

Administrative Policy No. 2.11

Subject: Plain Talk: Clear Written Communications

Information Contact: Office of Communications
MS: 45010, (360) 902-7783

Authorizing Sources: Executive Order [05-03 Plain Talk](#)

Effective Date: May 15, 2008

Revised: October 11, 2019

Approved By: **Original signed by Lori Melchiori**
Senior Director, Office of Policy and Rules

Purpose

This policy requires communications from the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to be clear and easy to understand. It requires DSHS employees to ensure the clarity of written communications by using plain talk principles. The purpose of this policy is to help achieve better services and results for customers.

Background

[Executive Order 05-03](#) requires all state agencies to use simple and clear language when communicating with citizens and businesses. It recognizes that clear and easy-to-understand communications are essential to good customer service. Clear written communications help our customers to understand how to access services and comply with requirements.

Scope

This policy applies to all DSHS employees.

More Guidance

[Plain Talk Guidelines: Governor's Plain Talk Web Site](#)

[The DSHS Branding and Style Guide](#)

[DSHS Administrative Policy 2.07, Office of Communications Policy](#)

[DSHS Administrative Policy 7.21, Access to Services for Clients Who Are Limited](#)

[English Proficient](#)

[DSHS Administrative Policy 11.02, Forms Management](#)

[DSHS Administrative Policy 11.08, DSHS Administrative Policies](#)

Definitions

Additional guidelines: Guidelines developed for specific types of writing, such as letters, instructions, manuals, forms, rules, policies, contracts, news releases and webpages.

Customers: Users of the information, such as the public, DSHS clients, vendors, service providers, partnering agencies, tribal organizations and DSHS employees.

Peer reviews: Activities enabling an author to ask for feedback from other employees on draft documents. Administrations' communications managers and division communication contacts can be helpful resources/reviewers for staff.

Plain talk activities. The use of plain talk principles for meetings, training, workshops, writing projects, reports, website development and inquiry response.

Plain talk principles: General guidelines for writing documents under [Executive Order 05-03](#):

- Understand customer needs.
- Include only relevant information.
- Use words your customers use.
- Write in active voice
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.

Written communications: Documents including letters, forms, instructions, public notices, fact sheets, media releases, webpages, brochures, flyers, booklets, manuals, rules, policies, reports, briefing documents, contracts, agreements, newsletters, emails and specific legal documents created by DSHS.

Policy Requirements

A. Clear written communications

DSHS must provide clear and easy-to-understand written communications to:

- Assist customers in accessing services and achieving optimal results.
- Increase compliance with DSHS requirements.

B. Employee and management responsibilities

1. DSHS employees must write and organize internal and external communications considering:

- a. Customers' needs, including accessibility.
 - b. Plain Talk principles under Executive Order 05-03.
 - c. [The DSHS Branding and Style Guide](#).
 - d. Additional guidelines for specific types of documents and webpages.
2. Employees are encouraged to use layout and design principles that help the reader understand the meaning of a document on the first try. This includes adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings and subheadings and other techniques that lead the reader through the document.
 3. Supervisors must support employees in writing clear, concise and easy-to-understand information. This includes enabling employees, as needed, to:
 - Attend essential training related to clear written communication.
 - Involve internal and external stakeholders in writing projects.
 - Conduct peer reviews.
 - Conduct usability tests as appropriate and able.

C. Responsibilities of plain talk lead

1. The Office of Communications is the plain talk lead for DSHS.
2. The DSHS plain talk lead:
 - Serves as DSHS' central contact for plain talk and provides expertise and technical assistance when requested.
 - Shares resources and learning opportunities and provides training to help employees communicate clearly and effectively.
 - Reviews DSHS administrative policies during the initial review.