

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: One Year Later

Since implementation of the Plain Writing Act of 2010, we've taken great strides to ensure all staff understand the need for plain writing and know how to incorporate plain writing principles in agency work. As part of our continued commitment, we regularly advocate for plain writing throughout CMS in various meetings, trainings, and communications.

Meetings

- Presented at CMS Executive Officers meetings in January and May 2011.
- Presented during retreat for CMS Regional Office Administrators and Consortia in January 2011.

Trainings

- **Train all incoming employees as part of CMS New Employee Orientation as of September 2011.**
- Trained managers at a CMS All Managers Meeting in April 2011.
- Launched an agency-wide desktop training in June 2011 with 98% compliance by August 1, 2011.

Other internal promotions

- Promoted plain writing in a CMS Administrator's intranet blog posting in June 2011.
- Encouraged staff to comply with plain writing requirements in *This Just In*, the CMS employee monthly eNewsletter, for May and July 2011.
- Displayed prominent flyers throughout CMS buildings May-Sept 2011.

We're training all CMS employees

The Office of Communications launched a desktop training for all CMS employees in June 2011 that was successfully completed by 98% of employees. As part of the desktop training, we included a survey to assess the training needs of the agency. We've been able to provide follow-up training to other components upon request. HHS University is currently developing a Plain Writing course that will be available HHS-wide and has asked to use this desktop training as the basis for their training.

To capture new employees, senior officials advocated for the inclusion of plain writing training as part of the new employee orientation. We continue to train agency employees during these bi-weekly new employee orientation sessions.

Plain writing in consumer products

The Office of Communications is a longtime proponent of plain writing, and we've been incorporating plain writing principles into every product we produce for years, spanning 100+ fact sheets, web pages, brochures, letters and booklets. Most of these products are available online, and many are also available in print. Here are just a few representative examples of our plain language efforts:

- **A Quick Look at Medicare:** A new brochure we developed based on extensive consumer research on Medicare's health insurance model.
- **Medicare Summary Notice (MSN):** We recently re-designed the MSN to incorporate consumer-tested improvements, including user-focused organization and messaging to help people navigate their Medicare benefits. The MSN is an explanation of benefits mailed quarterly to people with Medicare who've had claims filed for services. (The re-designed notice became available online through MyMedicare.gov in March 2012 and will be mailed beginning in early 2013.)

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) is giving us new opportunities to communicate to expanded audiences. The Office of Communications is collaborating with other CMS components to review and make plain language recommendations around a variety of ACA programs, including:

- **Pioneer Accountable Care Organization:** We've made sure all consumer letters and model marketing materials adhere to plain writing principles.
- **Pre-Existing Condition Insurance Plan:** We're working to make sure all consumer communication materials are user-friendly, including letters and notices, web copy, and promotional materials. Our re-designed PCIP application form and consumer brochure are available online.
- **Affordable Care Act Overview:** We developed a plain language overview focused on doctors and other providers that was mailed with the February edition of *WebMD* magazine to over 175,000 doctors' offices around the country.

Plain writing on the web

We've provided training on web optimization principles that go hand-in-hand with plain writing to multiple groups within the Office of Communications, as well as other components including the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services, the Federal Coordinated Health Care Office, and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation.

The Office of Communications is also nearing the end of a 2-year effort to optimize www.medicare.gov, our primary consumer website. We're applying research-based plain language and usability principles to help users quickly complete known top tasks online, and expanding the information architecture to allow the site to absorb all existing consumer-focused content. The goal of our effort is to make sure consumers can quickly and easily access comprehensive Medicare information online and create a consistent, rewarding user experience across all Medicare channels. We expect the optimized site to launch in late summer 2012.

Feedback opportunities

To provide an opportunity for public feedback, we created the CMS Plain Language [webpage](#) to explain the importance of the Plain Writing Act and outline CMS' commitment to full compliance with the Act. The public can contact CMS and send comments via the [feedback form](#) posted

prominently on the page. We monitor this feedback and make suggestions and recommendations to relevant components as appropriate.

Looking ahead

We'll continue to look for new opportunities to incorporate plain writing principles across all agency communications to better meet consumer needs, improve program utilization and compliance, and meet administration expectations of transparency and patient-centered care.