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CITY, NEWS

## City centers on creating accessible content for populations with varied needs

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by Angela Yang

**I**n a world growing increasingly multicultural and aware of a diversity of needs, Boston is a pioneer among U.S. cities in endeavoring to improve the accessibility of its content.

About 17 percent of residents across Boston do not consider English their primary language, according to data released by the City. Meanwhile, nearly 13 percent live with at least one disability.

Manar-ul Islam Swaby, director of the Mayor's Office of Language and Communications Access, wrote in an email the City began prioritizing accessibility to its visual and auditory materials about four years ago.

"Boston is the first city in the country to look at accessibility through the lens of both language ability and disability, rather than separately," Swaby wrote. "Boston is also the first city to have a centralized office dedicated to making city services accessible for all."



*The Boston Mayor's Office of Language and Communications Access produces materials that are accessible to people with physical disabilities and language barriers. CAROLYN KOMATSOULIS/DFP FILE*

Mayor Martin Walsh signed an ordinance in 2016 to create the initial program that evolved this year into the LCA, which released a set of language and communications guidelines to help staff create content for multilingual communities.

Gerard LaFond, a senior digital executive at global public relations firm LEWIS, said all effective public relations ensures accessibility in its content.

“Accessibility is good communication. If your message resonates, it means you’re successful,” LaFond said. “And if our target audiences’ primary languages are different, we want to make sure that that message translates accordingly.”

The best way to do that, according to LaFond, is to interact with and learn from local speakers.

The City currently does not have a staff of translators, Swaby wrote, but primarily outsources the task to professional contractors.

“Shorter materials can be translated by language volunteers who are bilingual and have signed up to provide voluntary translation services,” Swaby wrote, “or multilingual staff within a given department.”

Every City department has a Language and Communications Access Budget to finance translations for materials, according to their website. Once a department receives its translation, LCA guidelines recommend consulting a native speaker from a pool of City Hall volunteers to ensure accuracy.

More than 120 volunteers provide services in 28 languages as of February, according to Swaby. Interested participants must first complete a self-assessment to gauge their language fluency.

“LCA’s Language Volunteer Pool is made up of community members and staff who are interested in leveraging their language skills to provide short-form interpretation or translation services,” Swaby wrote.

Also included in the guidelines are tips to increase the accessibility of digital images and videos for blind or visually impaired individuals. One way to provide context is through alternative text.

Jason Laffer, marketing and communications manager at the Carroll Center for the Blind, said alternative text is important because it describes what an image contains, giving access to visual information that a sighted person could see and assume.

“So if you have a photo of a man petting his dog,” Laffer said, “[alternative] text would basically be one or two short sentences that explain to a screen reader user, ‘image of man bending over and petting his golden retriever dog.’”

All City of Boston videos should also have accurate captions, according to the guide. But when creating videos, Laffer said, audio description is also essential for accessibility.

“For a sighted user, when we’re watching a video and we see somebody walking over to a table, we know that they’re walking over to a table,” Laffer said. “But if it’s dead silent, that’s where audio description comes in.”

It's a feature that can be turned on and off by the user, Laffer said. When in use, a narrator describes the action occurring on the screen.

No accessibility measure is a universal solution, however. David D'Arcangelo, commissioner for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, said it's important to remember disabilities are not monolithic.

"There's people who have no usable vision at all to people who have high partial vision and have some significant usable vision," D'Arcangelo said. "So, I encourage people to think of accessibility as a spectrum."

An individual who has low vision, for example, might benefit greatly from enhanced screen contrast or larger and smoother fonts, while someone who is completely blind might rely fully on screen reader technology.

"Oftentimes people use accessibility interchangeably with usability," D'Arcangelo said. "And they're not necessarily the same things."

69-year-old Judy Graham of Auburn, Massachusetts became blind as a premature infant when doctors exposed her to too much oxygen — before medical experts knew about the consequences. She said she tends to enjoy video content, especially if it contains engaging audio.

"I love plays, I like concerts and I watch a few things on TV, like Jeopardy," Graham said. "And I like to listen to baseball games and football and things like that."

As for activities that require writing or other interaction with text materials, Graham applies the services of a reader.

"She comes once a week and she writes out checks, reads the mail and she'll fill out forms if there are any," Graham said. "She does things like that, she's great."

Several Boston residents expressed support for the City's recent accessibility initiatives.

Khalilah Jones, 24, of Jamaica Plain said it's crucial that the City establish a concrete stance on making materials and presentations more accessible to all.

"I know that when people are going to apply for different jobs, or find information about, for example, something related to a public hearing about some development that was happening in East Boston," Jones said, "people who didn't speak different languages didn't feel like they could adequately understand what was being said about something that impacts their lives."

Dorchester resident Lisa Varnerin, 62, said it's "great" to offer content that would be available to those with visual impairments, but that there are other issues around Boston that should be looked at.

"Sometimes the brick sidewalks are uneven and bumpy," Varnerin said. "The public sidewalks are difficult to manage."

Kerry Buckley, 27, of Back Bay said the LCA’s efforts would make headway in achieving inclusivity.

“Being able to look at media as a non-English speaker in the city that might not otherwise be able to [understand] it,” Buckley said, “definitely makes things more accessible.”



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