



In the Community to Serve®

CARES Advisory Group Meeting Notes
November 19, 2025 2:00 – 3:30pm Pacific

Advisory Group Member	
Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC)	Sylvia Schaefer
Benton-Franklin Community Action Connections (CAC)	Dalia Ochoa
Community Action of Lewis, Mason, & Thurston Counties (CACLMT)	Ester Castro, Stephenie Arnold
Coastal Community Action Program (CCAP)	Debbie Gregg
Chelan-Douglas Community Action Council (CDCAC)	Tom Bonwell, Sarah Brito, Alan Walker
Kitsap Community Resources (KCR)	Kandi Balandran
Lower Columbia Community Action Center (LCCAP)	Kathy Bates
NW Community Action Center (NCAC)	Jose Alvarez
OIC of Washington (OIC)	Heidi Silva, Casandra Ochoa, Candi Jaeger
Opportunity Council (OPPCO)	Marie Stanley, Melissa Gong
Community Action of Skagit County (SCCAA)	Misty Velasquez
Snohomish County Human Services Dept (SCEAP)	Constance Hockett, Traci Baugh
WUTC Staff	Andrew Roberts, Andy Sellards, Corey Cook, Jacque Hawkins-Jones, Keith Quinata
The Energy Project	Shaylee Stokes
Public Counsel	Kai Hiatt
NW Energy Coalition	Charlee Thompson
Department of Commerce	Michelle DeBell
Cascade Natural Gas	
Dan Tillis, Dir Customer Experience	Jennifer Gross, Regulatory Affairs Mgr
Teri Sovak, Mgr Customer Service, Credit & Collections	Noemi Ortiz, Mgr OR Conservation & Weatherization
Shannon Steed, Consumer Specialist	Rodney Fowler, Business Analyst

1. CARES enrollment update (Dan)
2. Language access plan results (Empower Dataworks)
3. Open Discussion

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Meeting notes:

- **CARES Enrollment Update and Goals:** Dan provided an update on the CARES enrollment numbers in the meeting chat, sharing that 18,163 accounts received a discount in October. That's an increase of 918 compared to September. The discounts by tier were also included in the chat. Dan also shared that heating season outreach efforts are in full swing, including the use of a new analytics platform to improve the Company's ability to find, engage and enroll customers. Dan stated that we'll share more details on the new analytics platform in the next few months. In response to a question, Dan advised that our CARES enrollment

rate is just over 30% of identified likely low-income households, with a goal to increase this to the high 30s or 40% in the coming year, and mentioned that further plans to achieve this will be shared in future meetings.

- **Language Access Plan Assessment Overview:** Hassan from Empower Dataworks presented the completed assessment of Cascade's language access plan, detailing the methodology, data sources, and steps taken to evaluate and improve communication with limited English and limited literacy customers, with Dan and the advisory group providing context and support.
 - **Assessment Methodology:** Hassan outlined a four-step process: collecting data on languages and education levels in the service area, prioritizing languages for service, evaluating current language services, and conducting a detailed asset review of Cascade's communication materials.
 - **Key Definitions and Data Sources:** Hassan explained the use of Census Bureau definitions for Limited English Proficiency (LEP), American Community Survey (ACS) data, and criteria for limited education households, focusing on households where no adult has completed above grade 8.
 - **Geographic and Demographic Analysis:** The assessment identified Spanish as the most prevalent non-English language, with significant concentrations in Yakima County and the Tri-Cities area and noted about 10,000 limited education households primarily in Yakima.
 - **Cascade Service Utilization Data:** Cascade's internal data confirmed Spanish as the dominant language for interpretation requests and account notations, aligning with census findings.
- **Language Prioritization Matrix and Recommendations:** Hassan introduced a matrix for prioritizing language services based on prevalence and urgency, recommending proactive bilingual communications for Spanish and interpreter referrals for rare languages, with input and feedback from Shaylee Stokes and other advisory group members on refining the approach for vulnerable populations.
 - **Matrix Criteria and Categories:** Languages were categorized as prevalent, common, or rare based on service area percentages and household counts, with Spanish identified as the only prevalent language and six rare languages (Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Ukrainian, French) meeting the minimum threshold.
 - **Urgency of Communication:** Communications were classified as critical, important, or low urgency, with recommendations to provide bilingual materials for prevalent languages in critical and important cases, and to use visual aids and interpreter referrals for rare languages.
 - **Feedback on Vulnerable Populations:** Shaylee Stokes and others highlighted the need to consider pockets of vulnerable, limited English proficiency households not fully captured by census data, suggesting the matrix be applied specifically to estimated low-income customers and emphasizing the importance of agency feedback.
 - **Minimum Baseline and Community Input:** Hassan and Dan clarified that the matrix sets a minimum baseline for language services, with additional languages and needs to be addressed through ongoing feedback from community partners and agencies.
- **Evaluation of Cascade's Current Language Services:** Hassan reviewed Cascade's existing language services, identifying strengths such as the upgraded call center systems

and processes and interpreter access, and gaps in emergency, safety, and disconnection communications, with recommendations for improvement and feedback from Jen and other agency representatives.

- **Service Strengths and Upgrades:** Cascade's call center now allows direct access to Spanish-speaking agents, replacing a previous voicemail system, and offers interpreter services in 240 languages, with positive feedback from staff and agency partners.
- **Identified Gaps in Communication:** Gaps were noted in the availability of emergency and safety information in Spanish, clarity of disconnection notices, and consistency in energy efficiency communications, with recommendations to enhance visual elements and bilingual messaging.
- **Agency Feedback on Materials:** Sylvia and other agency representatives confirmed that translated materials and program information are widely available and effective, with no significant issues reported in serving Spanish-speaking clients.
- **Building Trust and Awareness:** Recommendations included distributing flyers to highlight free interpreter services, using employee spotlight campaigns to humanize Cascade staff, and increasing visibility of language options in community outreach.
- **Asset Review and Technical Recommendations:** Empower Dataworks conducted a detailed review of Cascade's communication assets, providing feedback on Spanish translations, English readability, and the use of visual elements, with specific recommendations for document improvements and website enhancements.
 - **Spanish Asset Review:** Gabby evaluated Spanish-language materials, finding generally good translations but recommending improvements in vocabulary consistency, clearer headings, and increased use of visuals for better comprehension.
 - **English Readability Assessment:** English documents were assessed using the Flesch Kincaid grade level, with most materials at a 9th or 10th grade level, but some (e.g., energy assistance web page) needing simplification and more descriptive headings.
 - **Visual Communication Enhancements:** Recommendations included using icons, white space, and formatting to make critical information (such as disconnect notices) more immediately understandable and developing universally recognizable visual cues for emergency and safety communications.
 - **Website Translation and Accessibility:** Cascade's website offers auto-translation into 16 languages, with a recommendation to move the translation widget to the header and to create dedicated Spanish versions of vital pages for improved accuracy and clarity. The translation widget has already been moved.
- **Action Plan, Feedback Process, and Next Steps:** Hassan and Dan outlined the next steps for finalizing the language access plan, requesting feedback from the advisory group on the action plan recommendations, and described the process for filing the plan with the CARES annual report, with Noemi Ortiz providing guidance on tracking feedback.
 - **Action Plan Recommendations:** Section 3 of the language access plan contains 16-17 preliminary recommendations, with Hassan inviting the advisory group to review, suggest additions or removals, and highlight priorities before the plan is finalized.

- **Feedback Collection and Tracking:** Noemi Ortiz requested that feedback be submitted with reference to specific recommendations for easier tracking, and Dan confirmed that both the presentation and full report will be distributed for review.
- **Filing Timeline and Reporting:** Dan stated that the language access plan will be filed with the CARES annual report by the end of January, with ongoing updates and progress tracking led by Noemi Ortiz and reported back to the advisory groups.
- **Open Discussion and Community Input:** The meeting concluded with an open call for further questions and discussion, emphasizing the importance of community agency input in refining the plan and communication strategies.

Follow-up tasks:

- **Language Preference Data Integration:** Check feasibility of including customer language preference from the customer information system in the assist portal and online CARES application, and report back on both options. (Dan)
- **Language Access Plan Feedback Tracking:** Ensure that feedback submitted on recommendations specifies which recommendation it refers to for tracking purposes. (Advisory Group)
- **Disconnection Communication Improvement:** Consider forming customer focus groups to gather input on visual elements for disconnection communications to ensure clarity without causing undue alarm. (Dan)
- **Disconnection Notices and Assistance Information:** Review and enhance pairing of assistance program information with disconnection notices, especially in Spanish and other non-English languages. (Dan)
- **Community Outreach for Language Services:** Consider and provide ideas from advisory groups and community partners on effective ways to inform limited English proficiency customers about available interpreter services and language options. (Advisory Group)