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Tech Brief

Mobility Information Needs of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Travelers in New Jersey

FHWA-NJ-2004-018

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The Problem?

As one of the most diversified states in terms of culture, language, and ethnicity, New Jersey is home to a large number of populations who speak a language other than English at home. The year 2000 Census Data indicates that one out of every four New Jersey residents speaks a language different from English at home. Of those people, nearly half of them (45%) admit speaking English less than "very well," which is the basic definition for a LEP person.

Language barriers prohibit people who are LEP from obtaining services and information relating to transportation services and programs. Because LEP people are not able to read instructions or correspondence written in English, and may not understand verbal information, they often are not aware of regulatory requirements and legal implications of the services they seek. Therefore, they may not be able to take advantage of the transit systems, which could affect their economic and social opportunities.

Dampened access to the mobility information by the LEP population simply creates a fertile soil for growing complaints, which is exactly what New Jersey Transit (NJ TRANSIT) and New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) strive to reduce or eliminate.

THE RESPONSE !!!

As part of the overall effort to improve transit services and comply with Title VI non-discrimination mandates, NJDOT and NJ TRANSIT propose this research on best practices to satisfy mobility information needs of LEP people in New Jersey. As outlined in the United States Department of Transportation Guidance, Title VI regulations require recipients of Federal funding to take reasonable steps to ensure that LEP persons receive the language assistance necessary to offer them meaningful access to appropriate programs and activities. This research aimed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Provide residents and travelers in New Jersey who have limited English proficiency with the ability to gain essential access to New Jersey's transportation opportunities, such as bus, rail, road, water and air. Unique in the United States, New Jersey has only one transit agency, NJ TRANSIT, for all modes of Public Transportation in the state. This unique organizational structure will help to afford comprehensive and consistent solutions for public transportation infrastructure systems, as well as better management and customer services for the traveling public. This research should assist NJ TRANSIT in maintaining and improving the quality of transit services.
2. Further New Jersey transportation agencies' compliance with Title VI regulations as they pertain to the avoidance of discrimination against people of different national origins or language proficiency.
3. Provide NJ TRANSIT and NJDOT with a manual to be used in recommending ways of improving their service to the LEP travelers in New Jersey.

Project Tasks

The Request for Proposal (RFP) of this project calls for three parallel surveys across diversified organizational structures and geographical areas. It is critical for the project team developing a well thought out and dynamic research plan the project are completed on time and within budget. The result of this research offers much needed guidelines for NJ TRANSIT to provide mobility information for LEP people.

Task 1. Review Literature

Task 2. Identify Sources of Information on Location, Nature, and Size of LEP Groups in New Jersey.

Task 3. Identify and Classify the New Jersey LEP Population

Task 4. Generate Input from LEP Populations

Task 5. Survey Peer Transportation and Transit Agencies in the United States

Task 6. Survey Internationally Oriented Activity Centers

Task 7. Survey Selected Transit and Transportation Providers in Other Countries

Task 8. Develop a Nonverbal Communication Approach

Task 9. Synthesize Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Recommendations

Task 10. Synthesize with LEP Market Research for Development of the Final Report

Task 11. Prepare Quarterly Progress and Final Report

This research project has been completed within 24 month. The first task was accomplished in the first three-month period. Tasks 2 through 4 were accomplished within six months. Task 5, 6 and 7 were completed by the end of the first year. The last three months of the project were used to compile the final project report and present the final results and findings to the Research Project Selection and Implementation Panel (RPSIP).

Main Findings

This research examined the demographics and strategies of the New Jersey's Limited English Proficient (LEP) population. After an extensive literature review, the project identified the geographical location and linguistic backgrounds for approximate 400,000 LEP New Jersey residents. We found a concentration in the state's six urban northeast counties. A high correlation between transit use and LEP population distribution was discovered.

The first step was to obtain the LEP community input on mobility-information issues. We distributed a questionnaire on transit communications to over 500 students in various English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) courses. We also conducted survey with small groups of LEP residents. The surveys showed that a majority of respondents understand most transit communications although large minorities had problems getting some information such as that conveyed in announcements. The focus groups corroborated this information, but some members also indicated perceptions of discriminatory treatment by individual transit employees and a lack of appropriate transit routes.

The second step was to survey the best practices of peer transit agencies in American metropolitan areas with bi- or multilingual populations. Through this survey, we found several agencies, WMATA in Washington DC, Tri-MET in Portland, Oregon, Sounder Transit in Seattle, Washington, and New York City MTA, with innovative practices such as multilingual websites.

The third step was to survey selected transportation providers outside the United States along with various airports, tourism centers, and other locales catering to multilingual clientele. We found practices included multilingual web pages, publications and announcements, telephone lines, pictograms, visual aids and personal assistance.

At the strategic level, agencies should prepare a long-range Transit Plan. The plan would take into account community demographics in long-range transit planning, including a voice for LEP community members in planning routes. Agencies should maximize human contact and personal assistance to the degree that this is economically feasible. This recommendation includes introduction of cultural and linguistic sensitivity training for all employees with traveler contacts. To leverage resources, agencies should explore cooperation with other organizations, e.g., social services organizations committed to work with various immigrant communities.

At the operational level, we recommend such techniques as increased use of pictograms to present simple information and creation of a multilingual website. We also recommend improvement in public announcement techniques.

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A final report is available online at <http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/research/research.html>

If you would like a copy of the full report, please FAX the NJDOT, Division of Research and Technology, Technology Transfer Group at (609) 530-3722 or send an e-mail to Research.Division@dot.state.nj.us and ask for:

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