

## 2014 Plain Writing Act Implementation Update Survey

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Reply: March 26, 2014**

1. Points of Contact:

- a. Please confirm the senior official in your OpDiv or StaffDiv responsible for plain writing. You can see your current senior official that you provided last year in the chart at the bottom of the Department's plain writing webpage:  
[www.HHS.gov/open/recordsandreports/plainwritingact/index.html](http://www.HHS.gov/open/recordsandreports/plainwritingact/index.html).

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Note: We will include the name and e-mail address of this person on the Department's plain writing webpage.

- b. Please identify any other personnel working on plain writing in your agency whom we may contact to follow-up to your responses to this survey:

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2. What steps has your agency taken since February 2013 to continue implementation of the Plain Writing Act? Please describe, including:

We make plain language training available to all employees, and employees have 24/7 access to at least one plain language class through online courses. During 2013, OADC offered eight sessions of "Basic Plain Language Skills" based on the Federal Plain Language Guidelines. In addition, individual Centers, Institute and Offices (CIOs) offered their own plain language training sessions tailored to the needs of their staff. We have 2 online options for plain language training. We recorded and captioned one of the in-person "Basic Plain Language Skills" classes and posted it on the agency intranet. Also, we promote the National Institutes of Health online plain language training course.

The CDC/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Health Literacy Council (HLC), which includes representatives from across CDC, meets regularly to develop guidance to help CIOs comply with the Plain Writing Act and the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy (attached), which supports the use of plain language. OADC contacts HLC members with names of new employees in their CIOs to promote plain language training for those new employees that will write, edit, review, or approve materials for the public.

CDC continues to use several mechanisms to track and measure progress. OADC enters all the training it offers in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Learning Portal, and makes a considerable effort to help CIOs enter their training offerings too. The portal allows us to confirm and credit attendees. OADC runs reports in the portal to provide CIO-specific staff training data.

We use fillable data forms in SharePoint to standardize data collection across CIOs. Items on these data forms are directly aligned with the Plain Writing Act requirements and the goals and strategies outlined in the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. We email HLC members each quarter with links to current data forms, provide technical and subject matter support to members via phone and email, and follow up as needed regarding reported data and specific items. These data are compiled into a report card every other quarter to report progress.

- a. Since February 2013, what types of documents and how many (estimate is acceptable, please specify) of each has your agency written in plain writing? Please also specify how many of each were new and how many were substantially revised.

Our CIOs used plain writing in public documents for:

- Abstracts (16 new)
- Articles (17 new)
- Brochures (21 new; 3 revised)
- Campaign messages (38 new; 2 revised)
- Contract documents (1 new)
- Controlled correspondence, decision memos, briefing documents (315 new; 1218 revised)
- Curriculum (1 new)
- Fact sheets (291 new; 39 revised)
- Feature stories (58 new; 11 revised)
- Federal register notices (5 new)
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (20 new; 9 revised)
- Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) (3 new; 3 revised)
- Guidance documents (32 new)
- Infographics (54 new; 5 revised)
- Letters (108 new; 4 revised)
- Media advisories (61 new)
- Mobile apps (6 new)
- Newsletters (62 new)
- Personnel documents (12 new)
- Posters (88 new; 3 revised)
- PowerPoint presentations (33 new)
- Press releases (227 new)
- Public Service Announcements (PSAs) (9 new)
- Reports (86 new)
- Scripts for podcast, TV, radio (28 new; 1 revised)
- Signs (10 new)

- Social media messages (5,190 new)
- State profiles (46 new)
- Survey questions (38 new)
- Tool kits (2 new)
- Training materials (2 new)
- Web buttons (9 new)
- Web pages (899 new; 414 revised)

### 3. Measurement:

- a. How do you track the conversion of existing documents into plain writing?

We developed guidance and spreadsheets that CIOs can use to track documents. Staff members fill in the spreadsheet with the document type and whether or not the product follows the Federal Plain Language Guidelines. In addition, CIOs use a variety of electronic systems to track and monitor documents, such as eClearance, SharePoint, and Activator.

- b. How do you measure whether your covered documents use plain writing?

The Office of the Director (OD) and the 11 CIOs include plain language principles in the standard review and clearance criteria that are applied to public documents before we release them. Each of the 11 CIOs has an Associate Director for Communication Science (ADCS) who is responsible for this communication review. The agency Communication Director may also review sensitive, complex, or emergency response public materials and apply plain language criteria.

In 2013, CDC implemented a new tool called the Clear Communication Index ([www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/ClearCommunicationIndex/](http://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/ClearCommunicationIndex/)) that includes 4 questions and 20 items that research shows affect clear communication. The Index references the Federal Plain Language Guidelines and expands the items we consider for clear communication. Staff use the Index to score documents on a scale of 0-100. We track document scores and use them to identify steps we can take to increase clarity.

For example, CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities (NCBDDD) is creating templates that incorporate the Clear Communication Index items for webpages and online publications. These templates will help programs develop and revise webpages that are compliant with plain language techniques and Index items.

For 2014, OADC is coordinating a fact sheet assessment initiative. The primary aim of this initiative is to have a group of trained evaluators score agency fact sheets using the Index and consult with CIOs to revise for increased clarity.

- c. How do you measure (a) the effectiveness of your plain writing program; and (b) the effectiveness of your plain writing documents (i.e., whether the public can easily understand and use them)?

We measure effectiveness of the plain writing program through feedback from the CIOs' ADCSs, the HLC, and plain language assessments of randomly selected documents using the Clear Communication Index. Because audience testing and feedback are resource intensive activities, we are able to test only a small number of documents with focus groups, interviews, and usability testing.

In addition, one of the planned outcome measures for the Fact Sheet Assessment Initiative mentioned above (item 3b) is to compare pre and post audience readability judgments about CDC.gov content with responses to questions in the American Customer Satisfaction Index survey.

d. What obstacles are there to measuring these aspects of your plain writing program?

Although testing documents with the intended audience and asking for customer feedback on our plain language use are the ideal ways to measure our plain writing program, these are resource-intensive activities. Individual programs often don't have enough resources to thoroughly audience-test all documents they produce.

Results from the American Customer Satisfaction Index items provide only general level information about customers' satisfaction with our website, but we can't match responses to specific documents or get feedback on plain language use in documents.

#### 4. Examples:

- a. Please submit three documents that your agency has substantially altered and improved through plain writing.
  - i. We improved these documents in 2013 and submitted documents 1 and 2 for Center for Plain Language ClearMark awards.
    1. Real Stories – Special Needs and Emergency Preparedness: [emergency.cdc.gov/children/real-stories/index.asp](http://emergency.cdc.gov/children/real-stories/index.asp)
    2. Extreme heat infographic: [ephtracking.cdc.gov/showInfographics.action#ExtremeHeat](http://ephtracking.cdc.gov/showInfographics.action#ExtremeHeat)
    3. Healthy contact lens wear and care web page: [www.cdc.gov/contactlenses/protect-your-eyes.html](http://www.cdc.gov/contactlenses/protect-your-eyes.html)
- b. Please submit three documents that you intend to revise or rewrite.
  - i. Older drivers in the workplace: [www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2005-159/](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2005-159/)
  - ii. Diseases and vaccines that prevent them: [www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/patient-ed/conversations/prevent-diseases/provider-resources-factsheets-infants.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/patient-ed/conversations/prevent-diseases/provider-resources-factsheets-infants.html)
  - iii. Teen pregnancy: [www.cdc.gov/TeenPregnancy/AboutTeenPreg.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/TeenPregnancy/AboutTeenPreg.htm)
- c. Please provide the top three documents using plain writing that have had the largest impact on the public.
  - i. CDC's fact sheets on sexually transmitted disease are among our most popular web content. The team revised these fact sheets in 2013. Here are three examples.
    1. Bacterial Vaginosis fact sheet: [www.cdc.gov/std/bv/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/bv/default.htm)

2. Gonorrhea fact sheet: [www.cdc.gov/std/gonorrhea/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/gonorrhea/default.htm)
3. Human papillomavirus fact sheet: [www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm)

## 5. Training

- a. Please describe in detail your training program for training employees in plain writing.

Plain writing is part of CDC's strategic efforts in clear communication and health literacy. CDC/ATSDR has an internal Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy, which is based on the HHS National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy [www.health.gov/communication/HLActionPlan/](http://www.health.gov/communication/HLActionPlan/).

In both plans, Goal 1 focuses on strategies for clear communication and staff training. Our CIOs have identified staff with regular duties in writing, editing, designing, and clearing documents for the public, as well as web developers, and have trained staff in plain language. CDC University offers health literacy, clear communication, plain language, and web development courses to staff on a periodic basis and consults with CIOs to schedule training based on need.

Between February 2013 and January 2014, CDC trained 993 staff who draft, edit, or review public health and safety information in plain writing. We trained an additional 1,423 individuals who do not have specific duties in public communication but decided they would benefit from the training.

- b. If you do not yet have training program, what is your plan to implement a training program? Do you need assistance from the Department with training?

Not Applicable

## 6. Agency Support, Incentives, and Recognition

- a. How have senior officials in your agency reinforced the requirements to write documents in plain writing? Has your agency's leadership issued Plain Writing Act-related directives? If no, what is your plan to do so?

CDC reinforces compliance with the Plain Writing Act through OD level coordination of plain language activities and an agency operational policy. OADC is located in the OD and coordinates plain language work for all OD offices and the 11 CIOs. OADC supports 2 full-time positions in health literacy and plain language, and led the agency in developing an operational policy to implement the Plain Writing Act at CDC.

Senior agency officials reinforce plain writing by sponsoring and releasing staff for training, requesting briefings, and inviting presentations at staff meetings. Our basic training slides quote the CDC Director emphasizing the importance of clear communication. CDC leadership continually reinforces the importance of complying with the Plain Writing Act through CDC's intranet, newsletters, and agency-wide announcements.

CIOs support many health communication and education staff with plain language responsibilities. For example, the director of the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (NCEZID) has announced the Plain Writing Act, training courses, and the Clear Communication Index in center-wide emails. Senior officials from divisions within the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH)/ATSDR send reinforcement emails to employees directing them to complete plain language training.

b. (If applicable): How has your agency updated its website devoted to plain writing over the past year?

The CDC's webpage for Plain Writing ([www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html](http://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)) is current. It describes what we are doing to use plain writing, and provides links to the Plain Writing Act of 2010, federal plain language guidelines, federal plain language website, the plain writing plan from HHS, and the *Simply Put* manual. The website also has information on how users can provide feedback on the use of plain language in documents and materials, as well as examples of public documents CDC programs have created using plain language. In addition, this website links to CDC's Health Literacy website that has a plain language page that includes four plain language promotional materials.

In addition, several CIOs offer:

- Key writing resources
- Links to plain language tools
- Links to online subscriptions to The Chicago Manual of Style
- Writing samples
- Material development resources
- Message testing materials
- CIO goals and strategies for plain language
- Appointments with plain writing experts
- Links to videos and articles demonstrating the utility of using plain language to improve clarity

OADC maintains an intranet site regularly updated with upcoming plain language training opportunities and plain language promotion materials.

c. Please describe incentives or rewards you provide to employees to encourage the use of plain writing.

CDC offers a plain language award in the annual agency awards program. Each CIO can nominate one employee or team for this award. Senior leadership and other supervisors in several CIOs reward staff who demonstrate and promote effective, clear communication and literacy skills through Performance Management Appraisal System (PMAS) ratings, time off awards, and special CIO awards.

CIOs have created their own internal awards and recognition programs. For example, OADC created its own Plain Writing award for its staff. NCEH/ATSDR hosts annual honor

awards that recognize clear writing initiatives. NCEZID hosted its second Annual Showcase of Clear Communication Products in October 2013.

In addition to the rewards described above, in 2013 OADC coordinated an agency-wide Clear Communication Challenge to incentivize the use of plain writing and clear communication. Nine CIOs participated by identifying and implementing activities to establish or accelerate clear communication activities. Activities included: training staff in plain language, developing a clear writing checklist and guidance material, creating a clear writing thesaurus widget, and requesting reviewers consistently require plain language in the materials they review.

- d. Do you include plain writing ability in relevant job descriptions (i.e., employees who draft, edit, or clear any document)? Please provide examples.

Yes, our CIOs include plain writing ability in relevant job descriptions, and assess clear communication and health literacy skills of new federal employee hires and contract hires, who will be involved in drafting, editing, or clearing public health and safety information for the four audiences CDC serves. Some CIOs ask job candidates to provide samples of plain language materials they have produced. In addition, the HLC developed a plain language element to include in the PMAS to evaluate staff plain language competency.

- e. Do you nominate documents for recognition as recipients of ClearMark Awards by the Center for Plain Language? If so, what documents? If not, why not?

Yes. CDC has submitted 4 entries in the 2014 ClearMark competition. CDC's NCBDDD submitted "Real Stories – Special Needs and Emergency Preparedness" in the original/new documents category. CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office of Smoking and Health, submitted their material "Surgeon General's Youth Consumer Guide." In addition, CDC's NCEH/ATSDR submitted two materials: ATSDR's website "Don't Mess with Mercury," and an extreme heat infographic from NCEH's Tracking Branch.

7. Please provide any Plain Writing-related best practices used by your OpDiv/StaffDiv to comply with the Plain Writing Act.

- a. We sample and conduct independent document reviews for clear communication.
- b. We are standardizing and disseminating the application of plain language and clear communication elements with the Clear Communication Index, a scoring rubric applied to an increasing number of public materials.
- c. We emphasize the need for on-going training in plain language. Plain language skills should be periodically refreshed and advanced through on-going training. Specific individuals and types of employees that would benefit from advanced trainings are identified and trained.

- d. We recognize staff and programs for effective plain language use. In addition to an agency plain language award, many CIOs offer their own plain language and clear communication awards. Also, the Clear Communication Challenge described above (item 6c) elevated awareness of the importance of plain language, and recognized CIO efforts to accelerate clear communication activities. This activity, along with other plain language and clear communication related topics, are regularly featured in CDC's internal newsletter CDC Connects. Finally, staff skills in plain language are recognized through the ClearMark competition.
8. What support from the Department and/or other HHS organizations would be most helpful in continuing to make your plain writing program stronger?
- a. The Department can help us by consistently and visibly promoting the use of plain language in all public communication across all HHS divisions and with other federal departments and agencies. Plain language should be the default practice, instead of an afterthought or something to argue about during clearance, so that managers and staff eventually develop plain language "defaults" and built-in processes.
  - b. The Department can develop measures that "protect" plain language documents and make sure that documents created in plain language stay in plain language through the clearance process within HHS and across departments.
  - c. The Department can offer plain writing consulting for programs that need to supplement their plain writing capacity.
  - d. Anything the Department can do to reduce the burden to test documents with audiences and get feedback on plain language use will help. The Department can identify ways to make it easier and less costly for us to do audience testing and collect customer feedback.

Attachment