

Since our Groundviews newsletter focuses mostly on the people involved in and affected by Solid Ground, we produce the semi-annual Big Picture News to give you an agency-level view of our work. ~ The Editors

Language access & equity for all

Most of us have experienced being somewhere where we don't speak the language – and we know the frustration and fear that can bring. So imagine trying to access emergency shelter, advice about a sensitive legal issue, or other vital support services when you don't speak English.

“Navigating social services and systems can be very scary. And doing so in a language that is foreign to you further negatively impacts immigrant and refugee communities and communities of color,” says Ariana Cantú, Solid Ground's Administrative Manager.

This reality is at the crux of why Solid Ground is committed to improving access to our services for people whose primary language is not English.

In January 2012, we launched a clear set of Language Access Policies and Procedures intended to create language access equity – both for people seeking our

services, and to fairly compensate bilingual staff members who regularly use their language skills on the job.

A Language Access Task Force with staff representation from all major Solid Ground departments, including seven bilingual people, met bi-monthly for over a year to create the policy (although intentional Language Access efforts began here about six years ago).

The Guiding Principles that informed the Language Access Task Force work are:

- Ensure that language is not a barrier to accessing our services.
- All Solid Ground employees will know how to access interpretation and translation services provided both internally and externally to meet the language needs of our clients.
- Bilingual employees will receive additional compensation for use of language skills on the job.

The work began with copious information gathering to identify top languages spoken, gauge

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agency-wide interpretation and translation needs, and assess how often bilingual staff use their language skills at work. Research also showed that few other similar agencies have established language access policies.

Ariana played a lead role in this work and says, “**I am happy to be part of this movement at Solid Ground to better understand the cultural and language differences of those we serve** and to adjust our own Americanized culture to create a safe, approachable environment for people whose primary language is not English.”

Several tangible outcomes emerged. A comprehensive and user-friendly Language Access Resource Guide is now available to all Solid Ground staff, with tips on how to work with interpreters.

We also now have a fair compensation system for bilingual employees who use their language skills on the job, and clear Language Access Policies and Implementation Procedures to support the work.

But perhaps the most meaningful impact of the Language Access efforts is reflected in more culturally competent services

from programs such as our Housing Stabilization Services (HSS), which serves a large number of Spanish-speaking people (see lead Groundviews story,

She was always by my side). And thanks to the new policy, HSS Program Supervisor &

Case Manager Pamela Calderón’s position was reclassified as bilingual to compensate her for the significant amount of time she uses her language skills at Solid Ground.

Work still to come includes recruiting a pool of on-call bilingual staff to respond to walk-in or unanticipated interpretation needs more efficiently than using outside interpretation services.

Ariana says, “Establishing Language Access practices and processes allows Solid Ground to take the next step in putting our Anti-Racism Initiative values into practice. **It’s walking our talk when we invest in policies and practices that support equity and access for all!**”



(l to r): Language Access Task Force members Pamela Calderón, Rogelio Diaz & Ariana Cantú