

2010 CSAC Challenge Award Executive Summary  
**Simply Speaking – Plain Language Initiative**  
County of Los Angeles Quality and Productivity Commission

## **OVERVIEW**

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The initiative shifts the County's embedded linguistic culture to a simpler, clearer form. It includes promoting awareness, providing training, and measuring the impact of plain language.

## **CHALLENGE**

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Government communication is often technical and bureaucratic. This impacts the effectiveness and cost of programs. Since our mission is to serve the public with high quality services and information, we believe all communication should be delivered clearly. One department found that plain language improved services and saved money. Based on that information, the Commission surveyed County leaders, found a need, and developed the plain language initiative.

*Plain language is communication that everyone can easily understand. Plain writing is easy-to-read, logically organized, and understandable the first time it's read.*

## **SOLUTION**

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The Quality and Productivity Commission implemented a Plain Language Initiative in the County of Los Angeles, including 37 departments and 100,000 employees. Steps taken:

### **Brought top-level management on board**

- Obtained the support of the County Board of Supervisors and Chief Executive Officer, met with key department heads and strategic planning consultants

### **Developed an effective promotion plan**

- The promotion campaign included a poster series; letterhead message; articles in County publications; a web page on the Commission website; and an annual "Plain Language" award

### **Developed a countywide infrastructure for effective outreach**

- Formed a countywide "Writers' Network" of managers to promote plain language within their departments and a "Core Writers' Group" to develop strategies

### **Used technology to support the initiative**

- Purchased an electronic writing course and editing software; distributed countywide
- Developed a comprehensive website with links to outside resources

### **Provided countywide training**

- Obtained Productivity Investment Fund grants to develop materials and provide software and plain language training to managers countywide, including: *StyleWriter Course and Editor; Handbook and Tip Sheet*, and workshops. To date, the Commission has trained over 1,000 staff, managers, and Board Deputies.

### ***BUDGET/COSTS/SAVINGS:***

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**Funding Source:** County of Los Angeles, including Information Technology Fund and Productivity Investment Fund grants

**Budget and Costs:** Total Budget \$289,636: Annual Operating Cost (\$61,000) and one-time Capital Costs (\$228,636) for software and consultant fees. Project completed within budget.

**Savings:** Savings are based on reductions in error and complaint rates, or increased response rates. They are measured in material cost and staff time. Examples: Public Health translated health fact sheets into plain language and reported \$22,320 cost savings/avoidance. Consumer Affairs reported the number of monthly calls dropped 30 percent after clarifying messages and tip sheets, resulting in an annual savings of \$56,100.

### ***RESULTS***

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The embedded linguistic culture in the County is changing. All 37 County departments are active participants and many reported changing communication protocols. Examples are: Auditor-Controller decreased HIPAA Hotline calls with a better form; Public Health clarified health fact sheets; Human Resources requires appeals documents to conform to plain language principles; Internal Services hired an attorney to write clearer contracts; and Community and Senior Services and Mental Health changed their websites using plain language. This initiative has demonstrated quality public service, increased cost savings, and improved productivity.

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