

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

PLAIN WRITING IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (DRAFT)

BACKGROUND

On October 13, 2010, President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act into law. OMB issued final guidance to implement the law on April 13, 2011.

The purpose of the act is *“to improve the effectiveness and accountability of Federal agencies to the public by promoting clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”* The law heralds a change in how in federal communications will be presented. From now on, clarity will be the primary objective in writing. Documents will be judged based on their simplicity, precision, and usefulness to stakeholders on all levels.

Below is a high-level draft plan for implementing the Act’s requirements at DHS. This draft was prepared by select stakeholders and was submitted to leadership as a proposal for DHS-wide action. The next step will be for the designated senior official to circulate the plan via Component Executive Secretariats for comment and review at the Component level.

DHS PROGRAM

- A. Established DHS Executive Secretary Phil McNamara as the DHS senior designated official for plain writing by July 13. According to OMB draft guidance, this official should:
 - a. Be sufficiently senior with cross-cutting agency responsibilities
 - b. Oversee agency programs, personnel, technology, regulations or policy
 - c. Be involved in agency communications

- B. Process to oversee –
 - a. Roles and responsibilities
 - i. Senior designated official
 - 1. Will be called on periodically to brief OMB and White House officials on agency efforts
 - 2. Sign out the kick-off memo communicating the requirements of the act
 - 3. Recruit DHS HQ and Component plain writing coordinators, who manage a cadre of their own trainers
 - 4. Oversee train-the-trainers session
 - 5. Prepare an annual report
 - 6. Assemble a panel of stakeholders who will provide feedback on the agency program/annual report
 - 7. Chair an annual meeting of trainers to select the best of before/after documents to be included in the annual report

8. Serve as editor/owner of the plain language page on dhs.gov and on the opengov page
 9. Provide for official recognition and/or reward for high performers in the plain writing initiative
 10. Manage inquiries through the public email box on the plain language page at dhs.gov, which may include comments on agency implementation efforts and/or nominations for specific documents for revision
- ii. Designated Deputy Senior Official: the informal internal stakeholder group recommended Gail Kaufman, Deputy Chief of Staff, DHS Office of Policy
 1. To represent DHS with OMB and White House officials should the designated senior official be unavailable
 2. Other duties as assigned by the designated senior official
 - iii. Plain Language Coordinators (from all DHS Components)
 1. Recruit trainers from within DHS (goal of at least 1 trainer per 4500 employees)
 2. Record number of trainings and number of people trained
 3. Report plain language metrics and progress to designated senior official
 4. Promote their training course availability with stakeholders within their organization
 5. Provide further training/teaching materials as needed to trainers
 6. Turn in best of “before and after” documents in at least four categories annually for inclusion in the report
 7. Attend an annual meeting with other plain writing coordinators to select the best of before/after documents and discuss program progress
 - iv. Trainers
 1. Conduct two-hour training courses not less than quarterly
 2. Keep records about how many people are trained and frequency of classes report numbers to their plain language coordinator
 3. Provide evaluation forms to class so that coordinators can monitor trainer performance and assess better ways to help employees learn
- b. Internal Stakeholders
 - i. All Components, with the plain language coordinators serving as principal POCs
 - ii. designated trainers
 - c. Scope for action: identify before and after documents in six categories for each DHS Component over a one year period. Recommended types of documents are:
 - i. Top five public facing visited web pages, plus one other candidate that needs attention
 - ii. A standard DHS Form (perhaps one used by the general public or small business)
 - iii. Letter to the public
 - iv. Job announcements
 - v. How-to documents/instructions
 - vi. Nominations from the public received via open/plain page on dhs.gov
- C. Training Tasks
- a. Train the Trainer
 - i. Need to identify who will be the lead trainers – a baseline of three per Operating Component, one per HQ Component

- ii. Train the trainer event to be held at a GSA facility
- iii. Webinar capability needed (adobe connect) to do remote training
- iv. 15-minute leadership outreach/briefing for select senior staff meetings (TBD)
- b. Training Resources: Soft Inventory
 - i. Future plans
 - 1. Two-hour DHS courses to be available (recommended frequency: not less than quarterly; modules to be developed through consultations with internal stakeholders)
 - ii. Existing Interagency training
 - 1. Web manager university courses available
 - 2. PLAIN free half-day classes for print and web
 - iii. Existing DHS training
 - 1. Online Learning at DHScovery – (per OCHCO “Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely” is a one-hour course now available via Skillsoft Training; three books are also available:
 - 1. Plain Language in Government Writing: A Step-by-Step Guide
 - 2. Banishing Bureaucratese: Using Plain Language in Government Writing
 - 3. Writing for Readability
 - 2. USCIS training program: as of 7/12/2011 they have trained 2,781 employees or 15 percent of USCIS
 - 3. Legal Writing – OGC completed a training class on legal writing earlier this year
 - iv. Existing DHS documentation
 - 1. Plain language guide (15 pages) produced by USCIS to be adopted by DHS
 - 2. ESC Handbook to be published and distributed by ESEC shortly
 - 3. USCIS and the HQ Web Communications page have online resources published at DHSConnect for internal audiences to learn more about plain writing and resources

D. Annual report

- a. Coordinators for each Component should report on the following:
 - i. How many individuals received training
 - ii. How frequently were the classes held
 - iii. How many people doing training
 - iv. Percent of agency employees trained that year
 - v. Estimate of the time needed at current frequency and volume to train target audience
- b. Best of before/after
 - i. Each Component should submit their best-of before/after documents in the above categories for possible inclusion in the report
 - ii. Senior official and trainers will get together to review the documents submitted and select the best-of for inclusion in the annual report
- c. Producing and publishing the report
 - i. The report should be briefed to the stakeholder panel
 - ii. Written stakeholder comments on the program and progress should be included at the end of the report

- iii. The report should be provided to the Secretary and published on the DHS.gov plain writing page

RESOURCES

Plain Writing Act of 2010

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/html/PLAW-111publ274.htm>

OMB Guidelines for Implementing the Plain Writing Act

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2011/m11-15.pdf>