A Push for Plain English

By Stephen Barr
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Gobbledygook. It's the stuff of government. Maybe its No. 1 export.

Now, a first-term House member, *Bruce Braley* (D-Iowa), wants to do away with the wordy, pompous and confusing forms and memos that spew out of the bureaucracy every day.

He has introduced legislation that would require the government to write in "plain language" -- simple words, short sentences and no jargon, so that people can understand tax forms, college aid applications and other documents distributed to the public.

"Unless there is aggressive or intensive oversight, no agency is going to change the way it does business," he said.

Braley is a lawyer and knows that lawyers generally get blamed for the legalese in federal paperwork. He also knows that Congress is a factory for gobbledygook.

He developed a passion for plain language when he began practicing law in 1983, when the Iowa Supreme Court adopted easy-to-understand wording for jury instructions, he said. Braley began talking it up with other lawyers and writing on the topic.

Using plain language would improve services to the public, save time at agencies spent on answering questions about what documents mean and make it easier to hold agencies accountable for their work, Braley said.

A local office of the Veterans Affairs Department rewrote a standard form to make it more clear and the number of telephone calls into the office about the form dropped from 1,200 to 200 a year, Braley said.

The innovations being carried out locally can be made to work at the national level, he said. "We need to do a lot of education about effective communication," Braley said. "In the past, that has not been a priority in how the federal government does its work."

The bill suggests that an agency may achieve plain language by reading the "Plain English Handbook," published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Plain Language Guidelines.

To avoid imposing a crushing paperwork burden on agencies, Braley's bill would apply to future documents and would not require agencies to rewrite old forms, letters, publications, notices and instructions.

The bill would not apply to federal regulations, which have been widely criticized through the years for using muddled language. But previous efforts to improve regulation writing have only partially succeeded, because many regulations deal with politically sensitive issues and sometimes are shaped by high-stakes lobbying in Congress and at the White House. Backers may not want them to be too clear.

Braley acknowledged that his bill has received mixed reviews from fellow House members. "I get positive feedback from some of my new colleagues, who are reform-minded and think this makes sense," he said. "Others are less excited."

Braley is not the first politician to make a push for clarity in government publications. *Al Gore* made it a part of his "reinventing government" project as vice president, and President *Bill Clinton* backed up Gore's plain-language push with a 1998 memo directing agencies to rethink how they write documents, including regulations.

Even though the Clinton-Gore initiative faded, some agencies have tried to adopt plain-language techniques. They include the Veterans Benefits Administration, the Interior Department, the National Institutes of Health, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Securities and Exchange Commission. "A plain English document uses words economically and at a level the audience can understand. Its sentence structure is tight. Its tone is welcoming and direct," according to the SEC handbook.

"We're waging an all-out war on complexity," SEC Chairman *Christopher Cox* said in a speech at the Center for Plain Language this month. He added, "We're dead serious about plain English."

Annetta Cheek, co-chairman of the nonprofit center, said, "We are firmly convinced that the government could save time and money and provide better customer service if it would just learn to write clearly." She called Braley's bill a "great start" toward that goal.

Joanne Locke, chairman of the Plain Language Action and Information Network, which sponsors monthly meetings for federal officials, said she believes the legislation "can make a difference" by giving agencies a green light to write with more clarity.

Braley has picked up almost 20 co-sponsors for the House bill, and *Daniel K. Akaka* (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate federal workforce subcommittee, plans to introduce a similar version soon.

Senior citizens, veterans and taxpayers should be able to understand public documents, Akaka said. "Filling out government forms should not be like solving a complex crossword puzzle."

Falling Short on Smart Cards

Federal agencies missed this weekend's deadline for completing the first phase of a "smart card" project designed to tighten access to federal buildings and computer networks, the [Office of Management and Budget](#) said.

Agencies were supposed to have completed background checks and issued the new identification cards by Saturday to all employees with 15 years or less of federal service, and to certain contractors. More than 1 million federal employees and 591,358 contract workers were affected.

As of Friday, 97 percent of federal employees and 79 percent of contractors had undergone background checks. But federal agencies have issued only 1 percent of the identification cards, which contain electronic chips carrying personal data, including fingerprints.

"The milestone was to hit this, and we didn't, so we're holding ourselves accountable," *[Karen Evans](#)*, who oversees government-wide technology policies for the OMB, said Friday.

Under a presidential directive, agencies face an October 2008 goal to get the cards into the hands of all federal employees and contractors who need them to perform government work. Evans said she expected to see a surge in the number of cards issued in the next few months.

The rollout of the new credential has been snagged by technical issues, such as whether data were properly encoded on cards, the OMB said. Card costs have dropped from $110 last year to $47 per card now, Evans said.

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