

The Charlotte Observer

Plain Writing Act - at last, a law that everyone can support

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From Deborah S. Bosley, an associate professor of English at UNC Charlotte:

Amid all the chaos around passage of the health care reform bill, the public missed an important bill that passed the House with a wide bipartisan vote of 386 to 33. This bill has 10 co-sponsors, including N.C. Reps. Mel Watt (D) and Virginia Foxx (R).



Rep. Bruce Braley's, D-Iowa, Plain Writing Act of 2010 (HR 946) requires the federal government to write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a "clear, concise, well-organized" manner that follows the best practices of plain language writing.

Why is this bill important? Because information we receive from the government, or forms we have to fill out, often are overly complex and frustrating. If we are to function as full, participating citizens in this democracy, we must be able to understand the information we receive from our government. Clear information is, I believe, a civil right. How can we agree to something, sign

our names, obey compliance rules, receive benefits and services, or even know who we're voting for if information is not written and designed for easy understanding?

Here's the "before" example from the Department of Health and Human Services' Handbook Assuring Access to Essential Health Care:

"Title I of the CARE Act creates a program of formula and supplemental competitive grants to help metropolitan areas with 2,000 or more reported AIDS cases meet emergency care needs of low-income HIV patients. Title II of the Ryan White Act provides formula grants to States and territories for operation of HIV service consortia in the localities most affected by the epidemic, provision of home and community-based care, continuation of insurance coverage for persons with HIV infection, and treatments that prolong life and prevent serious deterioration of health. Up to 10 percent of the funds for this program can be used to support Special Projects of National Significance."

This example is written at a 20th grade level (almost enough education for a Ph.D.), and the language is needlessly wordy and jargony ("consortia"?). This version clearly does not make it easy for the intended audience to understand.

Here's the revised version:

"Low income people living with HIV/AIDS gain, literally, years, through the advanced drug treatments and ongoing care supported by HRSA's Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS

Resources Emergency (CARE) Act."

This revision is written at a high school grade level and focuses on the relevant information.

As Braley said, "There is no reason why the federal government can't write forms and other public documents in a way we can all understand.... Plain, straightforward language makes it easy for taxpayers to understand what the federal government is doing and what services it is offering."

No one ever complained that information from the government was too easy to understand. Business also gains from the use of plain language: studies show that plain language builds trust, and trust increases profits and numbers of customers. Everyone benefits.

Contact your senators and urge them to pass the bill. Demand to understand.

Read more: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/04/04/1354263/plain-writing-act-at-last-a-law.html#ixzz0kAC1QrkQ>