

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](#)

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Approved By: Original saved by Dana Phelps
Senior Director, Policy & External Relations

Purpose

This policy requires Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) internal and external written communications be clear and easy to understand. It requires DSHS employees to continually improve the clarity of written communications by using Plain Talk principles and other best practices. 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 who produce internal or external written communications.

More Guidance

[Plain Talk Guidelines: Governor's Plain Talk Web Site](#)
[The DSHS Style Guide for Clear Rule Writing](#)
[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.

Intended Audience: Targeted 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.

Plain Talk Activities: Activities promoting use of Plain Talk principles, including 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.

Usability Tests: Activities enabling employees to ask for feedback about the clarity and usability of a document or webpage from a sample group of the targeted audience before it is final.

Written Communications: Documents including letters, forms, instructions, public notices, fact sheets, media releases, webpages, brochures, flyers, booklets, manuals, rules, policies, reports, contracts, agreements, newsletters, 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 achieving optimal services and results.
- Increase compliance with DSHS requirements.
- Increase DSHS efficiency by reducing the time spent answering questions.

B. Employee and Supervisor Responsibilities

1. DSHS employees must write and organize internal and external communications considering:
 - a. Customers' needs.
 - b. Plain Talk principles under Executive Order 05-03.
 - c. Additional guidelines for specific types of documents and webpages.
2. 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.

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.
 - Supports and assists administrations with Plain Talk.
 - Shares resources and learning opportunities to help employees communicate clearly and effectively.
 - Review DSHS administrative policies during the initial review.