

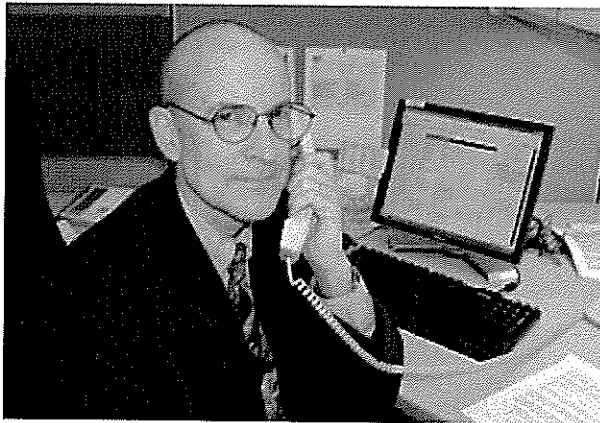
## Finding the Formula for Plain Language

November 26, 2007 –

*Bruce Corsino is the new FAA Plain Language Program coordinator. He replaces Annetta Cheek, who retired this year. Corsino also worked for 15 years as a federal psychologist and medical ethicist, doing life-support management in intensive care units. Focus FAA spoke with Corsino about Plain Language program goals and their impact on the FAA.*

### **What is Plain Language?**

Plain Language programs ensure that documents or web pages are easily understood and used by customers. Our Plain Language program was set up as a result of presidential directive and FAA policy. Congress seems ready to pass the Plain Language Act this year. When that happens, the use of Plain Language by federal agencies will no longer be recommended — it will be required.



Passage of the Plain Language Act would mean increased pressure on the FAA and other federal agencies to communicate more succinctly, says Corsino.

### **How will this new law affect the FAA?**

The FAA, like other agencies, must have a system to prove that it uses Plain Language. Right now, we don't have that kind of system. One of my jobs is to set it up. Thankfully, due to my predecessor and some key FAA officials, this agency already understands that Plain Language lowers costs, improves safety and customer satisfaction.

### **How did you get into the field of Plain Language?**

I got interested years ago, during my doctoral residency. Back then, I was ordered to write a four-page brain function report. I told the training director that no one reads or understands a four-page report, and asked permission to reduce it to one page. That's a fairly bold move for a student. I lost that battle. But in the end, I became the training director and shaped a whole generation of students to write simple, one-page medical reports. During my career, I've been able to ensure Plain Language versions of many federal and state laws and policies.

**You said you need to “set up a system.” What do you mean?**

Our FAA orders and acquisition policies state that all the written and electronic documents we produce or purchase must use Plain Language. The pending Plain Language Act will further impose on us an enforceable Plain Language standard. To my knowledge, we have no system to ensure that our publications meet that standard. That's dangerous.

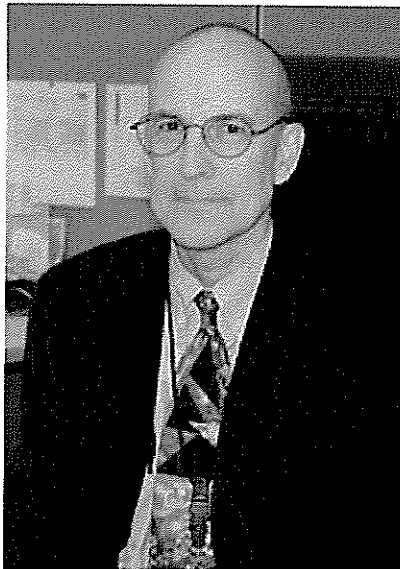
It's easy to imagine an inquiry or lawsuit claiming loss or harm because a person was unable to understand an FAA policy. When that happens, I need to have records proving to FAA administrators that those documents were reviewed and met minimum Plain Language criteria before they were published or purchased. Right now, I can't do that. If I can't provide this kind of buffer and insurance to managers, then the agency is not getting full value out of my position.

**How will you fix that problem?**

Part of the solution is to have our web and printed publications Plain Language-screened before release. Decent software exists for that purpose, but agencies have to buy and make it available to all employees, not just a few.

And, we can't have FAA writers and departments all over the country using that software differently. The Plain Language Program office or board must ensure the control and systematic use of that software, or else each FAA section will create their own Plain Language standards and exceptions.

Without that kind of software and control, the enforceable part of our agency Plain Language Program will not exist.



The challenge to the FAA's Plain Language Program, says Corsino, is identifying the areas where it can have the most impact.

## **What else will the agency, our employees and customers get out of the Plain Language Program?**

We've been the national Plain Language leader in government for years. The website "[plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov)" is actually sponsored by the FAA and run out of my office. A big part of my job will be to provide that kind of information and other Plain Language training.

I also need to build an awards program that gets all FAA employees to think about Plain Language every time they communicate. An annual award might not be the best way to do that. I'd like to spread out the prize money so that employees, even those in the lowest pay-bands, can win and will think about Plain Language all year. That's one inexpensive way to create an FAA Plain Language culture.

I'll do Plain Language reviews of FAA documents, pilot training manuals, customer satisfaction programs, and the cost of incomprehensible email. I could even do a field evaluation of communication patterns between pilots and controllers to see if there are Plain Language solutions to runway incursion problems.

Obviously, the opportunities here are endless. The great challenge will be to identify and invest myself in those projects with the greatest chance to reduce costs, or improve safety and customer satisfaction. I need FAA leaders and subject matter experts to help me with those decisions. Fortunately there is a great number of FAA employees with Plain Language skills, and they make my job easier.

Annetta Cheek left a profound Plain Language legacy here at the FAA, that I'm inspired to maintain. To me, that kind of mission and work is a formula for job satisfaction.

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