

### **Program Overview**

The Spanish Language Outreach Project (SLO) is a five-year collaborative national initiative of the Americans with Disabilities Act National Network (ADANN), 10 regional ADA centers, and the ADA Knowledge Translation Center. The overarching goals are to: 1) develop a deeper understanding of the context of Spanish-speaking communities through research and expert consultation; 2) assess the diverse regional and national community needs of Spanish-language speakers in the U.S.; 3) develop plans to reduce barriers to language access; 4) identify and develop knowledge translation interventions, products, and resources targeted to Spanish language communities; 5) develop connections to new outreach partners and trusted community leaders to better support dissemination, training, and Technical Assistance (TA). This research brief reports on the findings from first stage of the SLO Project to address goal #1.

### **Data and Methods**

Using a participatory process and working with the ADANN, researchers identified and connected with national, regional, and local organizations for outreach and conducted semi-structured interviews to answer the following research questions: What are some of the common barriers that Spanish-speaking communities face in the U.S.? What are some recommendations on doing outreach and providing resources to the Spanish-speaking community?

At the national level, participants consisted of 14 leaders from nine national organizations who work directly with Spanish-speaking communities and/or people with disabilities. Regional participants included 46 community members that are a part of, work with, or are involved with members of the Spanish-speaking community living with or without disabilities. Most regional participants identified as parents of someone with a disability, community resource managers, a person with a disability, or a director of programs at their organization.

### **Background**

#### *The Americans with Disabilities Act*

The ADA is a law that strives to ensure that individuals with disabilities are not discriminated against and have equal rights and opportunities. The ADANN provides TA, training, and informational materials to Spanish speakers; however, few Spanish-speaking individuals with rights or responsibilities under the ADA receive TA from the ADANN or use the Spanish language website resources. Knowledge of the law can support the ongoing effort to address the disparities that Hispanic and Latino individuals with disabilities and their families face.

#### *Spanish Language Speakers in the United States*

The Spanish-speaking community in the U.S. is diverse. Hispanic and Latino/a are the most common terms used to describe people within Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S., however, not all Spanish-speaking individuals use these terms to describe themselves. As of 2020, there were 62.1 million Hispanic, Latino, or Latina people in the United States. This population includes people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, and Spanish descent. This group is one of the fastest growing populations in the country, and with this comes an increase in the number of people with disabilities in these communities.<sup>1</sup> Hispanics continue to face underrepresentation and access disparities in areas such as education, health care, employment, and civil rights. For Hispanics with disabilities, there are additional barriers as they simultaneously navigate cultural and health-related differences.

#### *Barriers to Information Sharing*

Research finds that language is one of the main barriers to informing Spanish-speaking communities about their rights. Many

basic resources are only in English, contain complex language, are not translated accurately or properly adapted to the Spanish language.<sup>2,3</sup> These language barriers make for ineffective content that is difficult to understand, especially in terms of legal information. Further, Hispanic and Latino groups commonly report fear or mistrust in accessing legal resources or experiences, which may be attributed to prior negative experiences or mistreatment while encountering law enforcement.<sup>4</sup> Discrimination can lead to a lack of knowledge about rights and services.<sup>5</sup> Spanish-speaking communities are more likely to experience poverty and unemployment in the U.S., which can lead to lower education and health literacy levels.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, immigration status is a barrier for a portion of this population. For some, fear of deportation prevents seeking resources from professionals, which can lead to misinformation.<sup>7</sup> These fears and unawareness of law protections may impede individuals from speaking up about their rights.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Outreach Strategies*

Little research has been done to determine the best methods to reach Spanish-speaking people with disabilities and their families. Most of the evidence to date on outreach to this community relates to health promotion and sharing information to address health disparities. Successful outreach strategies have involved leveraging trusted community partnerships including the *Promotora* model,<sup>6</sup> family supports,<sup>9</sup> and developing culturally tailored messages.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the lack of information related to how Latinos and Hispanics interact, share, or understand the ADA and civil rights, the purpose of this report is to fill this knowledge gap and understand how the ADA information can be better delivered to this community

### **National Findings and Key Highlights**

National leaders report language to be the primary barrier for the Spanish-speaking communities they serve. This includes inadequate or ineffective translation and interpretation services, and a lack of bilingual staff. One project director stated, "We think about translation as just a translation, but is it culturally appropriate, what is the reading level, there is a lot of diversity in our population." Even if materials are translated, they are not always culturally relevant or understandable, which may also be due to a lack of plain language. A bilingual project coordinator explained, "Information about disabilities is not disseminated in a way that they can understand their child's rights, or their rights."

Another significant barrier at the national level is the lack of access

to information about services, programs, and benefits. Some staff members called it a "unequal distribution of institutional knowledge", which leads to disparities in services for the Spanish-speaking community. Lack of access to information may be related to fear and lack of trust from who is delivering such information. Unfortunately, many people from the Spanish-speaking community live with constant fear of deportation or having problems with immigration services. One co-director explained this impact on access to support services- "I might be really afraid to get healthcare because I don't know if I can trust that person with my immigration status." Lastly, participants report that stigma attached to disability becomes a significant barrier. People can feel shame or fear

surrounding disability, especially if it is related to mental health. This stigma is coupled with the lack of education and understanding of disability amongst this community.

## Regional Findings and Key Highlights

Like national findings, participants across 10 ADA regions reiterated that language is the most recurrent barrier for the Spanish-speaking community, including a lack of or inadequate information in Spanish, bilingual and bicultural staff, interpretation and translation services, and cultural competency. A parent of an individual with a disability stated, "I have lost many opportunities for my child because of the language, because I am not that good in English, the information, maybe I have received it, but I can't understand."

Participants explain that many people in this community do not know what resources and programs are available to them. Echoing national findings, regional participants report fear or lack of trust based on immigration status impacts access to and knowledge of services. Instead of acquiring information from professionals, one

participant explains "it was a trusted member who learned the information and they transferred the information to the community." Stigma and lack of education surrounding disability, technology, discrimination, low literacy, and survival mode were named as other common barriers by regional participants.

Regional participants reported on the ways that Spanish-speaking communities access information. Across regions, social media was the most common, with Facebook and WhatsApp being the most used platforms. In-person community interactions, radio, TV, text messages, and phone calls were also common ways for this community to access and share information.

## Conclusion

### Outreach Strategies

Participants gave recommendations for the ADANN to improve outreach to Spanish language communities. At national and regional levels, in-person training and partnering with local organizations were the most frequently recommended. Nationally, members also suggested utilizing social media, valuing representation, and understanding the needs of the community. At regional levels, community members suggest making information culturally accessible and relevant, and tailoring information based on the needs of each state.

### Significance

These findings provide deep insights into the barriers that Spanish-speaking communities face across the US. The Spanish-speaking community is not well informed about disability and the ADA, and many outreach efforts have not been successful. Based on community members' testimonies, the Spanish-speaking community requires specific training and materials related to ADA so the community can be informed, trained, and more aware of their rights.

## References

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