



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-260243.2

April 21, 1995

The Honorable Henry B. Gonzalez
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Banking
and Financial Services
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Gonzalez:

This letter responds to your request that we determine whether selected federal agencies have bilingual staff available to meet the needs of their non-English-speaking customers. The growth in the number of non-English-speaking customers requesting federal services and the National Performance Review's emphasis on improving federal agencies' service to the public have focused attention on this issue.

Interviews at headquarters and selected regional offices of four agencies with service missions revealed no indication that the agencies had been generally unable to meet their growing responsibilities to communicate with non-English-speaking customers. Although several offices reported having a shortage of bilingual staff, these offices said they were able to obtain bilingual services as needed from their local communities.

We selected the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for review because of the specific interests expressed by your office and because they represent examples of the different ways in which federal agencies provide services to the public.

To assess the availability of bilingual services at these agencies, we interviewed officials at their headquarters and selected regional and district offices, including VA medical facilities. We also reviewed the congressional inquiry files at the regional offices of SSA, VA, and HUD to determine whether these offices had received any complaints concerning service to non-English-speaking customers. Because HCFA deals with the public largely through private insurance carriers, we

also spoke with officials from several HCFA carriers to determine whether they had enough bilingual staff to meet their non-English-speaking customers' needs.

At SSA, the agency's strategic plan stated a clear objective of ensuring that those members of the public who did not speak English would be able to conduct business with the agency. To fulfill this commitment, the plan stated that SSA would employ an "adequate" number of bilingual or multilingual staff. All of the SSA regional and district offices we contacted told us they either had sufficient bilingual staff to meet the needs of their non-English-speaking customers or used community resources to meet this need. For example, the San Francisco regional office responded that they had 10 interpreters, 14 translators, and 39 employees who could interpret and translate 12 different languages. On the other hand, the Los Angeles district office reported not having sufficient bilingual staff. In addition, the New York regional office reported that some individual offices within the region also experienced this situation. The New York regional office reported that limited hiring authority had precluded it from hiring enough bilingual staff. According to these officials, their offices looked to the local community to provide bilingual services as needed, such as paid translators or free interpreters from civic groups or religious organizations. We reviewed the congressional inquiry files at the SSA regional offices we visited and determined that there were no complaints concerning service to non-English-speaking customers.

VA, HCFA, and HUD did not specifically address the non-English-speaking public in their strategic plans. However, both HCFA and HUD had included efforts to help customers with foreign language needs as one of their stated customer-service standards.

Five of the six VA regional offices and medical facilities we contacted reported having non-English-speaking customers. Officials from all five believed that they had sufficient bilingual resources to meet their customers' needs and, if necessary, could obtain additional assistance from the local community. For example, the Brick outpatient clinic in New Jersey had 12 bilingual staff who spoke five languages. Our review of the congressional inquiry files at the VA regional offices and medical facilities we visited showed that there were no complaints concerning service to non-English-speaking customers.

HCFA officials at the three regional offices we contacted said they had very little contact with non-English-speaking customers, and believed they had sufficient bilingual staff to meet their needs. For example, the New York regional office reported that it had employees who spoke Spanish, Italian, French, several Chinese dialects, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Although HCFA did not require its private insurance carriers to provide services in foreign languages, the carriers we contacted also said that they had enough bilingual staff to meet their needs. One carrier reported having eight bilingual employees who spoke five non-English languages. Another reported having employees who spoke three languages in addition to English. The carriers also noted that they had limited interactions with non-English-speaking customers.

Officials from HUD's San Francisco regional office reported that a 1991 survey of regional employees identified about 50 employees who spoke a variety of languages. Officials acknowledged, however, that they had received a letter of concern from a Member of Congress about the ability of fair housing enforcement staff to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking customers. According to an official of the San Francisco regional office, the region's workload for processing fair housing complaints increased in September 1992, when the State of California lost its authority to process fair housing complaints. HUD officials told us that in March 1993, recognizing the need for additional Spanish-speaking staff to handle this workload, the San Francisco regional office hired three Spanish-speaking equal opportunity specialists to investigate fair housing complaints, while its Orange County district office hired four specialists.

The two other HUD regional offices we contacted believed that they had sufficient bilingual staff to serve their non-English-speaking customers. For example, the Newark, New Jersey, field office of one of the regions had 32 staff members, about 20 percent of the office staff, who spoke 16 languages. We did not identify any complaints concerning service to non-English-speaking clients in the congressional inquiry files of the regional offices we visited.

We discussed the information in this letter with officials from each of the four agencies and incorporated their observations, as appropriate. They agreed with the information presented in this letter. We are sending copies of this letter to the

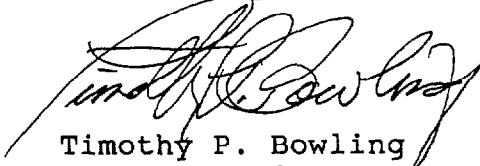
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Secretary of VA, the Secretary of HUD, the Administrator of HCFA,
and the Commissioner of SSA.

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I hope this information is helpful to you. Please call me on
(202) 512-5074 if you have any further questions.

Sincerely yours,



Timothy P. Bowling
Associate Director
Federal Human Resource Management
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