



Bridging the Gap: Strengthening Language Access for Child-Serving Contracted Providers

SEPTEMBER 2026

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
MARISOL GARCÍA, CHILD ADVOCATE
[HTTPS://WWW.MASS.GOV/LISTS/OCA-SPECIAL-PROJECTS](https://www.mass.gov/lists/OCA-SPECIAL-PROJECTS)

**1 in 4**

Massachusetts
residents speak a
language other than
English at home

With more than a quarter of Massachusetts residents speaking a language other than English at home¹—a rate that is increasing faster than the national average²—there is a growing need to ensure that state services are meeting the needs of children and families in the Commonwealth regardless of what language they speak. Child-serving systems depend on effective communication with families to build trust, promote understanding, and achieve positive outcomes.

Language access refers to the services and strategies that enable children and families to communicate effectively and participate fully in programs, services, and activities. Systems with strong language access enhance service quality, leading to improved individual outcomes,³ higher levels of engagement,⁴ and measurable cost-benefits,⁵ such as reduced errors, delays, and duplication of services. **Language access is thus a core component of service delivery, ensuring that every child can benefit from the support designed to help them thrive.**

Common language access services often include:

- Interpretation and translation services
- Communication Access Realtime Interpretation (CART) services
- Language Bank
- Language Line
- Multilingual Staff

For a description of common language access services, see **Appendix A**.

The Commonwealth has taken meaningful steps to strengthen language access. In 2023, Governor Healey signed Executive Order (EO) #615, Promoting Access to Government Services and Information by Identifying and Minimizing Language Access Barriers.⁶ The EO directs state executive agencies to identify and reduce language access barriers by assessing services and programs, developing and implementing Language Access Plans, and promoting access to government programs and information for individuals of all language abilities.

While the EO marked an important step in strengthening language access across the Commonwealth's executive agencies, many child-serving state programs are delivered by contracted providers under the oversight of state agencies.

¹ United States Census Bureau (2024) *Language Spoken at Home*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>

² Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 1990 & 2000 Decennial Censuses and 2010–2023 American Community Surveys (ACS) accessed via [State Share of U.S. LEP Population Trends \(1990–2023\)](#)

³ Lindholm, M., Hargraves, J. L., Ferguson, W. J., & Reed, G. (2012). Professional Language Interpretation and Inpatient Length of Stay and Readmission Rates. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 27(10), 1294–1299.

⁴ Pereira, K.M., Crosnoe, R., Fortuny, K., Pedroza, J., Ulvestad, K., Weiland, C., Yoshikawa, H., & Chaudry, A. (2012). Barriers to Immigrants' Access to Health and Human Services Programs. Office of Human Services Policy - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

⁵ Karliner, L. S., Pérez-Stable, E. J., & Gregorich, S. E. (2017). Convenient Access to Professional Interpreters in the Hospital Decreases Readmission Rates and Estimated Hospital Expenditures for Patients with Limited English Proficiency. *Medical Care*, 55(3), 199–206.

⁶ Commonwealth of Massachusetts (2023). <https://www.mass.gov/executive-orders/no-615-promoting-access-to-government-services-and-information-by-identifying-and-minimizing-language-access-barriers>

As described in this brief, there is variation in how the directive is implemented by child-serving providers, leading to **gaps in effective service delivery and quality for families with varying language abilities**. Two key factors contribute to this variation:

1. Child-serving providers report a lack of clarity on the language access guidance and support provided by the state.
2. Many child-serving contracted providers report that they lack the resources necessary to provide meaningful and effective language access.

This brief draws on the experiences of child-serving providers to understand current language access needs, highlight opportunities for improvement, and inform strategies to strengthen service delivery for all children and families. See Appendix B for methodological details.⁷

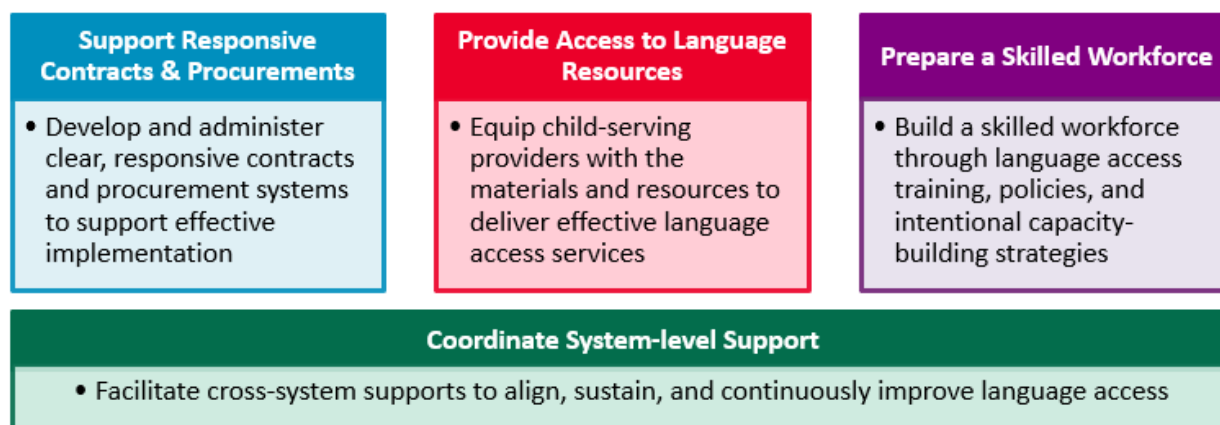
Strengthening Language Access for Child-Serving Providers

The state plays a central role in promoting high-quality services for children and families.

Through policy and guidance, funding structures, and contracting practices, the state sets expectations that influence how contracted providers design and deliver services. When language access is clearly defined and well-resourced, the state better prepares providers to effectively serve all children and families.

State action can strengthen language access in the following core areas:

Figure 1:
Core Elements of Language Access



The remainder of this brief is organized according to these four core elements of language access support, designed to meet the evolving needs and abilities of providers and the children and families they serve, while offering flexible and practical pathways for improvement. Individual agencies and providers can advance the first three core elements within their own services. However, state-level coordination of these efforts – the fourth core element – would create a stronger, more consistent approach to improving language access across the state.

⁷ The OCA engaged a sample of child-serving providers and did not conduct an evaluation of all state-contracted child and family services organizations.

Support Responsive Contracts & Procurements

The Provider Perspective

State procurement processes regularly lack clear and consistent guidance on required and available language access supports.

“(There are) line items for vague funding items that could include language access such as a line item for ‘program support.’ We’re just not sure.” – Contracted Provider

Many state-funded child-serving providers report uncertainty about the language access services available to them. Providers attribute this uncertainty to vague or minimal contract language that references language access obligations without clearly specifying available services, funding, or implementation expectations. To add to the uncertainty, language access resources may vary by agency and by contract, in part due to differences in allowable expenditures. Many providers report being unsure where to turn with questions about language access support, contributing to inconsistent implementation across providers and programs. Consequently, available language access services or supports may go overlooked or underused, with service recipients – children and families – bearing the impact.

Nearly **a third** (30%, n=11) of surveyed providers are unsure if they receive any language access support from their contracting state agency.

At the same time, a small number (11%, n = 4) of respondents *could* point to available supports such as interpreters, translation support, and access to a language line.

Strategies to Support Responsive Contracts and Procurements

*“It would be nice if the state can clarify resources available or resources/efforts supported by contracts – ‘if you use X, Y, Z service, you can request reimbursement for that.’”
 – Contracted Provider*

Effective language access for child-serving providers requires contracts and procurements that are clear, responsive, and intentionally structured to support service delivery for all children and families. To reduce uncertainty about what services are available or reimbursable, child-serving state agencies should strive for procurement systems that define the roles and responsibilities of providers in implementing language access services and explicitly communicate and elevate available language access supports. The OCA recommends that child-serving state agencies:

Increase clarity regarding available language access services and support throughout the procurement process. When procurement documents highlight available support and clearly communicate expectations, providers can plan, budget, and deliver services with confidence and consistency.

Each stage of procurement, from solicitation to implementation, offers opportunities to strengthen the clarity of state-sponsored language access supports.

- *Solicitation:* Detail the procurement’s allowable expenditures and inform contracted providers of their role and responsibility related to language access within the Request for Response (RFR) or Request for Proposal (RFP).
- *Application & Response Submission:* Allow contracted providers to consider and/or include language costs within their program budget and/or scope of work, consistent with the procurement’s allowable expenditures.
- *Award & Selection:* Explicitly state how language access capabilities and plans will be evaluated and scored.
- *Contracting:* Contracts should be clear on what language access supports the state will provide versus what the contracted provider is responsible for. For new providers, procurement teams should consider onboarding modules or meetings to ensure early and consistent understanding of requirements.

The City of Austin’s Language Access Policy encourages departments to “...include the same (language access) requirements or expectations in the Statements of Work or bid documents so that contractors understand expectations prior to bidding.”

Source: City of Austin Administrative Bulletin Number 22-02

Setting Providers Up for Success

Agencies should strive to write procurements that clearly identify roles and responsibilities with regards to language access for contracted providers. Some child-serving agencies have taken steps to define language access expectations and requirements throughout the procurement process:

- “The following is a detailed list of expenditures [including translation services] that are the responsibility of the Successful Responder and are included in the rate.” – DYS Community Services Network
- “The FRC shall provide the following services...access to oral interpretation services to all Family Members in Spanish, Haitian Creole, Russian, Khmer, Portuguese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and American Sign Language...” – DCF, Family Resource Center Procurement
- “...a Contractor must ensure that there is sufficient staff fluent in the preferred language of the individuals served under their Contract or that Qualified and Trained Interpreters are available.” – DMH, Young Adult Access Centers

Establish clear channels for language access guidance and support during the life of the contract. During service delivery, child-serving providers may encounter new questions or implementation challenges that were not identified or anticipated during procurement – such as questions around allowable expenditures related to language access. Developing clear communication channels between agencies and providers can facilitate quicker resolution, improve access to guidance and support, and promote consistent service delivery for children and families. To support communication and responsiveness, state agencies should consider the following strategies:

- Develop standard guidance documents or materials that outline language access requirements, available resources, and key agency contacts. Agencies may consider how a provider-facing webpage or resources page may help consolidate and clarify available resources.
- Create mechanisms to clarify contract language and conditions to ensure providers understand expectations and available support during service delivery. Strategies could include annual contract amendment procedures (including ensuring contracts can be enhanced over time as practices evolve), regular check-ins or office hours for providers to raise questions, and/or guidance memos or supplemental documents issued during contract implementation to clarify ambiguous requirements (e.g., when one provider in a multi-provider contract asks the contracting agency about allowable expenditures, the agency shares the response with all relevant providers).

Supporting Language Access in Human Services: A Webpage for Contracted Providers

A New York Human Services agency developed a dedicated “Language Access Information for Providers” page to help providers understand and fulfill their responsibilities related to meaningful language access. The resource brings together essential guidance, legal context, and practical tools to support service delivery. Key sections include:

- *Defining Language Access:* An overview of what language access means in human services and the languages most spoken in the state.
- *Laws, Rules, and Regulations:* A summary of federal and state requirements that shape language access obligations.
- *Provider Responsibility:* Guidance on meeting language access expectations.
- *Resources for Providers:* Resources and instructions on accessing and using agency-supported vendors for language services.
- *Agency Contacts:* Information on how providers can reach the agency for questions and assistance related to Language Access training and/or support translation outside of the top languages.

Source: [Language Access Information for Providers | Office for People with Developmental Disabilities](#)



Lost at the Welcome Desk: A Family's Experience Navigating Services

This narrative is drawn from real scenarios shared by providers, highlighting the experiences of families navigating community-based systems with inconsistent language access and resources.

When the young girl and her parents walked into the community center, she gripped tightly to a folder carrying paperwork they had received in the mail. The notices and forms were all in English. While her parents could generally communicate in English, the stakes felt too high to risk misunderstanding. They wanted to ensure every form was completed correctly to avoid any delay or disruption in benefits, hoping the change in housing and employment would be the only transition their family would have to navigate.

In the lobby, a colorful sign listing the languages spoken at the facility caught the girl's eye. She was relieved to see her native language included. At the front desk, that relief quickly faded. The receptionist greeted them kindly but struggled to understand their questions. The receptionist pointed to a few different brochures written in several languages – none of them their own – before pulling out a tablet. She observed a familiar Google Translate screen, as her parents attempted to clarify their situation. The translations were clumsy and incomplete, confusion growing on each side of the counter. The young girl gestured to the sign on the wall and asked if there was someone else who could assist.

After a brief period of waiting, another staff member who spoke their language passed through the lobby. Clearly in a hurry, he politely explained that he was assigned to support a specific program within the center and could only provide support by appointment, since his services were in high demand. To complete their recertification and navigate additional services, the family would need to return another day.

Feeling uncertain and discouraged about their access to benefits, the family gathered their things to leave. As they stepped outside, the girl watched her parents' anxious faces, wondering whether the services they were entitled to would continue.

Provide Access to Language Resources

The Provider Perspective

Child-serving providers lack the resources and state agency support to deliver meaningful, high-quality language access.

“Agencies provide great materials, but those materials/workshops are not provided in Spanish... [our] staff applied for a supplemental grant to translate all materials. We didn’t get the grant [and staff hours could have been spent serving youth, instead].” - Contracted Provider

Many child-serving providers face challenges in delivering effective language access services due to limited resources.

Providers are largely responsible for identifying appropriate language access services, funding these services, and managing implementation.⁸ In practice, providers report difficulty identifying and accessing reliable, vetted language access resources in their communities. Even when language access resources are available, child-serving providers often lack the funds and purchasing power to obtain interpretation, translation, or multilingual materials at the scale needed to serve their children and families. While state agencies may translate certain vital documents, child-serving providers expressed frustration with contracts that do not, in their perspective, adequately reimburse costs for essential language access services or cover the full range of language access activities – especially when those activities are critical to effectively serve children and families. As a result, providers independently address these language access challenges, leading to gaps in service quality and missed opportunities to coordinate resources.

59% of surveyed providers (n=22) reported that they do not receive assistance from the state for language access.

Use of Informal Supports for Communication

When language access supports are limited, providers rely on informal strategies to communicate with families. Of the 43 providers surveyed, **many allow individuals with limited English proficiency to provide their own interpreters or have a relative (46%), child (32%), or friend (30%) serve as an interpreter.*** Relying on informal supports, such as relatives, can create significant emotional and cognitive burdens and can compromise accuracy and confidentiality.

*Survey respondents were asked to “select all that apply” and percentages may not add up to 100%.

⁸ Allowable expenditures for language access can vary by contract, and some contracts may explicitly provide funding or resources to contracted providers for certain language access activities.

Strategies to Improve Access to Language Resources

State Procurement Mechanism for Language Access Services

The Commonwealth provides a statewide contract for in-person interpretation, translation, telephonic interpretation, and video remote interpretation services.* This procurement mechanism identifies qualified vendors and pre-negotiated rates, intended to achieve economies of scale and benefit from the state's buying power. Individual state agencies and eligible entities can negotiate lower rates, and individual purchases are made via fee-for-service contracts.

*The Procurement Request Form for Foreign Language Interpretation and Translation Services (PRF75) was replaced by the PRF88 on July 1, 2026.

Sources: [PRF75 Contract User Guide](#); [PRF88 Foreign Language Interpretation and Translation Services](#)

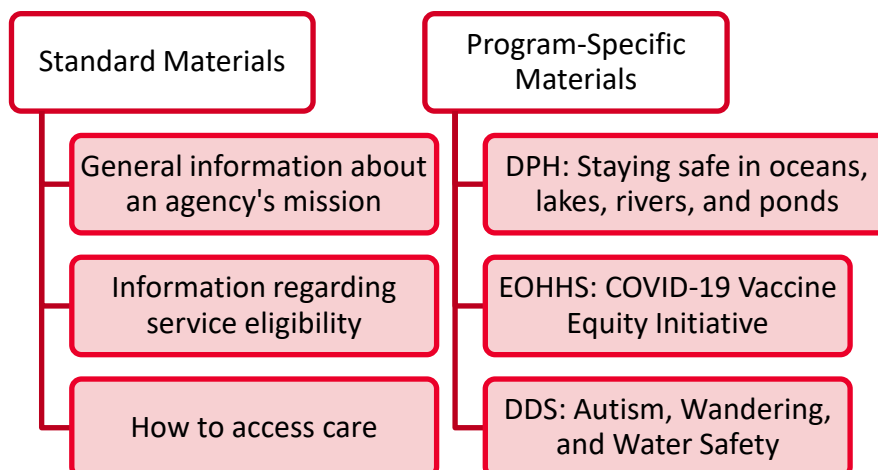
To improve language access for children and families, agencies should ensure that child-serving providers are supported throughout the term of the contract, addressing both initial needs and ongoing service delivery. While some of these recommendations may require additional funding, others can be implemented more easily and leverage economies of scale to improve efficiency:

Translate key provider-facing materials into languages frequently encountered. Child-serving agencies have the information and tools to support translation for child-serving providers. Through Language Access Plans, agencies currently identify the language makeup of their service population.⁹ In addition, agencies can leverage the statewide contract to identify qualified vendors at competitive rates. Building on these capacities, agencies should:

- **Create and manage a resource repository of translated materials and basic forms.** The state and individual agencies can use vendors procured through the statewide contract to create a repository of translated materials. Basic, standard resources – such as intake forms, consent forms, application materials, outreach templates, and materials about state services – can be translated once and made available to multiple child-serving providers and programs. By providing these materials in a shared, accessible repository, agencies can reduce duplication of effort, lower costs for individual providers, and ensure that families receive consistent, quality information in their preferred language.
- **Expand the list of translated documents to include program-specific materials.** Meaningful access requires more than standard forms with general information, such as legal or eligibility notices. Standard materials alone do not address the information, instructions, and resources unique to each child-serving program. Moreover, program requirements and eligibility may change over time, and families need access to updated materials in their preferred language to fully engage with and benefit from services.

⁹ Language Access Policy and Implementation Guidelines (2025) <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/language-access-policy-and-implementation-guidelines>

Figure 2:
Types of Agency Materials for Translation¹⁰



Leverage the statewide contract to facilitate continuous access to a variety of language access resources. Language access extends beyond written translation and includes other services essential for ongoing communication with families, such as in-person interpretation and language lines. By using the statewide contract, the Commonwealth can support consistent and continuous access to these services, laying the groundwork for stronger language access across child-serving agencies.

There are a range of procurement options for individual state agencies to consider.¹¹ Some are more costly and may provide greater reach or more comprehensive coverage, while others require less investment but can still represent meaningful progress toward improving language access. These options provide agencies with flexibility to advance language access based on their resources and needs:

- **Increase providers' awareness of statewide contract vendors and their ability to access associated language services.** Most non-profit and human social service providers under contract with the Commonwealth are eligible to benefit from the contract and its associated rates, yet many providers report they are unaware of qualified vendors in their area.¹² State agencies should take steps to raise awareness of this underutilized

¹⁰ For examples of program-specific materials, explore the following links:

DPH: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/staying-safe-in-oceans-lakes-rivers-and-ponds#:~:text=Always%20swim%20with%20a%20buddy,other%20people%20in%20the%20water.>

EOHHS: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-vaccine-equity-initiative>

DDS: https://www.mass.gov/info-details/autism-wandering-and-water-safety-information-for-caregivers?_ga=2.188712872.1424787979.1777561740-1026858383.1777247549&_gl=1*ifuaaw*_ga*MTAyNjg1ODM4My4xNzc3MjQ3NTQ5*_ga_MCLPEGW7WM*czE3Nzc1NjE3ODEkbzlkZzEkdDE3Nzc1NjE3ODEkajYwJGwwJGww#resources-on-this-page

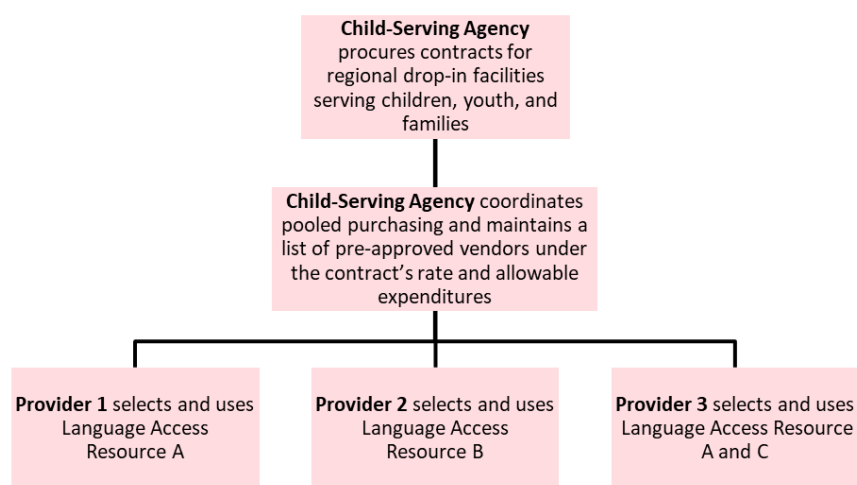
¹¹ The options in this section focus on actions individual state agencies could take. For recommendations on how the state as a whole can leverage the statewide contract to coordinate language access efforts, see the section on "Coordinating System-Level Support."

¹² For more on eligible entities, see [Non-Profit Purchasing Programs | Mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/non-profit-purchasing-programs).

statewide resource – mentioning the contract during procurement, explaining it during onboarding, and reinforcing it through guidance materials and ongoing communication. Individual child-serving agencies should consider tailoring the vendor list to meet the varied needs of providers and families – for example, organizing vendors by specialty or expertise, such as health-care focused interpretation. Agencies are also encouraged to supplement the statewide list with information about notable community-based resources, coalitions, or regional language access partners who can support providers' work in a particular area or service setting. A curated and tailored list of qualified vendors can streamline access for providers, ensuring children and families receive timely and accurate information.

- **Facilitate cost-sharing or pooled purchase agreements for child-serving providers .** Using statewide contract vendors, individual agencies should explore how multiple providers under the same procurement can share the cost of translation or interpretation services. Cost-sharing or pooled purchasing agreements can also help providers manage language access expenses more efficiently.¹³ By joining together on contracts for similar services or documents, multiple providers can increase their buying power, negotiate better rates with vendors, reduce per-provider costs, and ensure consistent quality across programs.

Figure 3:
Pooled Purchasing Agreement Example



Child-serving agencies coordinate pooled purchasing of language access services, giving providers access to pre-approved vendors at contract rates while allowing each provider to use the resources they need.

¹³ Language access contracts are typically structured and priced based on type of service rather than a flat contract for all needs. Given that translation services may be priced by page and interpretation services by session, for example, the cost of language access can vary widely depending on the type and volume of work.



The Cost of “Just Helping”: The Experience of Bilingual Staff

This narrative is based off real scenarios from providers in which bilingual staff are pulled from their primary roles to fill systemic gaps in language access, asked to carry responsibilities they are not trained or prepared to handle, and left feeling burned out in a sector that depends on their skills.

A teenager and his mother arrived at a mental health clinic to discuss the teenager’s recent behavioral challenges at home. The two were greeted by a social worker and ushered into a private meeting area. The social worker began their initial line of questioning to understand the teen’s experience. With every question, the mother looked towards her child – the recipient of services – for translation and support. Wanting to avoid placing that responsibility on the teenager, the clinician called in a bilingual colleague from a different department to assist.

The colleague sat with the family and began interpreting to the best of her ability. Despite speaking the family’s language fluently, this staff member was not trained as a mental health interpreter, nor was she familiar with the specialized clinical terminology being used. As the conversation continued, her discomfort grew. Some of the terms had no direct translation, forcing her to approximate meanings and simplify concepts. She began to question the accuracy of her translation and whether the parent understood what was being discussed. She was acutely aware of the legal and ethical risks and began to worry that the youth’s privacy rights were also being compromised. After a few questions, she stopped the conversation and recommended that the social worker schedule a follow-up appointment with a certified interpreter who could ensure accurate communication and protect the family’s rights.

After making the recommendation, she excused herself and returned to her assigned workstation. There was a stack of unfinished paperwork waiting for her – a reminder that she was behind after a few instances of interpreting for others in the facility that same day. Exhausted and uncertain, she questioned whether her involvement had even helped the family or had only delayed their access to care.

Prepare a Skilled Workforce

The Provider Perspective

Provider staff – including multilingual staff – feel underprepared and undercompensated to administer language access due to gaps in policy and training.

“[Agency] has training on facilitation models and engagement tools but nothing on language barriers... [Even bilingual] staff struggle to facilitate a group with different language needs.” – Contracted Provider

Child-serving providers lack sufficient training in language access practices. They report gaps in training and guidance on when and how to appropriately use language access resources and best practices for providing language access, including working with translators and interpreters. In the absence of formal training, many providers described relying on trial and error, their own limited multilingual abilities, and ad hoc tools such as Google Translate. While using these solutions are convenient and often all they have at their disposal, child-serving providers report instances of inaccurate translation, important information being lost or misinterpreted, and additional barriers to effective assessment and treatment. This is especially concerning for providers who handle complex or sensitive personal information where both technical accuracy and cultural understanding are essential to making informed decisions.

58% of surveyed providers (n=21) do not regularly train staff on language access practices.

“Currently, I am having to take on an additional role as a case manager as no one else on the team is bilingual and able to provide services to one of our youth.” – Contracted Provider

Multilingual staff typically lack formal training, clear role definitions, and a corresponding pay differential. Child-serving providers consistently identify multi- and bilingual staff as their most valuable and frequently relied upon language access resources, especially for fostering trust and facilitating communication with children and families. However, these staff are often asked to provide language access without formal training or clear expectations. As a result, they report increased workloads compared to monolingual colleagues who are compensated at the same rate, role strain, and burnout. Burnout is compounded by inconsistent pay differential policies across provider organizations, which impacts workforce stability and the quality of language access services.

Amongst surveyed providers (n=37), utilizing **bilingual staff is both the most common language access method (81%) and the most preferred language access service (84%).**

Strategies to Prepare a Skilled Workforce

Building and investing in a prepared and skilled workforce is essential to effectively meet the language access needs of the Commonwealth's children and families. Effective language access requires staff who are supported by clear policies and equipped with the tools and knowledge to implement services. The OCA recommends that child-serving state agencies:

Provide or fund comprehensive training for child-serving provider staff on the administration of language access services. Training should cover foundational topics that apply across child-serving programs, such as best practices for working with interpreters and translators, legal and ethical considerations, and strategies for clear communication. Training should also address how to apply language access practices within the unique requirements and settings of each child-serving program, such as a direct care appointment versus a program eligibility interview. State-supported training would promote consistent practices and high-quality service delivery, centering the needs of children and families.

Invest in accurate, culturally competent, and program-specific training for multilingual staff. Multilingual staff play a critical role in facilitating communication with families, but many report a lack of training for the responsibilities required by their language skills. Providers that are required or intend to use multilingual staff to deliver contracted services should formally attest to providing comprehensive training for those staff members on linguistic accuracy, proficiency in specific service settings, cultural competence, and confidentiality and ethical considerations. Agencies can assist this effort by offering such training, ensuring multilingual staff can deliver services effectively, consistently, and in alignment with program requirements.

Reasonably compensate child-serving provider staff who use multilingual skills to carry out contracted activities. The state should recognize the added value and responsibilities of multilingual work by compensating staff who use their language skills in service delivery. This could include developing pay differential policies, standardized incentives (stipends or bonuses) for staff who complete language access training and use multilingual skills to deliver services, and/or modifications to the Chapter 257 Human Service Rate Setting process to allow for added pay for multilingual staff. Investing in multilingual capacity is a cost-efficient way to reduce miscommunication, costly administrative errors, and service delays caused by language barriers.

A Model for Multilingual Pay Incentives

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's Substance Abuse Prevention and Control program offers a **bilingual bonus for contracted providers with documented bilingual proficiency**. The administrative incentive outlines:

- The provider types eligible for the bilingual bonus,
- The language proficiency standards required to receive the bonus, as demonstrated by a standardized test, and
- The reimbursement process for providers to request the bonus.

Source: [LA County Department of Public Health, Substance Abuse Prevention and Control](#)



Lost in Translation: The Importance of Language Access Accuracy

This narrative is based off real scenarios shared by child-serving providers. The experiences reflect common challenges providers encounter when translated materials do not fully match the language abilities of the community, highlighting the importance of partnering with community members and embedding quality checks when developing translated materials.

At the provider's weekly morning meeting, the program supervisor gathered staff to share updates about new and upcoming initiatives that could benefit the children and family they serve. One announcement caught the team's attention: a new program offering tutoring support, school supplies, and additional educational resources for students. Staff knew many of the children in their program could benefit,

As the team discussed outreach, staff raised that many caregivers in their community preferred to receive information in their primary language. Although families were deeply engaged in supporting their children's education, navigating unfamiliar systems and materials in English could pose a barrier to participation. The team agreed that making sure parents clearly understood the opportunity would help children access the support as quickly as possible.

The supervisor reached out to the state agency sponsoring the program and requested that the flyer be translated into the language spoken by many families in their community. The agency responded quickly, sending back a translated version. Provider staff shared the flyer, widely – sending it home in backpacks, posting it in the center's lobby, and circulating it through parent messaging groups. Staff reminded families about the opportunity and emphasized how the program could support children's learning and promote confidence in school.

When the program started, only a handful of young people showed up. A few days later, several parents approached a trusted staff member with questions about the program. They explained that the translation carried a very different meaning from what staff had described. The translation relied on a different regional dialect from what they spoke and used unfamiliar phrasing.¹⁴ The misunderstanding ultimately discouraged families from enrolling their children, limiting access to services that could support their learning and development.

¹⁴ While this brief is focused on ensuring resources are made available in various languages and dialects, child-serving providers should also ensure that resources are accessible to individuals with varying levels of literacy and comprehension. Vocabulary should be reviewed to ensure accessibility of information to all individuals.

Coordinate System-level Support

The Provider Perspective

System-level coordination would streamline and align language access support.

“Shared challenges call for shared solutions.” – Provider Agency

Many of the structural barriers and challenges related to language access are shared across the child-serving sector. While there are various initiatives and stakeholder groups working to advance language access across the Commonwealth, current efforts are decentralized or narrowly focused, limiting their reach and impact. In contrast, the barriers confronting child-serving providers are common and interconnected. For example, resource and funding shortages are major obstacles for providers and state agencies alike. Providers interviewed for this brief consistently noted that greater coordination and alignment would improve clarity regarding roles and requirements as well as the quality of services. This is especially true for providers who deliver services on behalf of multiple child-serving agencies and for families that interact with multiple services and agencies. Within this context, providers expressed a desire for shared guidance, tools, and funding structures to promote consistency, efficiency, and access across child-serving systems.

7 out of 9 child-serving state agencies indicated that successful implementation of the Language Access Plan, as written, is dependent on the availability of adequate financial resources.

See Appendix B for a list of Language Access Plans reviewed.

Strategies to Coordinate System-level Support

Coordinating language access efforts across health and human services state agencies would enable the Commonwealth to streamline language access policies, resources, and provider support. Greater coordination would help to bridge the gap between policy and implementation of language access requirements, and ensure children and families can access consistent, high-quality services across all programs they access. The OCA recommends that the Commonwealth:

Establish a dedicated Language Access Division staffed by individuals with subject matter expertise to serve as the central authority for language access strategy, infrastructure, and oversight. While strengthened interagency coordination can advance many language access functions, a centralized Division would provide the structure, leadership, and accountability needed to promote consistent implementation and long-term sustainability. A dedicated Language Access Division would coordinate efforts to advance shared solutions across the core language access components: procurement, resources, and workforce.

Figure 4:
Core Elements of Language Access



Coordinating Language Access Efforts: Hawaii's Office of Language Access

"The Office of Language Access' (OLA) overall purpose is to affirmatively address the language access needs of limited English proficient (LEP) individuals by providing oversight, central coordination, and technical assistance to the State and state-funded agencies in the implementation of language access requirements."

The OLA coordinates with a Language Access Advisory Council to pursue its key functions:

- Establish state goals and objectives for language access
- Coordinate state and provider efforts
- Provide training and technical assistance
- Conduct needs assessment and research
- Identify, innovate, and make recommendations to address resource needs

Source: [Hawaii's Office of Language Access](#)

Support Responsive Contracts & Procurement: Establish consistent standards and clear language access guidance for state-contracted child-serving providers. While there are actions that state agencies can take to help providers navigate language access requirements and compliance on an individual procurement basis, a coordinated effort at the systems-level would promote consistency across child-serving agencies, providers, and programs. Standardizing procurement language and materials would be particularly helpful for providers managing multiple contracts with different agencies. A coordinated effort could look like:

- Template RFP or contract language for language access requirements, including allowable expenditures, expectations for documentation, and provider roles and responsibilities (e.g., template language in the RFP to document and clarify how providers plan to train and use multilingual staff to meet contract requirements).
- Standardized budget templates for language access costs, helping providers plan and document expenditures consistently and anticipate unforeseen costs (e.g., budget templates with designated sections for common language access services and estimated rates through the statewide contract – such as documented translation, interpretation, language line usage).

- Centralized guidance and FAQ materials in a single, easily accessible repository or webpage, providing a clear point of reference for procurement-related language access questions. For example, the state could develop a plain-language guide or toolkit that explains how to identify, contact, and contract with qualified language access resources, including step-by-step instructions navigating state procurement procedures. This resource would help providers of all sizes – particularly local nonprofit and community-based providers with limited experience navigating the procurement process – more efficiently secure language services, reduce administrative burdens, and preserve time for quality service delivery.

The [Metropolitan Area Planning Council Language Access Guide](#) includes a section on “Language Access & Procurement” to provide step-by-step guidance on procuring language access services and effectively leveraging state procurement resources.

Provide Access to Language Resources: Procure language resources for contracted providers.

While individual providers can pool resources across regions or contracts, centralized procurement offers a more efficient and cost-effective approach to ensuring consistent, quality services. The Commonwealth should use the statewide contract to procure language access services, such as telephonic and video interpretation or a language line, and make these resources available to contracted providers. This approach would encourage the state to use its purchasing power to obtain vetted language resources while reducing the administrative burden on individual agencies and providers. Coordination could also support several key functions:

- **Pool demand across providers.** Pooling allows high- and low-volume users to share infrastructure rather than requiring every provider to maintain capacity for every possible language.
- **Expand access to language resources for less common languages.** As the language diversity in Massachusetts grows, many child-serving providers encounter families who speak low-incidence languages or regional dialects. The state could maintain a centralized roster or rapid-response system to facilitate access to low-incidence languages and dialects, especially languages that individual providers may encounter too infrequently to justify procuring independently.
- **Provide rapid access for in-the-moment and crisis situations.** Many providers reported challenges accessing language resources during emergencies or crisis situations. Centralized resources can provide more comprehensive, around-the-clock access to resources when an unexpected language need arises or when there is insufficient time to arrange language assistance in advance (e.g., the state procures a language line and grants access to contracted providers).
- **Improve the state’s understanding of language access needs.** Centralized resources can generate centralized utilization data, giving the state a clearer understanding of demand and unmet needs. For example, individual agencies collect data on the language needs of their service populations. A centralized body could conduct periodic assessments of the top languages needed in each region. Clear data encourages more strategic and targeted investments in language access infrastructure across the child-serving sector.

Prepare a Skilled Workforce: Invest in a child-centered, language access training

infrastructure. Many of the earlier recommendations highlight the importance of ensuring staff are prepared to deliver language services effectively. Building on these efforts, a systems-level effort could take on the responsibility of designing and delivering training and support to child-serving professionals:

- Develop standardized training curricula and modules for staff, including contracted providers. Training for staff should cover, at minimum, ethical considerations, cultural competence, best practices for effectively using language resources in working with children and families, and program-specific procedures. Unlike individual agencies, which may vary in capacity and approach, a systems-level effort can consolidate expertise, develop foundational materials, and offer targeted modules by service type, population, or setting. Centralized training also allows for ongoing technical assistance, tracking trends, and updating materials as needs evolve, while reducing duplication and ensuring smaller providers have equitable access to educational materials.
- Offer targeted technical assistance and ongoing implementation support through office hours, webinars, or consultation to help providers navigate challenges that arise during service delivery. Language access challenges vary depending on the type of service or program, the population served, and setting in which services are delivered. Systems-level technical assistance allows support to be organized by issue or need rather than by individual agency. For example, crisis response systems – whether focused on behavioral health or child safety – address unique high-risk, emotionally charged interactions requiring clarity and trust to overcome communication barriers. Providing technical assistance and resources based on shared need promotes quality and consistency of support, allowing best practices and lessons learned from one agency or program to benefit the entire child-serving sector.

New Jersey's Department of Human Services (DHS) hosts monthly Community of Practice (CoP) meetings to provide technical assistance and capacity building support. Recordings and materials shared during the CoP are maintained on the state's online portal.

Source: [New Jersey Language Access Initiative Annual Report](#)

Position the Language Access Division within Administration & Finance (A&F). As the central contracting authority, A&F is well-positioned to coordinate state agencies and provider organizations with active contracts. A&F's core functions – budgeting, contracting, compliance, and system management – directly shape how child and family-serving state agencies deliver services. Establishing a Language Access Division within A&F would ensure language access is built into the core operational systems that govern funding, procurement, and service delivery – decisions that directly impact service quality for children and families.

Bridging the Gap

Language access helps ensure that children and families understand available support, participate in decision-making, and receive services that are responsive to their strengths and needs. Through their work with children and families, child-serving providers play a critical role in this effort. The strategies outlined in this brief offer actionable approaches to encourage meaningful access to services and help providers respond to evolving capacities, constraints, and community needs. By reducing variation across child-serving providers and fostering greater coordination and collaboration, these strategies advance more consistent, efficient, and sustainable language access practices across the child-serving sector. Ultimately, prioritizing language access will strengthen service delivery and promote wellbeing for all children and families in the Commonwealth.

Appendix A: Description of Common Language Access Services

Communication Access Realtime Interpretation (CART) Services: professional service or software providing instantaneous translation of spoken words into text

Interpreter Services: Translates verbal communication, including American Sign Language (ASL)

Language Bank: An organization or institution that provides volunteer and/or paid translators and interpreters

Language Line: Translation and interpretation service providing on-demand and onsite services

Translation Services: Translates written communication

Translation Software & Applications: Computer or phone applications that convert text or audio, including CART services and assisted listening devices (e.g., Google Translate, Microsoft Translator, etc.)

Appendix B: OCA's Methodology

Scope and Considerations: This brief focuses on the provision of services for individuals who speak a language other than English; it does not meaningfully address disability-related access needs, such as the Braille writing system or American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation. The OCA recognizes that ASL is a distinct language that intersects with broader language access goals. Services for individuals with limited English proficiency are typically addressed under civil rights laws whereas ASL and other disability-related accommodations (e.g., captioning services) fall under disability rights legislation and are often managed through separate agencies and procurement processes.¹⁵ This brief distinguishes between these areas to reflect their distinct, legal, operational, and funding structures as well as the specialized nature of the supportive services provided under each.

To identify language access gaps and opportunities, including creative solutions that could be deployed efficiently at scale, the OCA employed a multi-method approach.

Review of Language Access Plans: OCA staff reviewed Massachusetts Executive Department Agency Language Access Plans to understand current language access services and strategies, including how these efforts relate to contracted providers. Language Access Plans reviewed included:

- [MassHealth](#) (January 2024)
- [Department of Mental Health \(DMH\)](#) (January 2024)
- [Department of Children and Families \(DCF\)](#) (January 2024)
- [Department of Youth Services \(DYS\)](#) (January 2024)
- [Department of Public Health \(DPH\)](#) (January 2024)

¹⁵ Services for individuals with limited English proficiency are generally governed by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 whereas disability access requirements are typically protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

- [Department of Transitional Assistance \(DTA\)](#) (February 2024)
- [Department of Developmental Services \(DDS\)](#) (December 2023)
- [Massachusetts Commission for the Blind \(MCB\)](#) (January 2024)
- [Massachusetts Commissions for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing \(MCDHH\)](#) (February 2024)

Review of Request for Responses (RFR): To understand how the state identifies language access requirements and expectations for child-serving providers, OCA staff reviewed 18 RFRs. The review captured a representative sample of procurements and re-procurements (from FY20-current) spanning a range of contracted service types and agency functions, such as residential services, program administration, service administration, and education/training.

Review of State Procurement Mechanisms: The OCA reviewed the contracting guidelines for state procurement mechanisms – such as the PRF75/PRF88 – to clarify available services, understand eligibility and access, and review funding and payment structures.

Stakeholder Surveys: In partnership with the Children’s League, the OCA surveyed state contracted providers to understand their experience with language access. The survey consisted of multiple-choice, Likert scale response, and open-ended response questions, incorporating skip logic to tailor questions based on respondent’s prior answers. The survey was administered from September through October 2024.

A total of 43 respondents participated in the survey. Respondents included those in management positions (72%) and in client-facing roles (28%). The most common services provided by respondents include youth and young adult services (67%) and case management (67%), followed by education/educational support services (42%) and basic needs/supports (42%). Survey respondents represented every county in the Commonwealth. Most respondents reported working in western Massachusetts (60%), followed by southeastern Massachusetts (53%), northeastern Massachusetts (40%), central Massachusetts (14%), and 12% reported working statewide. Three provider respondents do not serve children and families with limited English proficiency and were excluded from analysis.

Stakeholder Interviews: OCA staff conducted 17 interviews, representing 21 stakeholders, including contracted providers, advocates, and state agency and municipal staff. The goal of these interviews was to identify potential challenges and opportunities in utilizing and improving language access resources.

National Scan: To inform the background and recommendations of this brief, OCA staff conducted a review of the national research. Areas of focus included the legal history of language access, research on effective policy directives and implementation, and evidence-based practices in other jurisdictions.

About the Office of the Child Advocate

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is an independent executive branch agency with oversight and ombudsperson responsibilities, established by the Massachusetts Legislature in 2008. The OCA's mission is to ensure that children receive appropriate, timely, and quality state services, with a particular focus on ensuring that the Commonwealth's most vulnerable and at-risk children have the opportunity to thrive. Through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, the OCA identifies gaps in state services and recommends improvements in policy, practice, regulation, and/or law. The OCA also serves as a resource for families who are receiving, or are eligible to receive, services from the Commonwealth.

Phone

Main Office: (617) 979-8374

Complaint Line: (617) 979-8360

Address

One Ashburton Place, 11th Floor
Boston, MA 02102

Website

<https://www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-the-child-advocate>

Email

Childadvocate@mass.gov

Acknowledgements

This brief was produced by the Office of the Child Advocate and represents the views and perspectives of the Office. We are grateful to all who contributed information, ideas, analysis, and feedback on this report, while acknowledging that the OCA bears ultimate responsibility for the analysis and recommendations presented herein.

The following OCA staff members contributed to this brief:

- Melissa Threadgill, Senior Director of Policy and Implementation
- Daisy Perez, Senior Policy and Implementation Manager
- Holly Swan, Senior Policy and Implementation Manager
- Kerin Miller, Policy and Research Analyst
- Jessica Seabrook, Data Analyst