

Translation is not Enough: Meaningfully Serving Communities Speaking Languages Other than English

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ABSTRACT:

This paper draws on research from several states to identify challenges that utility programs have had in serving households where English is not spoken and enabling their participation in energy efficiency programs and pathways to better serve these communities.

Reaching people who speak languages other than English can be a challenge for utility programs. Failure to build trust in communities and not providing in-language support, has frequently caused these customers to feel disconnected. The research we discuss here highlights the need for utilities and program administrators to make concerted efforts to meet the needs of this population, beyond translating materials into different languages. Engagement must be more focused within communities and the program transactions.

In this paper, we share learnings from several studies including an ongoing study to understand the customer journey through a northeastern state's energy efficiency programs for customers with limited English proficiency. That study includes interviews with community organizations to understand barriers, challenges, and experiences of their communities and to engage these organizations as partners in the research. Other study activities include a survey and interviews with participants to explore experiences and pain points customers face when trying to participate in energy efficiency programs, including the audit-based home improvement program. The paper highlights pain points in the journey and identifies potential opportunities to address them.

This paper contains recommendations on how utilities and others can better serve their customers who speak languages other than English.

Introduction:

The United States, unlike many nations, has no national language. While English is predominantly spoken, there are hundreds of other languages spoken in the country. Utility energy efficiency programs have historically been predominantly offered in English, thus excluding or limiting the participation from those who for whom English is not their primary language. Offering programs in multiple languages can be a complex challenge and require substantial effort on the part of program administrators, utilities, and implementation teams seeking to serve communities and households where English is not spoken. While customers pay into utility programs regardless of their language preferences, energy efficiency programs have often served communities that speak English, are wealthier, better educated, and whiter, as Frank and Nowak point out in their study of how “untargeted” energy efficiency programs in fact resulted in a participant population that was not representative of the general population” (Frank and Nowak 2016).

In this paper, we highlight learnings from several studies conducted to support utilities in providing services in languages other than English. We begin with a discussion of why this language matters and how language is connected to culture. We then explore the challenges in

identifying languages within a community or utility service territory. Next we discuss the likely pain points in the journey of a typical program and why translations of materials and flyers are not adequate to truly invite customers to participate. Finally, we conclude with recommendations on how utilities can better serve customers in languages other than English.

Research Scope and Methods

This paper draws on four studies conducted across the nation where the ILLUME team has conducted research in languages other than English. The first study we discuss is the Massachusetts Nonparticipant barriers study: which had goals to 1) characterize nonparticipants, 2) investigate barriers to participation, and 3) identify engagement opportunities. One customer group of particular interest was non-English speakers. The study included 1609 surveys with customers and 89 interviews with customers (Guidehouse 2020). The interviews were conducted in Spanish, English, and Portuguese. The survey was fielded in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Mandarin Chinese.

We also draw on a study the ILLUME team conducted for a southeastern utility that included a virtual/online experience diary using the Recollective platform, which is a software for online qualitative research.¹ We reference this study as Study 2. The study explored preferences around home temperature, attitudes toward energy efficiency, energy use and conservation, home maintenance, repairs, and upgrades. The study was fielded in English, Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, and Mandarin.

A third study we reference here (Study 3) supported communication about solar installation that the team conducted on behalf of a Western utility regulatory agency. In that study, the ILLUME team conducted focus groups in English and Spanish to gather feedback on informational materials related to solar. The goals of that study were to provide feedback on materials designed to give homeowners information to help them make decisions about installing rooftop solar

The final study we draw on here, Study 4, is a study that is still currently in progress. This study aims to create a journey map through state energy efficiency programs for customers with Limited English Proficiency. The study is focusing on 5 languages of interest for the study sponsors: Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Haitian Creole. The team has recruited community organizations as study partners, and we are working with them to host group interviews with individuals who have not participated in energy efficiency programs to understand barriers to participation. We are also leveraging program participant data to conduct surveys and interviews with participants to understand how participants with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) experience the program. In this paper, we have included findings from initial interviews with community organizations and data analysis related to language preference.

The importance of language

At the risk of stating the banal, language is central to how humans communicate and how human social worlds are organized. The languages we speak do more than communicate information, they convey culture, history, and values. In the study we reference above with

¹ www.recollective.com

utility customers in the Southeast, participants noted how important it was when their utility communicated with them in their primary language. They literally felt heard, and that contributed to more positive feelings toward the utility in turn.

We note, however, that since language is so important, it is critical to get it right; poor translations or inaccurate translations can confuse or even offend. The study in a Western state (Study 3) included information for homeowners about their rights when entering into a contract with a solar provider. In the Spanish-language version of the material, there was a grammatical error mixing the informal and formal pronouns (tu and usted); see figure 1. When presented in Spanish-language focus groups, the response to this error among participants was that it was “disrespectful” and showed a lack of care and attention to their language. While residents appreciated that the organization was making the effort to offer materials in Spanish, basic errors in the translations had the effect of reducing trust, rather than building it.

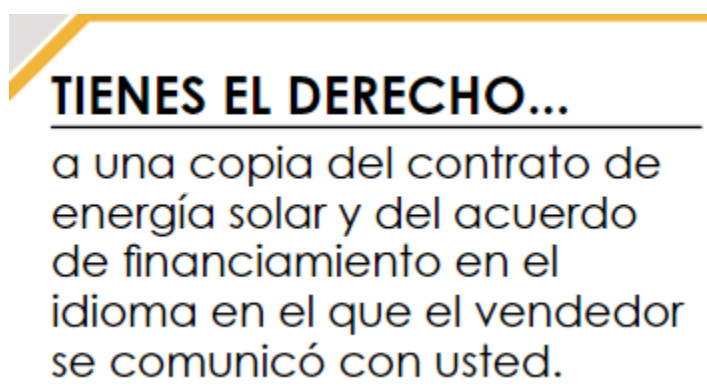


Figure 1: image of error in translated text from solar information

Of course, errors may be made in English-language materials too but given the status of English as a dominant language and one connected with state and local power, such errors don’t diminish the status of the language (see Silverstein 1996 on standardized language). By contrast, errors in a translated text can serve to further alienate communities who may already feel marginalized. We begin with this instance of an error in translation – and its impact on the intended audience – to highlight the stakes for these efforts. As utilities seek to better serve those markets that have historically been “hard to reach,” which is to say, harder for the utility to reach through the methods they’ve traditionally relied on, going beyond surface translation will be critical.

Understanding Languages Spoken by our Customers

But first, it is important to know what languages people speak within a given community or service territory. One major roadblock for utilities and other companies to identify a non-English or limited-English speaking audience in a specific territory is the scarcity of reliable and publicly available data relating to language preference or English proficiency. A recent investigation we conducted as part of Study 4 revealed several limitations of currently available data at the customer billing account level or at the census block level.

There are several ways to go about identifying the language preferences within a utility territory. For Study 4, the team drew on sources including utility program participation tracking data, utility call center tracking data, utility website analytics data, third-party customer data (e.g., Experian), GIS mapping data and US census data/American Community Survey data. After extensive evaluation of these data, we identified the following pitfalls:

- Census data only included certain languages or grouped languages together, e.g. Asian languages.
- Language spoken was included at the census tract level but not Census block level.
- Utility customer data tracked language preferences inconsistently through call centers and program participation.
- Website analytics data were not traceable at the customer level.
- Third-party vendor data available for purchase was inconsistent.

In order to serve communities that speak languages other than English, finding who these people are and what language they speak is an essential first step. To do this, utilities should make a concerted effort to collect and track primary language information from vendors who implement their various programs and directly from their customers. This could be as simple as having a primary language option as they open an account or enroll in a program.

A second step is to identify the internal organizational changes necessary to support outreach and services to customers with limited English proficiency, including languages that should be prioritized, what outreach and program materials should be translated, and the internal infrastructure needed to support these efforts.

Translation is about conveying meaning, not just translating words

Translation is a critical step in ensuring that programs are accessible in multiple languages. However, translation is not singular step or one-time process, instead, translation and accessibility must be integrated into the entirety of a process. Indeed, translation is about conveying the wholistic meaning of a phrase, including cultural nuance, pragmatics, and other features that go beyond semantic content (Morris 1971 [1938]; See also Hanks 1996 for a broad discussion of pragmatics in the context of the discipline of linguistics). As the authors have discussed previously (see Kelley and Dunn 2020), even seemingly straightforward translations of a static piece of marketing material may not be simple, and ought to incorporate nuances based on context and culture to be relevant. In this section, we explore several moments where translations can go wrong.

Human vs. Machine Translation

Machine translations have improved and in recent years have begun to complement or even replace human translations. However, given the need to build trust among LEP customers, a machine translation that cannot capture the right tone and friendliness being conveyed in a message may translate into a disengaged LEP customer. For example, in Study 2, the online home experience study the team conducted in the Southeast, a participant described receiving Spanish-language materials about home upgrades, which was translated as “actualizaciones.” However, this term is used only for computer/technology-related upgrades, not for home improvements. While it was the ‘right’ translation for ‘upgrades’ the context was entirely wrong.

Although great advances have been made in the capabilities of software to translate language in context, human translation is still essential to ensure cultural, community-specific and other contextual references are accounted for in a translation. If a machine translation is used, we recommend that a native speaker scan the text to look for cultural references and finding the right conceptual translation in order to reduce difficulties in comprehension.

Websites and dynamic content

When discussing dynamic content such as a website, translation can prove to be a challenge, in part because of the multiple kinds of text and features on a website. In a recent review of a utility program's website in Spanish, the team found that there were instances where translations did not flow through comprehensively, for instance, text on embedded images did not translate, links did not translate, or dropdown menu options did not translate. Figure 2 below shows a screenshot of the Spanish version of a utility website to find energy efficient products in local stores. The text outlined in red remained in English, even as the remainder of the text was in Spanish.

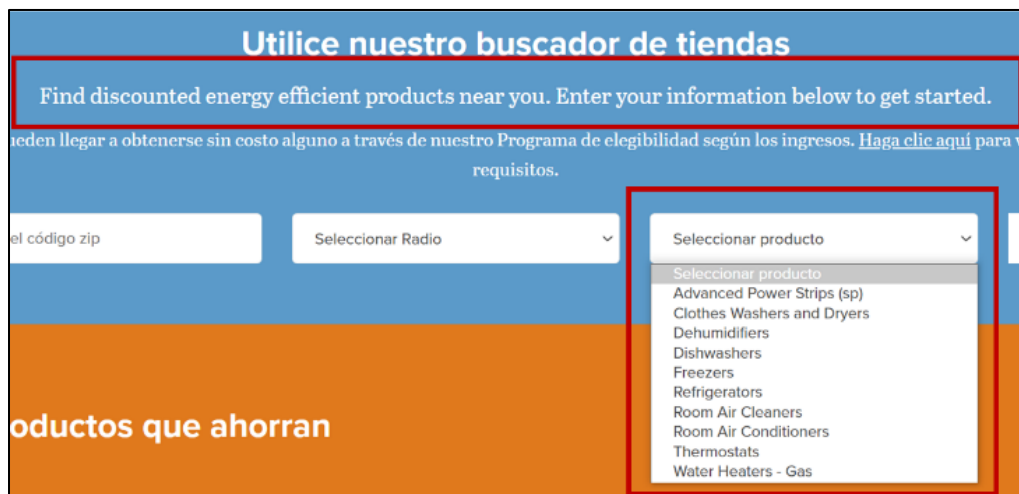


Figure 2: Website translation

In some cases, these lingering untranslated elements may not impact function or ability to participate in programs, but in other cases, such as where the application itself is not available in other languages, incomplete translation is a clear barrier to access. Even when there is not a functional barrier, lingering English language text can create a less-than-optimal user experience, emphasizing for the reader that the language they're reading in is not the primary or dominant language (See Kelley and Dunn 2020 for further discussion of language dominance; see also Silverstein 2003)

As utilities assess their accessibility in other languages, ensuring that the website translations are complete as well as accurate is an important baseline for enabling, not to mention, encouraging, participation by individuals who speak languages other than English.

Conceptual Correlates and cultural experiences

Another challenge that may impact participation of LEP customers is that there may not be conceptual correlates in their own native countries for many of the terms that are used in energy efficiency programs, such as "energy audit," "energy efficiency," "energy kits," etc.). This may present added cognitive and cultural challenges. It may be the case that services provided by utilities in their native countries are so different than the service provided in the US that foreign-born customers may have problems understanding the services offered at a conceptual level. For instance, in a recent interview with a community organization serving the Haitian community, we heard that in rural communities in Haiti people are more used to purchasing gas for cooking in cans or containers than piped into their homes. The practice of

paying a bill monthly for an intangible amount of a quantity may require some adjustment or getting used-to. In these cases, fully understanding the service may involve providing more accessible and dissected information, not a mere translation from English. Adding easy to understand explanations, testimonials, or insights from others, and case studies can be valuable. Utilities may want to consider partnering with community organizations to provide information about ‘what to expect’ or offer videos on a YouTube channel, for instance describing how to read a bill or what to expect if you’re connecting to your utilities for the first time.

More generally, if people have not had substantial experience with utilities or utility programs, they may rely on experiences with other governmental or private services. Perhaps due to limited English fluency, these experiences may have been poor such as having themselves or someone they know been the subject of scams or believing a service to be free when it was not. Cognitive frames (Lakoff 1987, Lakoff 1993, Goffman 1974) or heuristics such as that “nothing is free” or “What’s the catch?” may be prevalent.² Thus, concepts seemingly easy to understand (and translate) such as “free services” may be interpreted as “not free” by some customers. More significantly, “easy application process” may be interpreted as “complicated application process” especially when, for example, an ‘easy’ application process requires making a phone call that can require substantial courage and emotional energy to prepare for. In some cases, “energy efficiency program” may be interpreted as “assistance with bill payment” if people have largely received offers from their utility to support bill payments. If they do not feel that they need help with their bills at this time, they may disregard communications about energy efficiency or other offers as irrelevant. This could be solved by using in-language experts that understand both cultures and can determine where additional explanations are needed. Adding contextual references or explanations in addition to translating the original text in English can help foreign-born utility customers understand the service offerings at a conceptual level.

Length of Time in the US

While not a language-specific issue, community organization representatives we spoke with as part of Study 4 explained that newer immigrants are very likely not to speak English and must first overcome challenges to meeting their basic needs (shelter, food, etc.). They may be more inclined to ‘fly under the radar’ than those that have been in the US longer and will want to stay that way until they gradually develop an understanding of how to navigate the system and feel confident that they can avoid unwanted consequences. For example, receiving a ticket for parking in the wrong place or doing something that triggers some sort of alert that may cost them their residency. Newer immigrants may depend more on relationships to get by (family, friends, neighbors, community liaisons, community organizations). As they expand their networks and gain experience, they gain more and more access to resources and become more and more confident in their ability to get by on their own without feeling like they could be risking everything.

We also note that new immigrants and others who are unfamiliar with the season or climates, particularly in regions such as the northeast where there are substantial seasonal variations, may not understand program offers or how programs can help them. This barrier is compounded for those who do not speak or read English.

² We note that these frames are not limited to those with limited English proficiency but rather are common among nonparticipants. In Study 1, the nonparticipant barrier study, the research team heard significant skepticism about the legitimacy of energy efficiency programs that offered anything at no cost.

By contrast, community organizations suggested that immigrants who have been in the US longer are more likely to speak English themselves, or to have children or other family close to them that can help translate when needed. A few organizations commented on how Spanish speakers they serve are more likely to have been in the US longer or know someone who has. Some organizations also commented on the abundance of Spanish-language resources that are generally available and which seems to have made ‘getting by’ easier for Spanish-speakers more so than other LEP groups.

In addition to language, messaging and cultural references can be a barrier. For example, in an interview with a community organization that served the Nepali community, they explained that when they tried to do outreach about lead in homes, they found that culturally, people did not talk about health, so they needed to change their messaging to focus on tenants’ rights. They provided information on how to ask a landlord to fix things using house parties with an interpreter and going door-to-door. Focusing on tenants’ rights rather than on health shifted from a message that was outside the social and cultural norms (discussing health) to one that was legible in the social and cultural context (advocacy for tenants’ rights).

Words may translate easily into different languages but without context and the correct meaning assigned to them, LEP households and individuals may not benefit from services available to them. These added language, cultural and cognitive barriers can make a seemingly simple process to sign up for a service or program burdensome for limited-English speakers. In the next section, we explore a prototypical home energy audit program journey and highlight challenges or pain points for customers with limited English proficiency.

Translating the Customer Journey

Although the information relating to a program may be made available to non-English speakers in their primary language by translating materials through the website or printed flyers, this is barely adequate to fulfill their language needs and serve them successfully. Adequate services require the entirety of the process to be conducted in their primary language.

In this paper, we have discussed the importance of having language services in a customer’s primary language. We view this as an equity issue: adequately solving all customers requires that the utility provide services in the languages that its customers speak. In some cases, however, a customer might be able to ‘get by’ in English but might prefer communications in English. In this case, it may be more of a customer experience opportunity, where providing services in a preferred language provides a better customer service. As utilities work to improve the customer experience for their customers, considering language preference may be a valuable way to stand out as offering a stellar experience.

Utilities and program administrators must ensure that customers can access the service in the language of their choosing at every touchpoint along the way. In research we’ve done with participants and non-participants (in the studies described above) we have identified the following challenges and pain points for customers at various moments of program participation.

Program awareness/program entry:

Once potential program participants read about services in their primary language, they may still have questions that only a bilingual call center would be able to answer. This may be hard to navigate, especially for speakers of less-common languages or those with lower English proficiency levels. In a recent study where we interviewed community organizations about how they serve community members with limited English proficiency, they noted that some

individuals may disengage with a program or service due to fear that the English they know isn't good enough. For example, organizations said that some of their clients will call a number on a flyer and then hang up right away if the person who answers speaks English. There is also an emotional cost to making a phone call and speaking with native English speakers. It can be intimidating to have a conversation, and even if they gather the courage to make the phone call, these customers may face longer waiting times or may be unable to maintain a conversation in English to ask to be transferred to the bilingual representative who can assist them. Our team recently spoke with one participant who shared that she always asks her husband to call but when he's not available, she gathers the courage to call. While for some communities, a phone call may not be a significant barrier, for those with limited English-proficiency, the fear that they might be unable to ask questions or fully understand the explanations offered to them is a hurdle they may not want to face.

Program participation: Home Audit

If participants move to the next step of the process and sign up for a service or program, interacting with contractors or energy auditors may be another challenging moment in the journey. In order for them to understand the service they are being provided with, ideally it would be provided happen in their primary language. However, the limited availability of bilingual energy auditors and contractors may undermine the ability for companies to provide this service. We heard from customers in both the Southeast and the Northeast that even when they have received information in Spanish to set up a home audit, once they've scheduled the audit the confirmation email is in English and the contractor who shows up to complete the audit also speaks English.

Many home audit programs include multiple touchpoints with the customer, including an initial home audit and a return visit where insulation or other upgrades may be installed. Our team recently looked at the language capabilities of a set of home performance contractors affiliated with a northeastern state's energy efficiency offerings. Of the weatherization contractors, there were 7 who spoke Spanish, while only three companies had Spanish-speaking energy auditors. Similarly, while there was 1 Cantonese-speaking weatherization contractor, there were no energy auditors who spoke Cantonese. While the focus of this paper is not on workforce development, we note that there's an opportunity to train current weatherization contractors who speak languages prominent within a given community to provide energy audits. A 2019 Brookings institute analysis of BLS occupational Employment statistics showed a greater representation of Latino workers in the insulation trade (43.3% compared to 17.6% of the national workforce), but that representation did not carry through across all positions. According to the same study, only 12.4% of environmental scientists and geoscientists identify as Hispanic or Latino.³ We note that the Brookings study focused on race/ethnic identity, not language proficiency and that the two are not interchangeable. Nevertheless, we feel there may be opportunities to expand language services through training current weatherization contractors if a utility finds that their affiliated contractors do speak languages prevalent in their communities. In a recent study where we interviewed a community organization that provides housing, the organization noted that the utility contractor base didn't necessarily reflect the community they

³ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/09/10/how-clean-energy-jobs-can-power-an-equitable-covid-19-recovery/> see also https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2019.04_metro_Clean-Energy-Jobs_Report_Muro-Tomer-Shivaran-Kane.pdf#page=29

served, and this organization suggested that “[utility] needs to ensure that we have contractors that resemble and represent the population and offer multiple languages so there are no barriers there. Language is a potential barrier because people don’t feel comfortable with a language barrier.” We note that this may be especially important in the context of home audit programs where a contractor or auditor is coming into the private space of the home, and often into areas of the home (such as basement, attic, or crawl space) which are not generally accessible to visitors. Having an auditor who is familiar with cultural norms about how spaces in the home are organized and used, and who can communicate easily with the tenant or homeowner can significantly make the participation experience.

Program exit – Rebate/incentive receipt

A final step in a utility energy efficiency program is receiving the rebate or incentive. This step relies on trust that the program and process is legitimate, including the belief that the service being offered to them is genuine and that it is going to be of value to them. When our team has talked to nonparticipants, we have heard stories of times when they have misunderstood an offer or service and have gotten trapped into paying high bills. People have shared with us their concerns that they will miss some “small print” because they are a second-language English speaker. A participant in one northeastern utility program mentioned that she always requested to have everything in writing so that she could make sure she didn’t miss anything from the conversation that was held primarily in English.

Ensuring that participants receive their incentive or rebate checks (if not incorporated into the service delivery) is one way to begin to build legitimacy among participants who will likely share with others in their network. One way to do this would be to incorporate more ‘up front’ incentives rather than rebate checks that customers have to wait on. This might help both because customers may have limited cash flow and could alleviate concerns about whether or not an application has been correctly filled out

Beyond just language, literacy and “understanding the system” or knowing how to communicate with landlords, utilities, and other organizations can prevent people from accessing services there to help them. Community organizations predominantly serving LEP groups emphasized the importance of trust, noting that they might feel more comfortable and willing to participate in programs, evaluations, or market research if they can do so in the company of someone they trust who speaks their language.

Importance of Trust

The examples above highlight the vulnerability that communities and individuals with limited English Proficiency face and the ways in which what might be seemingly simple steps to participate in a utility program can become serious barriers for some customers. We note that a key element in being able to better serve customers, especially those with limited English proficiency is to cultivate trust. Many people don’t trust utilities – either because of poor previous experiences with shutoffs or because of an association with government entities, or simply because of unfamiliarity. Building trust with constituent communities is a critical part of better serving all communities, and especially those communities who speak languages other than English.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We close this paper with several suggestions that utilities may consider integrating as they work to better serve customers who speak languages other than English. The funding for these could come from marketing or outreach budgets or potentially through funds related to equity.

Conduct a language needs assessment. A language needs assessment can help utilities prioritize which LEP customers and languages they should prioritize, what outreach and program materials should be translated, and the internal infrastructure needed to support these efforts.

Gather and track customer language preferences. Asking customers which language they would prefer to receive communications will allow utilities to identify language needs. Without this information, it is difficult to quickly and accurately provide in-language outreach materials to customers.

If call centers and others who interact with customers are not tracking customer language preferences, consider incorporating this into CRM or other applications. Include questions about language and ways to track calls in other languages etc. to begin to understand the needs and preferences of community members

Identify within-organization opportunities. Based on the language needs assessment, a utility can identify the internal organizational changes necessary to support outreach to customers with LEP. This could include developing a toolkit and brand guide for human translation of materials and building a new website that mirrors the English website in other languages.

Diversify language, content, and channel of messaging to ensure messaging is accessible, culturally relevant, and is available on the channels that community members are using.

Develop messages that are culturally competent. The difference between an effective and an ineffective message may lie not in the literal translation but in the cultural competency of the message, materials, and images that accompany a piece of collateral. The best practice is to have a long-term goal of targeted, in-language messaging.

Use a human translator as much as possible. Humans are still more accurate than computers when it comes to language because they can better account for cultural and community-specific references in their translation. Human translations can better capture your brand tone. Where machine translations are used, ensure that professional (human) translators review materials to ensure that content and context are coming through. This review can also help to modify the content of the messaging to resonate with different cultural norms and preferences.

Explore outreach and messaging platforms that different communities rely on, including text messages, WhatsApp, social media, podcasts, local radio, farmer's markets, printed flyers, door-to-door (in conjunction with community organizations).

Cultivate relationships with community organizations or community leaders who sometimes serve as gatekeepers for the community. Empower community organizations or leaders to present the suite of program offerings to their community members, getting community buy-in and identifying what offerings may be most relevant for a given community.

Create a language access plan⁴ to ensure that for key languages within service territory services are being provided equitably across languages.

Invest the necessary resources. Finally, our last, and most important, recommendation is that creating equitable access for customers across languages will require investments of time and money and will require changes to the current practices, listening to community needs, and responding to historic harms.

For too long, energy efficiency programs have been supported by all customers but only benefited a select few with the resources to access them. Ensuring that programs are available and accessible –throughout the customer journey – in multiple languages will help to rectify these historic inequalities of access.

⁴ https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/resources/2011_Language_Access_Assessment_and_Planning_Tool.pdf

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