



**To:** California Racial Equity Commission Executive Committee and  
Community Engagement Committee  
**From:** Racial Equity Commission Staff  
**Re:** Spanish Interpretation Summary, March 21, 2024  
**Date:** July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024

## **Background**

The Racial Equity Commission is committed to providing language access to members of the public to participate in its events and meetings. Throughout late 2023 and early 2024, the Office of Planning and Research (OPR) worked on securing an agency-wide Language Access Services contract to provide interpretation services for public-facing meetings and written translation for public documents. The agency-wide contract, signed on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, will make both spoken and written interpretation available to OPR programs. While we awaited the agency-wide contract, Commission Staff signed a one-time contract for the March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024 Commission meeting and accepted Spanish Interpretation support for the May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024 Budget Equity Committee meeting from the Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications.

## **March 21 meeting process and challenges**

During the planning process for the March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024 meeting in Delano, CA we recognized the need to have Spanish interpretation services available to members of the public in attendance. When it became clear the agency-wide Language Access Services contract was not anticipated to be signed in time for this meeting, Commission staff worked swiftly with OPR's Business Services Office to secure a one-time translation services contract for this meeting and completed the contract the morning of March 21<sup>st</sup>.

Due to a combination of factors, we faced significant challenges providing adequate Spanish interpretation to the approximately 30 Spanish-speaking members of the public in attendance and those attending the meeting virtually. Despite our best efforts, Spanish-speaking attendees' ability to actively participate in the meeting was impacted. Although our contract for translation services requested two in-person interpreters for the duration of the meeting, we were assigned one virtual and one in-person interpreter. When the meeting commenced at 9:00 am, the virtual interpreter was present to provide interpretation on Zoom. The in-person interpreter arrived at 10:00 am and began interpretation for attendees using headsets that we borrowed from a nonprofit organization. Shortly after his arrival, the in-person interpreter informed us that interpreters rely on the ability to trade off translation with their colleagues approximately every 20 minutes because translating is a mentally and physically taxing task. We immediately began to make a plan that would 1) allow the interpreters to take breaks and 2) provide the Spanish-speaking attendees on Zoom and in person with continuous translation.

During the first recess around 11:00 am, we made the decision to move the in-person interpreter into a quiet room to join his colleague on Zoom. This allowed for continuous translation over Zoom. However, moving the in-person interpreter to a different room meant that he could no longer translate via in-



person headsets. To continue providing in-person attendees with interpretation, we received guidance from our legal team that those needing Spanish translation can move into the overflow and switched the room's audio from English to Spanish.

Throughout the meeting, the Kern Health Systems (KHS) Health Equity team relayed messages from community members about dissatisfaction with interpretation services provided, including that they felt segregated and that they wanted written materials to be provided in Spanish. Staff's ability to respond to and address these concerns was due to the frequent updates provided by the KHS team members and their dedication to working with us to find solutions. When making decisions, we also consulted the in-person interpreter to determine the best course of action that improved the interpretation experience for attendees and provided the best conditions for the interpreters to be able to fulfill their role and take proper breaks.

In response to attendees' expressed frustrations of being placed in a room separate from the meeting speakers, we transitioned the in-person interpreter back to the meeting room and equipped him with two microphones – one for the in-room headsets and one for Zoom. This solution intended to provide continuous virtual interpretation and intermittent interpretation for those in person. Due to a misunderstanding, both interpreters translated continuously for the remainder of the meeting without breaks. At this time, we brought as many of the Spanish-speaking attendees as would fit back to the main room around 1:00 pm. However, we were unable to bring all Spanish-speaking attendees back into the main room because the venue did not set up the room in the agreed upon layout, thus decreasing the room's maximum capacity. This space constraint also meant that we were unable to provide the in-person interpreter with adequate distance from conversations among staff and attendees, making it difficult for him to concentrate on the meeting's speakers.

### **Learning from the experience**

While staff worked diligently to provide adequate interpretation services and respond to challenges that arose at the meeting, this experience showed us that we had a lot to learn about providing robust language access. We reached out to the KHS team to understand their experiences, feedback, and recommendations for how to improve language access for future meetings. They shared a list of best practices and emphasized the importance of having enough interpreters to cover the event. They suggested we improve our communication with attendees because community members were confused about where to go during each transition period and had questions about how to access the interpretation services.

To provide a better experience for the May 9<sup>th</sup> Budget Equity Committee meeting, we worked with Agustin Arreola, External Affairs Manager of the Governor's Office of Planning and Research and Strategic Growth Council and public comment facilitator at Commission meetings, to identify and implement several improvements, including the creation of a new Commission meeting role. This role, called the Interpretation Coordinator, served as the point person on the day of the event for interpreters and is fluent in Spanish. Upon a recommendation from KHS, we briefed this staff member on the logistics of the



meeting two weeks prior to the meeting. One week before the meeting, we provided our assigned interpreters with written materials, connected them with the Interpretation Coordinator and asked them what support they need to be successful. We asked the two in-person interpreters to arrive half an hour before the start of the meeting to allow time to brief them on the agenda and reference materials. They brought headsets and we provided them with a device and microphone for Zoom interpretation. We assigned the interpreters to the table furthest away from Staff and guests to maximize their ability to hear speakers. With Agustin's help, we included Spanish translations on public comment cards and online public comment form. We created new signage that more clearly identified where to go to access interpretation services. We did not have any in-person attendees use interpretation. Translation was available to all Zoom participants. Due to limitations of the Zoom platform, we do not know how many attendees used virtual Spanish interpretation.

### **Additional supports are needed for providing robust interpretation services**

We are excited that we will be able to utilize the agency-wide Language Access Services contract for future meetings and provide more members of the public with the ability to meaningfully participate in Racial Equity Commission activities. The contract allows us to request interpretation services for the top 12 languages spoken in the state, and other languages as available by the contractor. We will also be able to provide key written documents such as the meeting agenda and presentation slides in Spanish and hope to expand languages provided to meet the needs of the communities we travel to. We look forward to the development of a streamlined internal procedure for requesting interpretation services to increase staff capacity.

Even with the upcoming interpretation contract, we are anticipating that we will not be able to provide translation services to the extent that we wish we could. Providing in-person and virtual interpretation for one language requires significant resources and providing translations of written documents requires even greater resources. With our team's limited capacity and resources, we have chosen to provide Spanish interpretation because it is the second most common language spoken in California. With greater resources, we would aim to provide interpretation and written materials in the top three languages in the geographic area and American Sign Language at all Commission meetings and events.

Additionally, we have explored the potential of holding a meeting entirely in another language, with interpretation provided in English. This format would place English speakers in a position familiar to those who rely on interpretation services to meaningfully participate in meetings conducted in English. We hope that an experience such as this will show communities that we are seeking to better understand their experiences and that learnings will inform the Commission's direction.

### **How this informs the Commission's work**

As we have heard from Commissioners and advocates, providing language access is essential to advancing racial equity. The Commission staff's challenges with securing adequate interpretation for one language is not unique to our team. We have heard from staff on other teams within our department and



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staff in other State departments that they need greater support and guidance for providing interpretation services. We recommend that Commissioners develop a set of recommendations for how agencies can ensure that providing language access is a simple and reliable process.

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