

## **'Agencies continue to wage war on jargon'**

GovExec, Nov. 21, by Amelia Gruber:

It may not be readily apparent from a glance at the Federal Register, but many agencies are continuing to fight the long-running battle to get federal employees to use simple, direct language in communicating with the public.

Officials from a range of agencies gathered Thursday at a forum sponsored by the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), to discuss their progress on teaching employees to communicate clearly, and to share ideas on how to translate acronyms and technical terms into concepts the public can grasp.

PLAIN is a government-wide group of volunteers who believe that better communication will help citizens trust the government more. "People should be able to understand what [government employees] write the first time they read it, especially materials that tell people how to obtain benefits or comply with requirements," the group's Web site states.

Undersecretary of Education Gene Hickok told federal workers at the forum that he decided to join the crusade against convoluted language in 1995, when then-Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge appointed him the state's education secretary. Hickok placed a "jargon jar" in his office and fined his staffers \$1 every

time they used overly complex and technical language in his presence. The effort helped eliminate terms like “classroom modules” (desks) and “collaborative instructional framework” (team teaching), from his staff’s vocabulary.

Hickok said he has continued to encourage plain language since he arrived at the Education Department in Washington. He pointed to a March 2002 memo, where he outlined tips to help employees write clear documents about his department’s policies.

“What we write and how well we write it will be a major factor in sustaining public interest and involving parents, educators, local officials and other interested parties in our efforts,” the memo explained.

The memo instructs Education staffers to keep sentences, paragraphs and sections short; separate sections with headings that accurately reflect the content in the section; avoid insider, legalistic and bureaucratic language; include only relevant information, while making nonessential information available to readers on request; and avoid using outdated documents as templates.

The National Institutes of Health has made strides in improving communications, said Ann Brewer, a program analyst and the agency’s plain language

coordinator. In the health care world, it is especially important to be able to get information to the public and the scientific community in a clear, understandable way, she said.

To recognize the importance of effective communication, NIH started a plain language award program in 1999. Employees can enter pieces of writing or other communications projects, such as posters or Web sites, in the competition. In the three years awards have been made, the number of entries has steadily increased, jumping to more than 250 this year from about 150 last year and 100 in 2000, Brewer said.

A committee judged entries based on how well they were organized, how readable they were, and how well they were targeted to their audience. Winners have included an exercise guide, a series of pamphlets on preventing complications of diabetes and a Web site to keep patients informed on the latest medical research.