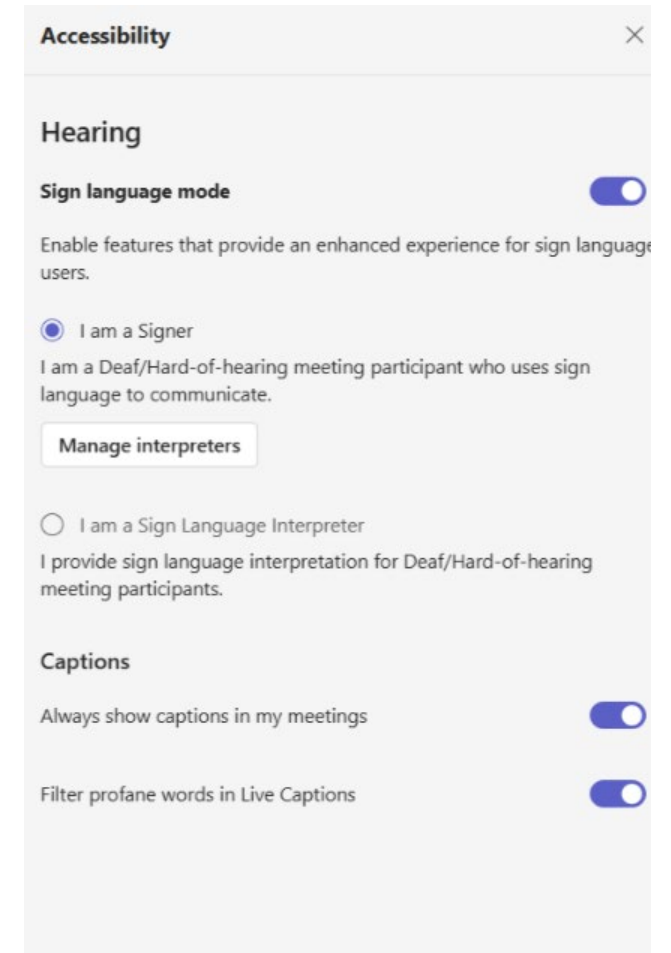


Logistics

- This presentation is being recorded and will be available for viewing on the [DMAS website](#) at a later time.
- This presentation is intended for informational purposes only and does **not** constitute legal advice.
- Add your name, job title and organization you represent in the chat
- Remote Conference Captioning (RCC) available through Virginia Relay. Find link in the chat
- If you experience technical difficulties during this call, e-mail: civilrightscoordinator@dmas.virginia.gov
- If you have questions, please enter them in the chat and we will address them at the end of this presentation as time allows

Logistics – ASL

- American Sign Language Interpreters (ASL) available through the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH)
 - Turn on Sign language mode:
 - Go to your meeting window and select More actions More options button > Settings.
 - Open Accessibility settings.
 - Turn on Sign language mode toggle button.
 - Choose your role as a signer or interpreter.



Today's Agenda

- 1:00 P.M. – 1:05 P.M. Welcome and Introductions**
- 1:05 P.M. – 1:10 P.M. Opening Keynote** - Steven Ford, Director, Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS)
- 1:10 P.M. – 1:30 P.M. Presentation** – Tips on Spanish Language Assessment for Bilingual Staff. By Montserrat Serra, DMAS Civil Rights Unit Manager
- 1:30 P.M. – 2:45 P.M. Panel Discussion**
- Alicia Scholer**, Language Access Coordinator, Community Engagement Team, Office of Innovation and Economic Development, City of Sacramento
- Eric Raff**, Director, Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (VDDHH)
- Yan Ma**, Office of County Executive Kathy Klausmeier, Historic Courthouse, Language Access Coordinator
- Elizabeth Hill**, NJ Department of Human Services, Director, Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- 2:45 P.M. – 2:55 P.M. Q&A and Public Comments**
- 2:55 P.M. – 3:00 P.M. Closing**

Opening Keynote



Steven Ford

Director, Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS)

Presentation

Tips on Spanish Language Assessment for Bilingual Staff

By Montserrat Serra, DMAS Civil Rights Unit Manager

Why Assess Language Proficiency?

- Many agencies rely on bilingual staff to communicate with the public
- Being bilingual does **not always mean being professionally proficient**
- Miscommunication can affect:

Access to Services

Miscommunication can block access to benefits and services.

Individual Rights

Interpretation errors can affect legal rights rights and due process.

Program Integrity

Inaccurate communication can create record and compliance errors.

- Agencies must ensure **accurate, effective communication** at every public contact.

Federal Compliance Requirements

Agencies receiving federal funds must provide meaningful access for individuals with **Limited English Proficiency (LEP)**. Two statutes set the standard.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act

Bars discrimination based on national origin, including language barriers.

Section 1557 of the ACA

Extends non-discrimination protections to federally funded health programs.

DMAS relies on phone interpreters, but Spanish encounters are frequent and qualified bilingual staff add value.

→ **Greater Availability**

Immediate response, with no hold time.

→ **Improved Customer Service**

Direct communication builds trust and reduces errors.

→ **Cost Efficiency**

Reduces reliance on contracted interpreter services.

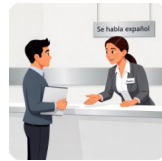
i Ensure staff are **competent to communicate in Spanish**

Why DMAS Developed a Spanish Language Assessment

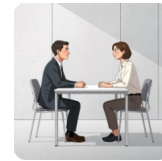
- DMAS primarily provides language services through phone interpreters.
- Spanish encounters occur very frequently, and **qualified bilingual staff** offer distinct advantages.



Phone Interpreters as the Default



More Readily Available



Better Customer Service



Cost Reduction

i Therefore, DMAS created an internal assessment to ensure staff are competent to communicate in Spanish.

Who Takes the Assessment?

Required Participants

1 Newly Hired Bilingual Staff

Spanish-speaking hires must complete the assessment before using Spanish on the job.

2 Current Employees

Staff who already use Spanish in their duties must also be evaluated.



Speaking with the Public

Phone or in-person Spanish conversations.



Providing Interpretation

Interpreting between Spanish and English speakers.



Written Translation

Translating forms, notices, or other communications.

DMAS Spanish Competency Levels

- After the assessment, staff are assigned one of three levels.
- Higher scores mean authorization for more complex language tasks.



Level 1 – Language Skilled

For general public interactions and basic written communication.



Level 2 – Professional Qualified

For complex interactions and formal translations with review.



Level 3 – Certified

For highly complex communication and specialized proceedings.

How the Assessment Work


The DMAS Spanish Language Assessment has two scored exercises plus one acknowledgment component. All parts are administered by the **DMAS Civil Rights Unit**.

Oral Exercise — 40 Minutes

- Consecutive interpretation
- Spanish verbal responses
- Tests fluency and accuracy

Written Exercise — 40 Minutes

- English-to-Spanish translation
- Professional background questionnaire
- Tests writing and vocabulary

-  **Language Assistance Acknowledgment Guide**
Staff review the ethics, responsibilities, and limits of bilingual language assistance

How Staff Are Evaluated

Each exercise uses a **standardized rubric** to score six core language competency areas.



Comprehension

Understanding spoken and written Spanish.



Language Control

Correct grammar, syntax, and register.



Fluency

Speaking and writing smoothly.



Task Completion

Completing tasks within the allotted time.



Vocabulary

Using appropriate terminology.



Professional Experience

Relevant training or certification.

28

Total Points
Maximum score per exercise.

15

Minimum to Pass
Score needed for competency.

3

Competency Levels
Higher scores unlock higher levels.

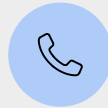
Maintaining a List of Qualified Staff

DMAS maintains a list of staff who pass the assessment. The list includes:



Name & Position

Employee name and job title.



Contact Information

Contact details for Spanish-language requests.



Date of Assessment

When the employee was last evaluated.



Competency Level

Level 1, 2, or 3 authorization.



Authorized Settings

Approved use cases: phone, in-person, and written.

Lessons Learned

Key elements to consider when developing language assessments:



Pre-Assess Staff

Always evaluate bilingual staff's proficiency before they engage in language-dependent tasks.



Define Levels Clearly

Establish distinct competency levels to match staff skills with appropriate communication complexity.



Standardize Evaluation

Implement consistent rubrics and assessment methods for fair and objective results.



Emphasize Ethics & Roles

Ensure staff are trained on ethical guidelines and the precise role of an interpreter.



Maintain Qualified List

Keep an up-to-date central registry of authorized bilingual staff and their competency levels.

Panel Discussion:

- **Alicia Scholer**
Language Access Coordinator, Community Engagement Team, Office of Innovation and Economic Development, City of Sacramento
- **Eric Raff**
Director, Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (VDDHH)
- **Yan Ma**
Office of County Executive Kathy Klausmeier, Historic Courthouse,
Language Access Coordinator
- **Elizabeth Hill**, NJ Department of Human Services, Director, Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Panelists Questions

1. Can you briefly describe your agency, and the role bilingual staff play in communicating with the public?

Panelists Questions

2. What led your agency to implement language proficiency testing for bilingual staff, and how long has your program been in place?

Panelists Questions

3. Which languages does your agency currently test for, and does your program include assessments for American Sign Language (ASL)?

Panelists Questions

4. How does your agency assess language proficiency (for example, what skills are evaluated and whether you use internal assessments or external vendors)?

Panelists Questions

5. At what point are staff tested—for example during hiring, when requesting bilingual duties, or periodically after they begin providing services in another language?

Panelists Questions

6. Does your agency use an external vendor or organization to conduct language proficiency assessments? If so, which ones have you used or would recommend?

Panelists Questions

7. What challenges did your agency encounter when implementing language proficiency testing, and how did you address them?

Panelists Questions

8. Based on your experience, what advice would you give agencies that are considering implementing a language proficiency testing program?

Q&A and Public Comments

Questions and comments will be addressed during today's event as time allows.

- Type your question on the chat, or
- Email your question to civilrightscoordinator@dmas.virginia.gov

Unaddressed questions will be published on the [DMAS website](#)