U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

April 2019

Background

On October 13, 2010, the Plain Writing Act (Act) was signed into law. The Act requires federal agencies to use clear government communication that the public can understand and use. Communications in plain language are especially important in the context of healthcare and human services. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recognizes that using plain language can help address the needs of those with limited health literacy skills. Plain language helps people understand health information better, because documents are less complex and more clear, concise, and jargon-free.

The Act requires agencies to write annual compliance reports and post these reports on its plain language web page by April each year. It also requires agencies to designate senior officials to oversee implementation of plain writing requirements. You can find links to HHS's previous compliance reports, and senior officials, at: *http://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/*.

The Department has amplified our efforts to implement the Act by engaging the public on how we can improve our plain writing efforts and prioritizing plain writing training for employees. HHS's 2019 compliance report demonstrates our continued compliance with the requirements of the Act.   This report is organized in sections on Accomplishments, Best practices, Innovations, and Continuous Improvements to highlight some of the major plain writing activities across the Department from March 2018 to March 2019.

Accomplishments

HHS has sought to reach all Americans with useful health information that they can easily understand. Over the past year, the Department has reviewed new and existing reports and web content for plain language to ensure the largest impact on the public. The major accomplishments across the Department included actions by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office for Civil Rights (OCR), National Institutes of Health (NIH), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH).

CMS redesigned its "Medicare & You Handbook" to explain Medicare benefits in plain language to beneficiaries. The handbook was revised and updated through a rigorous review and clearance process that included consumer testing. As a result, over 40 million beneficiaries gained a better understanding of their Medicare benefits.
https://www.medicare.gov/pubs/pdf/10050-medicare-and-you.pdf

CDC developed a new document to help local responders quickly create plainly written preparedness and safety information for their communities affected by hurricanes, flooding, and similar disasters. The clear and timely information helped thousands of people address critical needs, such as food safety, carbon monoxide poisoning, waterborne diseases, and mold.
https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/readiness/00_docs/CDC_Hurricanes_PreparednessSafetyMessaging_June2018_508.pdf

As Americans sought more information about the opioid crisis, OCR launched a new campaign

to inform the public about civil rights protections that may apply to a person in recovery from an opioid use disorder. OCR used plain language in its press release, newsletter, and video in support of this effort. Individuals with opioid use disorders received vital information on how non-discrimination laws can protect them.
https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/opioids/index.html

NIH's "Dictionary of Cancer Terms" was widely used by the public. Each term was understandable for the average person due to NIH's plain writing efforts that resulted in adding 212 new English terms to the dictionary and revising 262 others to meet plain language standards.
https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms

FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) successfully created nine new animal health articles and a video using plain language principals to achieve animal health literacy. The articles addressed topics such as drugs for dogs with osteoarthritis, helping cats live healthier lives, questions and answers about contaminants in pet food, and parasitic management in cattle, sheep, goats, and horses. CVM posted the new articles and video on the web, and they have been widely used by the public.
https://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/ResourcesforYou/AnimalHealthLiteracy/default.htm

OASH's Office on Women's Health reviewed and revised over 520 pages of web content on worksite lactation into just 18 pages of plain language, mobile-friendly content. Date from the website metrics showed that thousands more people found and viewed resources to support nursing moms in the workplace. The monthly page views tripled from 6,000 to 19,000 views after the content was updated.
https://www.womenshealth.gov/supporting-nursing-moms-work

Best Practices

HHS employed a variety of best practices to reinforce plain writing requirements, including senior officials promoting plain writing, and programs for tracking and measuring plain writing effectiveness. The following examples were a representative sample of best practices across HHS in the previous year.

Senior leadership's support of plain writing was critical to employee adherence. CDC senior officials sponsored staff training, briefings, presentations at staff meetings, and sent reminders to staff of the importance of plain language and complying with the law. They also stressed the importance of plain writing compliance through the CDC intranet, newsletters, and agency-wide announcements.

The Departmental Appeals Board (DAB) leadership explicitly included plain writing as a requirement in staff performance plans and evaluations. Furthermore, senior mentors, supervisors, and judges provided attorneys, interns, and other staff with specific plain writing feedback on a regular basis.

The programs for tracking and measuring plain writing effectiveness at CDC and CMS featured

an assortment of best practices for plain writing compliance. CDC's Chief Information Officers (CIOs) applied "Clear Communication Index" scores (a number between zero and 100) to indicate how many clear communication criteria the document had addressed. CIOs also used the "Plain Language Assessment" software to analyze text for plain language elements, including passive verbs, hidden verbs, and sentence length. In addition, CDC measured the effectiveness of its plain writing program through data and feedback from employees, the Health Literacy Council, and the public.

CMS tracked webpage plain language effectiveness by using Qualtrics, Foresee, SiteImprove, and Google Analytics software to monitor user experience. By understanding target audiences' health literacy and perceptions, CMS effectively increased its documents' readability (the public knows the CMS terms) and usability (the public can easily find the answers they are looking for).

Innovations

HHS developed innovative strategies to promote plain writing, including web banners, webinars, external social media messages, employee awards, and plain writing skills in position descriptions.

CMS started a workgroup to improve broadcast messaging, making communications to employees clearer. It awarded the "CMS Honor Award," an internal service award, to a CMS employee who trained staff on plain writing. It included in a position description for a health communications specialist "expert knowledge of plain language principles and best practices, and skill in applying such knowledge in developing content, and applying new approaches to complex communications problems."

DAB introduced the use of plainly written decision templates. This innovation ensured DAB work products were thorough, well-reasoned, and written in clear and concise language.

CDC instituted new innovations to bolster its plain language efforts, including the following:

- Launched the "Writing Wranglers" campaign to expand staff's plain language skills thought its website.
- Started a "New Communicators Network" on how to build a health-literate organization.
- Organized a webinar on "Improving Plain Language Use at CDC."
- Issued the "Writing Tip Wednesday" newsletter to share information about free webinars, training opportunities, health literacy resources, weekly writing tips, and podcasts.
- Offered a plain language award, and an excellence in communication award to employees.

NIH's National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin sponsored a new "Three-Minute Talk" competition to help early-stage scientists learn the importance of plain writing. NIH's National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke received the National Association of Government Communicators Blue Pencil Award for "Most Improved Publication" – a total rewrite of the brochure: "Brain Basics: Understanding Sleep" in 2018.

OASH won the Center for Plain Language ClearMark Award for "Colorectal Cancer Screening: Which Test would I Prefer?" in 2018.

Continuous Improvement

The Department carried out a wide array of training activities to ensure that employees fully understood the importance of plain writing and how to do it effectively. While agencies were given the necessary flexibility to tailor their particular training programs to their individual needs, HHS offered a Department-wide training—the *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Plain Language Training*—that agencies could also use. This basic plain writing training was accessible on the HHS Learning Management System (LMS) learning portal and the HHS intranet.

Many agencies encouraged the use of plain language for both internal and external communication. Most HHS agencies required employees to complete the LMS online training, but many agencies also supplemented this training with agency-specific trainings classes and documents.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration (ASA) offered a variety of plain language courses to teach writing skills for public relations, effective speech writing, technical writing, business writing, e-mails, and instant messages. The feedback from the 782 employees who completed the courses was positive, with many reporting the training helped them perform their jobs better.

All of the 34 DAB attorneys completed a "revision exercise" training, which involved reviewing sample language excerpted from an informal brief filed by a party in a case, and rewriting it in plain language. Once completed, the training specialist reviewed each response and provided a model answer with explanations.

NIH trained the National Cancer Institute (NCI) communicators at the Digital Communications University. The training included plain writing for digital and online platforms workshops. The average participation for each class was 30 to 40 students, with a mix of in-person and online representation. Overall feedback on the sessions was positive with an average rating of 8.5 on a scale of 10.

Conclusion

HHS's implementation of the Plain Writing Act has grown in scope and effectiveness with each year. Through persistent leadership, we have cultivated a plain writing culture, ensuring all new and existing documents and web content for the public, other government entities, and HHS employees are written in plain writing. If you have questions or feedback about this report, please contact the HHS Executive Secretariat at HHSExecSec@hhs.gov.