

‘Outright insulting’: Minnesota agency comes under fire for poor Hmong translation

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The Minnesota Department of Human Services recently removed a Hmong translation on its Facebook page after receiving complaints from Hmong community members and academics that the translation was riddled with errors.

The department posted an image with text and a short caption on Facebook on February 5, reminding Minnesotans with Medical Assistance or MinnesotaCare to update their address and other personal information to avoid interruptions in their insurance coverage. The posts, which were translated into five languages, also contained links to pages on the department’s website translated into each of the languages and other languages.

Several Hmong community members criticized the Hmong translation, saying it was confusing and poorly translated. Native speakers and Sahan Journal staff who reviewed the other translations—Somali, Vietnamese, Russian, and Spanish—found that there were problems with the Somali translation, but that the others were essentially accurate.

Critics of the Facebook posts say it’s not the first time they’ve seen garbled translations, but that state agencies should be held to high standards.

“There needs to be greater quality control, particularly from our public institutions,” said Lee Pao Xiong, director of the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University in St. Paul. “This is not the first time that we’re seeing this from a public institution, and it’s outright insulting that you don’t take care to have somebody take a look, have a second eye on the translation.”



The Minnesota Department of Human Services posted this revised translation on its Facebook page in February 2024 after Hmong community members complained that the first version was riddled with errors. Credit: Minnesota Department of Human Services

Bee Vang-Moua, director of the Hmong language program at the University of Minnesota, shared the department's post on her Facebook account on February 20, pointing out issues with the Hmong translation. The translation was too literal, she wrote, adding that no Hmong elder would be able to understand the department's message.

"The translations are very, very literal," Vang-Moua said. "If anyone knows anything about translation, it's never about literal translation. It's always about conveyance of the meaning and it's also about language access."

The Department of Human Services (DHS) also shared an English version of the post on its Facebook page. The English text overlaid on an image read, "Covered by Medical Assistance or MinnesotaCare? Don't risk a gap in your health insurance. Keep your address, phone number and email updated." The text also included a link to the department's website.

The caption next to the image read, "Have you moved in the past three years or will you be moving soon? If you have Medical Assistance or MinnesotaCare, please update your contact information. It's important so we can reach you about renewing your health insurance."



The Minnesota Department of Human Services shared this post on its Facebook page in February 2024, and also shared five versions translated into Hmong, Somali, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Russian. Credit: Minnesota Department of Human Services

The department provides health and economic assistance to Minnesotans who qualify, serving more than a million people in 87 counties and 11 tribes, according to the agency's website.

Vang-Moua said the text was incomplete in the Hmong version.

"It was missing parts of the sentences, missing complete thoughts or context," she said. Vang-Moua contacted the department directly about the Hmong translation, and said she decided to bring attention to it publicly on Facebook because she believes government agencies should be providing equitable language access.

The Hmong American Experience Facebook page, a news organization centered around Hmong communities in the United States, shared Vang-Moua's post on its page, bringing more attention to the department's post and spurring dozens of comments criticizing the translation.

The department replaced the Hmong translation on Facebook with a note saying that it had received notice of "significant errors" in its translation, and was working to correct them. The note added that the department has been working to improve its translation process and has been working with a new translation service. The Somali translation had not been removed when this article was completed.

"Thank you to the Hmong community for sharing your concerns about this translation," DHS wrote in the caption of the Facebook post in question. "We hear you and are updating these now."

In a statement to Sahan Journal, the department said the Hmong post was an old translation from a service they previously used, and that it had been mistakenly reposted without being updated. The translation was posted four times dating back as far as

December 2022, but did not receive any negative feedback until it was included in the February 5 post, the department added.

“DHS acknowledges that we need to improve Hmong, Somali and all translations and we will continue to revise content to correct errors,” said the department’s statement. “We recognize the need to provide more oversight and quality assurance on vendor work, and this has spurred conversations internally on how to do that.”

Vang-Moua said she appreciated the department’s swift response to comments from herself and others.

Despite the department’s quick retraction, the post raised concerns from some over how the error had occurred, and whether machine translation services like Google Translate were used. The department told Sahan Journal it does not use Google Translate, and instead contracts with third party translation services.

The service responsible for the translation was Atlanta-based LATN Language Solutions, according to the department. The department said it contracted with LATN going back to 2018, but sought new services after LATN’s translations came under scrutiny by employees and community members prior to the recent Facebook posts.

The department stopped using LATN as its primary translation service for public content in April 2023, but still utilizes LATN’s services internally.

LATN did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The department said it has since been working with the Minneapolis-based translation service, Latitude Prime, for its Hmong translations, and that the service implements a community review process for its work.

Translations from Latitude Prime are reviewed by someone who is knowledgeable about the subject matter of the translation and is a community member fluent in the translated language and English, according to Emma Yardley, a project manager for the company.

“It really does take a look at the relevance of the translation in that local area to ensure that it reflects the dialect, and that it’s culturally appropriate,” Yardley said. “A vendor located in a different state isn’t necessarily going to have the resources locally to translate it and do the community review that’s necessary.”

‘It’s not a huge problem, but it is a problem’

Though Vang-Moua said bad Hmong translations aren’t widespread in Minnesota, her eyes are glued to the ones she does see. She even incentivizes her students to fix bad Hmong translations they run into.

“Take photos of it, send it to wherever the origin of the translation is—the committee, the organization—contact someone, let them know, and see if they email you back,” Vang-Moua said. “I give extra credit to my students for taking the initiative to fix these things.” She’s seen bad translations everywhere, from parks to stadiums.

“I know that there are a number of state organizations or branches that are not doing so well in the translation department, because some of these are actual state signs or signs in public places and things like that,” Vang-Moua said. “It’s not a huge problem, but it is a problem.”

Because Hmong is a tonal language, one small error in a translation can completely change the meaning of a word, Vang-Moua said. However, she stressed that difficulties in translation can largely be circumvented by hiring experienced, formally trained translators. Xiong has also seen his fair share of bad Hmong translations. In 2012, Xiong and others spoke out about a botched Hmong translation on two billboards in St. Paul promoting McDonald's breakfast, eventually prompting the fast food company to fix and replace the advertisements.

Xiong said he's received requests from organizations across the country to review their Hmong translations, and often finds himself telling them they need to completely retranslate the content. He suspects that many translation errors are the result of companies and agencies contracting with younger Hmong speakers who may not be formally trained.

"They know how to market to the translation companies and all that stuff, and they're getting these contracts to translate these complex subject matters," Xiong said of the younger translators. "They don't know anything about it; they don't have the vocabulary for it."

Dialectal differences between Hmong speakers are also another aspect to consider when it comes to translations. According to Xiong, most public institutions are translating English into the White Hmong dialect, also known as Hmong Der, while many Minnesotans speak the Green Hmong dialect, also known as Hmong Leng.

Although most Green Hmong speakers can read White Hmong, according to Xiong, not everyone can.

"Many of the elders do not know that if they come from an area where they've never been exposed to the White Hmong dialect," Xiong said. "So I think that to assume everybody speaks White Hmong is wrong, it's a false assumption."