

County of Santa Clara


Office of the County Executive

County Government Center, East Wing
70 West Hedding Street
San Jose, California 95110



DATE: May 16, 2023

TO: Honorable Board of Supervisors
Jeffrey V. Smith, M.D., J.D, County Executive

FROM: Sylvia M. Gallegos, Deputy County Executive 

SUBJECT: Off-Agenda Report Relating to Language Translation of County Public Web Portal

At the April 18, 2023 Board of Supervisors meeting (Item No. 17), the Board approved a referral from Supervisor Chavez relating to an assessment of ongoing contracts with ethnic media to communicate information regarding public health, emergency services, and other critical updates. In Board discussion of this referral, Vice President Lee requested information relating to the possible translation of press releases by the Office of Communication and Public Affairs in more languages than the five currently offered, and the status of language access of the County Public Web Portal. This off-agenda report responds to Vice President Lee's request on the status of increasing language translation of the County's Public Web Portal.

Language Diversity in Santa Clara County

In 2021, it was reported that more than 54% of households in Santa Clara County speak a language other than English at home. As of 2023, the County's public-facing web platform serves over 10,000 web pages across 96 County programs, departments, and agencies. County web pages are written in English, and some are manually translated by staff into Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. However, manual translations are both time-consuming and expensive, resulting in most of our web content being available only in English. Some exceptions include information about COVID during the height of the pandemic, elections, and the 2023 winter storms.

To overcome the challenge of language barriers and to improve access to County information and services to better serve our diverse community, the recently established Language Access Unit (LAU) is collaborating with Technology Services and Solutions (TSS) to identify, test, and train machine translation software. The aim is to find software that can provide accurate and culturally appropriate translations in seconds, without the need for human intervention. By using this technology, County staff hope to make our web content more widely available and easier to understand for all residents, regardless of their primary language.

Board of Supervisors: Sylvia Arenas, Cindy Chavez, Otto Lee, Susan Ellenberg, S. Joseph Simitian
County Executive: Jeffrey V. Smith, M.D., J.D

Language Access of New County Web Portal

The County's new web platform aims to promote transparency, understanding, and inclusivity for our diverse community. To achieve this goal, County staff is committed to making sure that all community members can access its web content regardless of their language or literacy level. Once a suitable Artificial Intelligence translation solution has been chosen, the County plans to follow an established plan to implement multilingual features on the new SantaClaraCounty.gov web platform:

1. County staff who serve as content writers and editors will receive training on writing in plain language at a fifth grade level, covering the importance of plain language for website accessibility and user experience, plain language writing principles, and tools and resources for writing and editing content in plain language. Clear and concise language is crucial for ensuring that translated content accurately conveys the intended meaning and context in the target language. Plain language also helps minimize confusion and misunderstandings that can arise when complex or technical language is translated. By incorporating plain language principles into their writing, County staff can improve the accuracy and effectiveness of translation efforts, ensuring that all members of the community have equal access to important information and resources.
2. Website content will be translated and localized (There are local nuances in meaning, cultural references, and idiomatic expressions) using appropriate methods, such as, professional translators, machine translation, or a combination of both.
3. Multilingual user interface features will be implemented, including a language selection dropdown menu or buttons on the homepage and other key pages. The language selection will be consistent and visible across all pages, with automatic language detection based on user preferences or browser settings enabled.
4. The multilingual user experience will be tested and optimized through usability tests with native speakers of each supported language, gathering feedback, making necessary improvements to the website's design and content, and continuously monitoring website analytics to identify potential issues and opportunities for improvement.

To improve the County's web presence and enhance accessibility for our diverse community, the Public Portal Steering Committee is prioritizing the migration of all County websites from the SCCgov.org platform to the new SantaClaraCounty.gov platform by the end of 2024. While this migration is a significant step towards improving the County's online presence, the Steering Committee also acknowledges that implementing multilingual features may require additional resources and time.

Discovery Phase for Future Language Translation of Web Platform

Implementing multilingual features requires additional resources and time, and County staff hope that available machine translation technology will improve over time with the rapid advancements of artificial intelligence (AI), better meeting the needs of our diverse community.

While AI translation machines use machine learning algorithms to translate text, they are not fully reliable in the other main languages spoken in Santa Clara County due to the complexity of language. Translation requires more than just a word-to-word substitution, as it involves nuances

in meaning, cultural references, and idiomatic expressions that can be challenging for a machine to accurately understand and translate.

Additionally, AI translation machines rely on large datasets to "learn" how to translate, but these datasets (glossaries) can be incomplete or inaccurate, containing errors or biases that can be perpetuated by the machine. Furthermore, language is constantly evolving, with new words and phrases being added regularly, which can be difficult for an AI translation machine to keep pace.

Finally, context is crucial in translation, and machines can struggle to understand the context in which words or phrases are used, resulting in translations that may be grammatically correct but nonsensical in context. Despite these challenges, our hope is that as AI technology continues to rapidly advance, the quality of machine translation will improve over time to better meet the needs of our diverse community.

To ensure that web translations are accurate and culturally appropriate, more resources may be required, such as, up to four additional human translators per language and a program manager to be fully dedicated to this project. This will enable a phased approach to be established, where subject matter experts and language experts can collaborate to test the accuracy of the web translations.

In the meantime, the LAU and TSS staff will continue to explore and test machine translation solutions to improve language access for County residents. The goal is to provide accessible and inclusive web content for all residents, regardless of their language or literacy level. By using machine translation technology and working closely with the LAU, TSS staff aims to make significant strides towards improving language access on the County's web platform, with the expectation that technology will continue to improve over time.

County TSS staff and the Steering Committee are focused on fully launching the new County website over phases through the end of 2024. In the meantime, we are optimistic that the AI translation technology will improve significantly in this period and that the Language Access Unit and TSS can fully focus on implementation of a multilingual County website in 2025.

- c: Chiefs of Staff
 - Greta Hansen, Chief Operating Officer
 - James Williams, County Counsel
 - Tiffany Lennear, Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
 - Nina D'Amato, Director, Technology Services and Solutions Department
 - Nhan La, Director, IT Enterprise Content Management Services
 - Ricardo Romero, Director, Language Access Unit