# Inaccuracies in Prevailing Wages Rate Determinations for Translators and Interpreters

## Statement of Issue

As with other federally-contracted services, translation and interpreting services are frequently procured by the federal government through the General Services Administration (GSA). Through its invocation of the McNamara-O'Hara Service Contract Act (SCA), the GSA requires contractors and subcontractors for language services to compensate service employees no less than the wage rates and fringe benefits found to be prevailing in the locality. These rates are determined by the Department of Labor's (DOL) Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), through the Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program.

However, prevailing wage rates for translators and interpreters, as determined by OES, are inaccurate due to limitations in the survey methodology, as BLS surveys only regular W-2 employees, while the vast majority of the language workforce is composed of independent contractors. Thus, the BLS prevailing wage rates are significantly lower than language industry surveys. This gap causes a range of challenges for the language industry with respect to contracting with the federal government for translation and interpreting services in instances when the OES data serves, in some cases statutorily, as the benchmark for compensation in bidding estimates.

Currently, the BLS estimates prevailing wage rates for translators and interpreters to be $23/hr with $4/hr in fringe benefits. In reality, translators average between $42.30 - $55.44/hr, while interpreters average between $55.87 - $124.68/hr, according to the American Translators Association's (ATA) 2017 Compensation Survey.

## Background

Several limitations in the OES methodology render the prevailing wage results for translators and interpreters inaccurate:

1. **The OES only surveys employers with W-2 employees.**

   In fact, the vast majority of practicing translators and interpreters in the United States are self-employed independent contractors who file 1099s. In 2017, the ATA reported that 75.9% of the translator and interpreter workforce was comprised of independent contractors. The OES sample is therefore unrepresentative of the population, and significantly undercounts the numbers of translators and interpreters nationwide. This is further compounded when considering that OES may determine prevailing wages for an entire industry with as few as 10 respondents to the monthly survey.

2. **The OES excludes US Government employees.**

   On average, federal linguists (GS-1040 series) earn more than $70,000 per annum, before benefits, representing some of the most well-compensated of the translation and interpreting workforce. Exclusion of the federal linguists from the translator and interpreter workforce in the survey skews the data decidedly toward a lower rate of compensation.

3. **OES does not differentiate between Translation and Interpreting as two separate occupations.**

   Translation applies to written text, while interpreting involves oral exchange. Albeit related, these occupations are indeed different skill sets, with different industry certifications and standards. Not surprisingly, translators and interpreters are compensated at different rates.

4. **The OES does not allow for regional variations in prevailing wage rates for language professionals.**

# Industry Impact

Translators and interpreters are educated, highly-experienced, highly-trained, and often certified, performing highly-specialized and professional services. These individuals rarely accept the $23/hr plus $4/hr in benefits for a federal contractor if s/he can make over $40/hr in the private marketplace.

In the same vein, a language service company seeking to bid on a federal contract, but wishing to employ only certified or otherwise credentialed linguists, will struggle to compete with companies that exercise dubious business practices by sacrificing quality in order to compensate linguists at the BLS prevailing wage rate.

The inaccuracies in the prevailing wage rates determined by BLS therefore contribute to a federal contracting climate of minimal compliance and inequitable working conditions for translators and interpreters.

# Recommendation

The American Translators Association and the National Council for Languages and International Studies recommend that the Government Accountability Office examine the appropriateness of the OES methodology for industries where the majority of the workforce is composed of Independent Contractors, and the impact of potentially inaccurate prevailing wages on GSA and other government contracting activities in these industries.

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The American Translators Association, founded in 1959, is the largest professional association of translators and interpreters in the U.S. with over 10,000 members in more than 100 countries. ATA's primary goals include supporting the professional development of translators and interpreters and promoting the translation and interpreting professions.



The Joint National Committee for Languages, a 501(c)3 organization, and the National Council for Languages and International Studies, a 501(c)4 organization, develop policy recommendations for the Language Enterprise and advocate to the federal government for implementation of those policies . Together, JNCL-NCLIS represent nearly 140 member organizations active in virtually all aspects of the Language Enterprise -- PreK-20 education, research, training, assessment, translation, interpreting, localization, and more.