



# Client Correspondence Research Findings (Phase One Summary)



Report for the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF), Colorado Department of Humans Services (CDHS), Connect for Health Colorado (C4) and the Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT)

Prepared by Joining Vision and Action (JVA)

# Introduction

## Background

In March 2016, the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF), Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Connect for Health Colorado (C4) and the Governor’s Office of Information Technology (OIT) contracted with Joining Vision and Action (JVA) to conduct an evaluation of the current client correspondence letters that are sent throughout Colorado, reporting on the essential status of food assistance and medical assistance. These letters, the Notice of Action (NOA), the Income and Eligibility Verification System (IEVS), the Redetermination/Recertification Notice (RRR) and the Verification Checklist (VCL) were provided to JVA as template letters that are often used in client correspondence. The team of HCPF, CDHS, C4 and OIT recognized the need for updated letters that reflect desired changes by those who see them (the end-user/reader) and those who are set to help them across the state (stakeholders).

In this phase of the research, the team partnered with JVA for Phase One—to gather valuable input from stakeholders on these particular letter-types in order to ensure future communication sent through the state is more accessible, understood by more individuals, and leads to less confusion and more action. The main aspects that were examined were:

- Readability
  - Defined as the words used are easy to understand, sentences are easy to understand, concepts are familiar to readers, enough (but not excessive) text provided
- Navigation and Layout
  - Defined as the introduction, instructions, clearly defined sections, font size and type, visual layout (whitespace and images) that help the reader better understand the content of the letter
- Tone and Usability
  - Defined as a friendly tone, clearly describing next steps, appeals and legal section clarity (NOA only), culturally appropriate

## Research Methods

JVA utilized the following methods for this phase of the research, details of which follows by research type.

- Key informant interviews
- Client and User Integrative Project Team (IPT) meeting
- Stakeholder survey

### *Key Informant Interviews*

Ten key informant interviews were hosted as a way to reach targeted individuals that could speak to the strengths and weaknesses of the various correspondence types.

These individuals were identified by the key workgroup of representatives from HCPF, C4, OIT and CDHS. The goals for the interviews were to evaluate overall perceptions of client correspondence, gather feedback on client correspondence challenges, and identify key areas for improvement and potential modifications

### **Interview Protocol**

The project team helped with the identification and recruitment of the 10 interviews. The interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes between April 18-28, 2016. These conversations were recorded and a detailed summary was created for each interview. The interviews were semi-structured, with the same questions asked to each interviewee, while maintaining an emphasis on flexibility that allows for adjustments based on different perspectives and enables the interviewer to draw out items that are of particular interest to certain respondents based on their expertise.

Ten (10) interviews consisted of:

- 3 county directors
- 1 Healthy Communities or medical assistance site lead
- 1 Connect for Health Colorado assistance site lead/broker
- 1 CDHS county food assistance team lead
- 1 CDHS county cash assistance team lead
- 1 Spanish-speaking assistance site leader
- 1 member of the legislature
- 1 legal advocacy organization representative

### ***Client and User Integrative Project Team Meeting (IPT)***

On May 4, 2016, JVA hosted approximately 40 IPT members in a solutions-focused stakeholder meeting. This meeting was facilitated in a “world café” style to ensure all participants were able to contribute ideas and create a feeling of agreement on the client correspondence suggestions. This method utilized the stakeholder’s experience and expertise to come up with specific recommendations for improvement.

### ***Stakeholder Surveys***

The stakeholder survey was designed to reach out to the statewide stakeholders in an efficient manner and gather their input on their perceptions and experiences with the client eligibility correspondence. Hosted by JVA, this survey was conducted online only and remained confidential for all participants. The survey was specifically looking at how to improve the language, look and feel of these letters. The survey was directed to brokers, certified application counselors, consumer advocates, County Departments of Social/Human Services, customer service agents, health coverage guides, Medical Assistance Sites, State agency employees (HCPF, CDHS, OIT), state workforce training center employees and other stakeholder with an interest in correspondence.

### **Survey Protocol**

The online survey remained open for about two weeks during April 2016 (April 14-28), and participants were recruited through direct outreach from HCPF, CDHS, C4 and OIT. HCPF and partners estimate that approximately 10,000 individuals comprise the total

population who could have provided input on the survey (e.g., are consumer advocates, health coverage guides or work in a county department of social/human services; see below for sample breakdown). This means that with a sample of 635 participants completing the majority of the survey, the response rate had a  $\pm 3.76$  confidence interval, a more than acceptable range for this type of research.<sup>1</sup>

## Survey Response

The survey was opened 990 times, however, 44 of those did not answer any of the questions resulting a final sample of  $n = 946$ . Importantly, the survey was structured so that all participants saw and responded to feedback questions on the NOA first, followed in order by the IEVS, the RRR and the VCL. This order meant that many people responded to the NOA, but that participation tended to decrease on each of the following client correspondence types. Of those that took the survey, 807 responded to quantitative questions regarding the NOA, 689 responded to the IEVS quantitative questions, 666 to the questions about the RRR, and 635 to the VCL quantitative questions.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that about 67% of respondents completed the entire survey.

## Demographic Information

As part of the survey, participants were asked several questions designed to understand the perspective from which they were providing feedback on the client correspondence types and to allow for the analysis of potential differences between groups on their perceptions of the correspondence types.

### *Colorado Benefits Management System*

Participants were asked to indicate whether they directly used the Colorado Benefits Management System (CBMS) in their work. Of those that responded, 78.1% indicated that they did use CBMS directly in their work

### *Relationship to Client Correspondence*

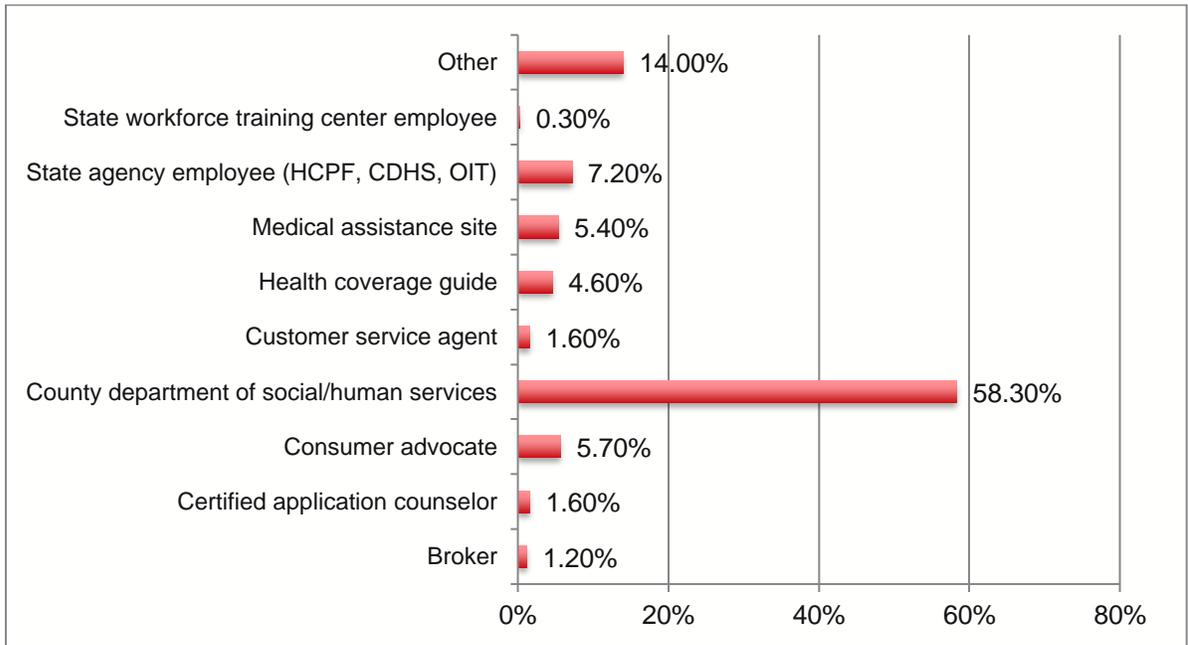
Participants were asked to indicate their relationship to the NOA, the IEVS, the RRR and the VCL (see Figure 1). More than half of respondents (58.3%) indicated that they worked at a county department of social/human services.

**Figure 1: Participant Relationship to Client Correspondences**

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<sup>1</sup> This confidence interval means that percentages included in this report can be understood to be within  $\pm 3.76\%$  of the response rate (i.e., margin of error is  $\pm 3.76\%$ ).

<sup>2</sup> With multiple quantitative questions per letter-type, this number represents the highest number of respondents. Some questions by letter had fewer responses.



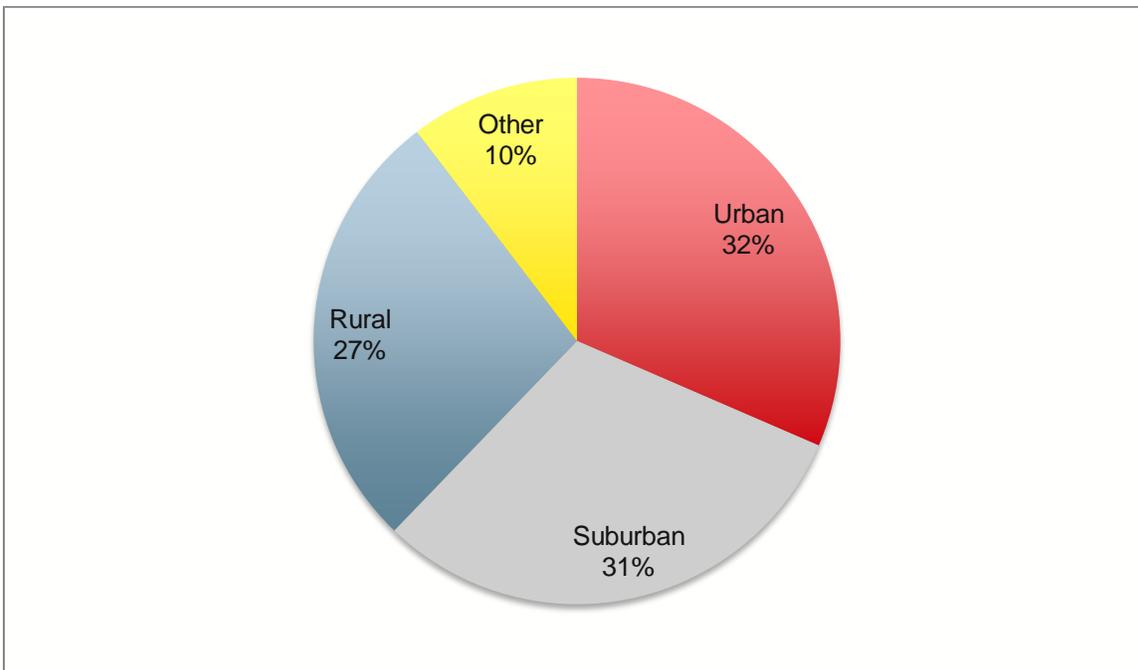
Respondents who indicated other (n = 132) most frequently mentioned:

- Another state partner (i.e., outreach) (20)
- Community organizations/nonprofits (15)
- Health advocates or family caregivers (15)
- Eligibility technicians, specialists, trainers (13)
- Other county employees (e.g., receptionists, workforce development) (13)
- Health care providers (e.g., nurses, hospitals) (10)
- Case managers/workers (9)
- Recipients/clients (7)

### *Geography*

Participants were also asked to describe the area development where the majority of their clients live (e.g., urban, suburban, rural or other). Responses indicate a pretty even split, such that 31.5% indicated that their clients live in an urban area, 30.7% indicated that they live in a suburban area, 27.4% reported that they live in a rural area and 10.4% selected “other” (see Figure 2). Those that indicated other largely selected that they served a mixed population (e.g., “urban and rural,” “statewide,” “all of the above”).

Figure 2: Geography of Clients



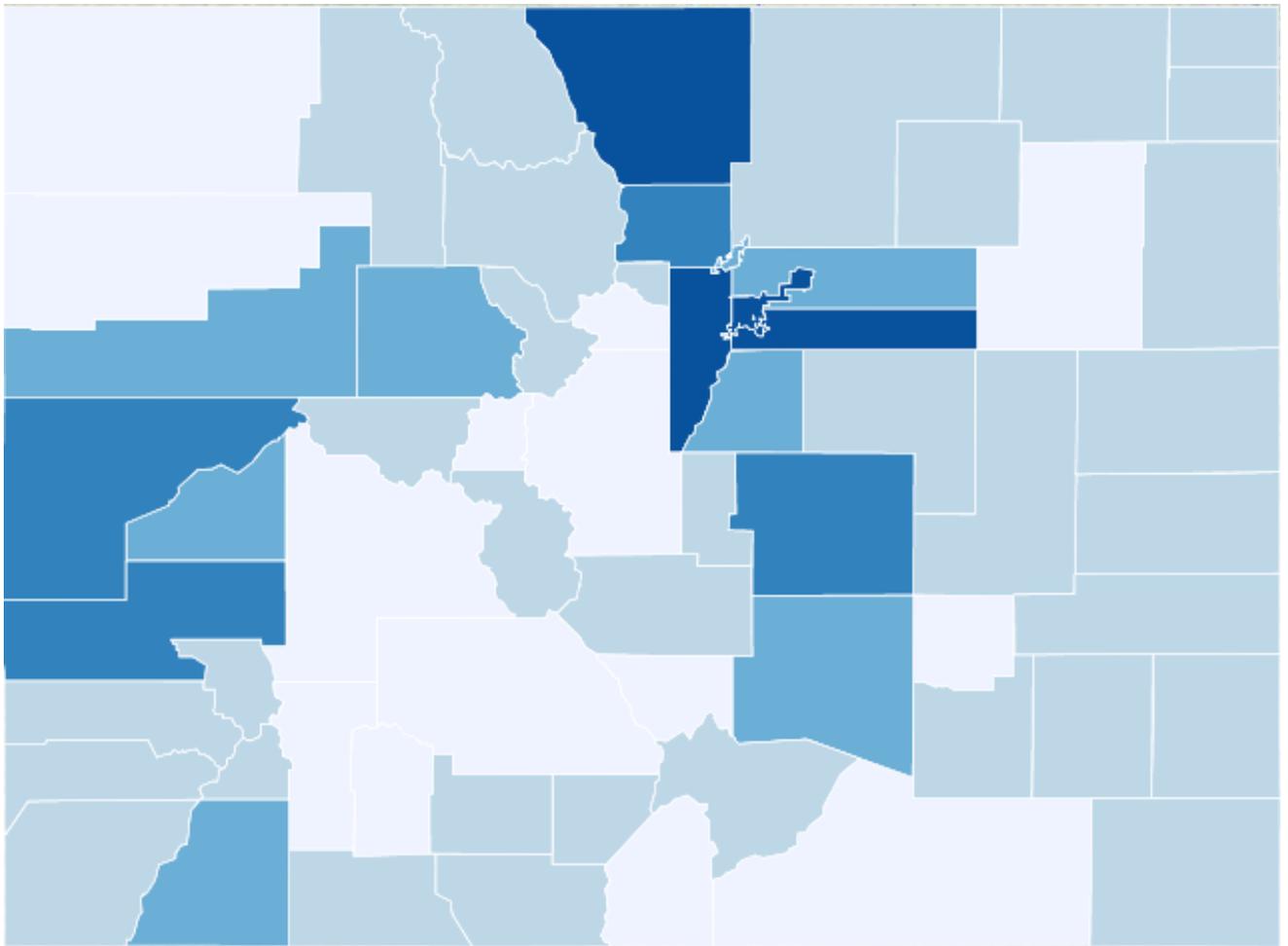
*By County*

- Participants were also asked to indicate in which county do the majority of their clients live (see Figure 3 on the following page for a heat map of responses). Regions were defined as the following, based on the breakdown provided by Colorado Counties, Inc. (CCI)<sup>3</sup>
- Eastern: Cheyenne, Elbert, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick, Washington, Yuma
- Front Range: Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, El Paso, Jefferson, Larimer, Weld
- Mountain: Chaffee, Clear Creek, Custer, Eagle, Fremont, Gilpin, Grand, Jackson, Lake, Park, Pitkin, Teller, Summit
- Southern: Alamosa, Baca, Bent, Conejos, Costilla, Crowley, Huerfano, Kiowa, Las Animas, Mineral, Otero, Prowers, Pueblo, Rio Grande, Saguache
- Western: Archuleta, Delta, Dolores, Garfield, Gunnison, Hinsdale, L Plata, Mesa, Moffat, Montezuma, Montrose, Ouray, Rio Blanco, Routt, San Juan and San Miguel

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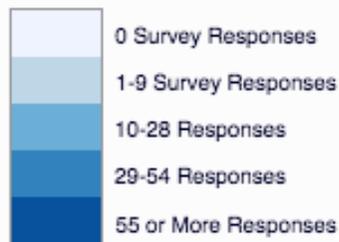
<sup>3</sup> Colorado Counties, Inc. *Five District Map*. Retrieved from: <http://ccionline.org/cci/district-officers/>

Figure 3: Colorado County of Clients



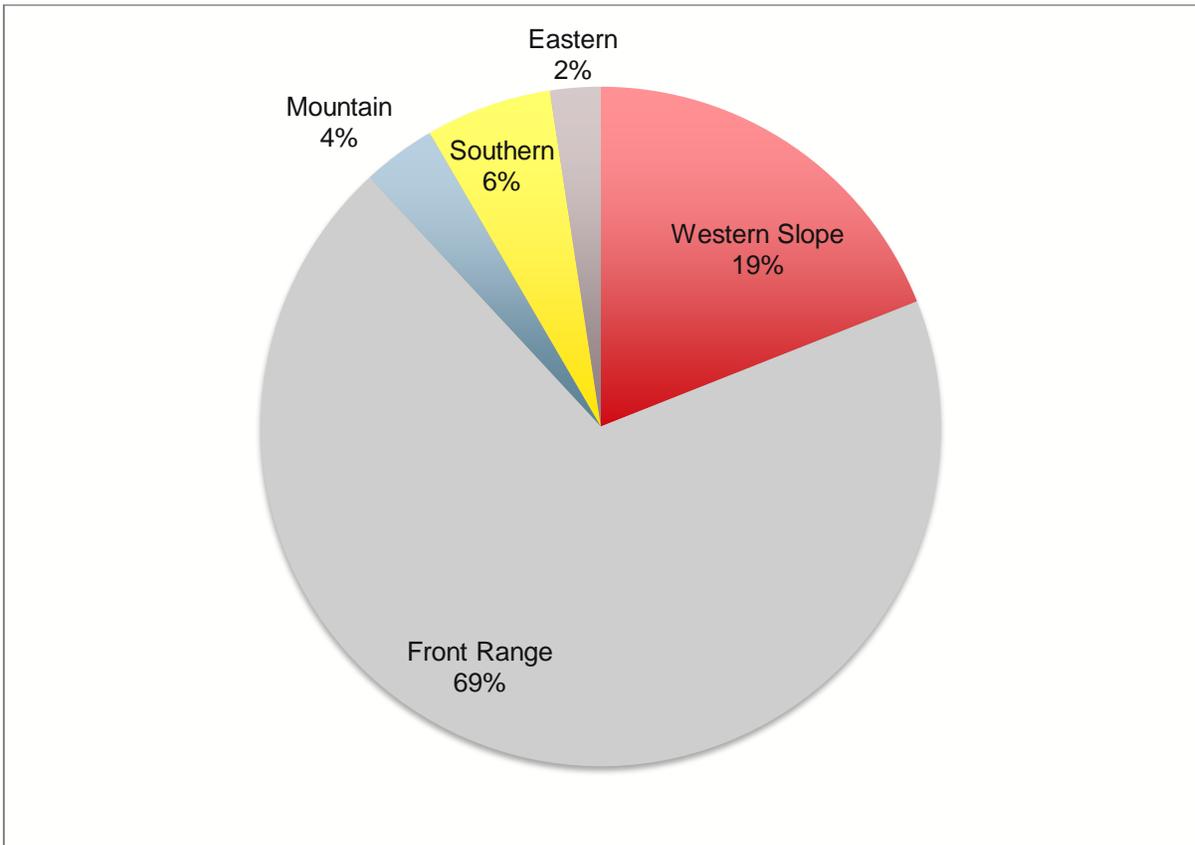
Map Legend

HCPF Client Correspondence Survey -  
Where Respondents Primarily Work



Additionally, using the district breakdown by CCI to group respondents into Colorado regions suggests strong representation of those working primarily with Front Range clients and with Western Slope clients (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Colorado Region of Clients



*Frequency of Confusion on Communications*

Additionally, participants were asked to indicate 1) approximately how many Medicaid, Child Health Plan *Plus*, Food Assistance or Cash Assistance clients they meet with or communicate with in an average month, and 2) how many of those clients that they meet or communicate with are confused by an eligibility correspondence letter.

Regarding the number of average monthly clients, the most frequent response was 100 (n = 93) and the average response was about 416. However, 75% had less than 150 clients and 98% had less than 1,000 clients, suggesting a couple of extreme outliers (e.g., 80,000 and 150,000). Similarly, the most frequent response for how many clients are confused was actually 0 (n =87), followed by 10 (n = 77), with an average response of about 109 clients. However, 75% of respondent reported a number less than 51.5 clients and 98% responded with a number less than 400.

As the average responses above appear do not clearly represent what is happening for most individuals (when it comes to their clients having confusion on the letters), another tactic was used: a percentage of clients experiencing confusion. This percentage was calculated by taking the number of clients confused divided by number of clients overall.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the average rate of client’s confusion was 46.5%, with the most frequent result

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<sup>4</sup> This calculation revealed that eight respondents indicated a rate of greater than 100%, and so were excluded.

actually being a report of 100% (n =113). Twenty-five percent of respondents indicated a frequency of less than 20%, and 75% of respondents indicated a frequency of less 75%.

## Reoccurring Themes (Across Letters)

Each correspondence letter was individually tested using all research tools. However, there were a variety of issue factors that spanned across all letters, and thus, there are recommendations that apply to all of the letters. This section highlights the key areas that, regardless of letter type, need to be addressed. See Table 1 for an overview of key issues and recommendations.

### Overall Issue Areas

The three issues that span across letter-types focus on the readability, the navigation and layout, and the tone and usability of the letters.

#### *Readability*

Primarily, the **literacy level of the letters is too high**, with numerous statements suggesting the letters would be better at a sixth grade reading level. Other ways in which literacy level becomes too high is by the amount of **lengthy sentences and unnecessary verbiage**. Readability will improve across all levels with an intense focus on easing the reading level.

**Inconsistent use of terminology** is an additional factor that negatively affects all letters' readability. For example, "Medicaid" vs. "Medical assistance"; "CDLE" vs. "CDOLE"; and "effective date" vs. "application date" vs. "coverage start date."

#### *Navigation and Layout*

When it comes to the navigation and layout of the letters, **there is too much difference in how each letter utilizes consistent organization and formatting**. For example, if a desirable "grid" view in the NOA is agreed upon, that grid should be used in other letter types. Similarly, if bold letters show the next steps/action items, each letter should utilize that. Wherever possible, consistency is desired.

Also related to layout is the notion **that the purpose and call to action are not always at the start of the letter, but often pages behind**. In some documents, this is better than others, but clarity for the reader on what this letter is about and what needs to be done next should be visible at the front.

#### *Tone and Usability*

A common issue affecting the tone and usability of the correspondence is that there are often **unclear calls to action**. Similar to the above two categories (readability and navigation/layout), by simplifying the call to action, the letters will be less intimidating to the reader. Also, **when there is too much legal information such as rules, appeals, etc.**, readers can become scared or misinterpret the letters.

## Overall Recommendations

### *Readability*

To attain a lower literacy level, the following recommendations are suggested:

- A consistent font size (12) is used throughout all letters
- A sixth grade reading level is recommended
- Shorter sentences and direct language are used
- Terms used are consistent within and across letters
- Avoid jargon and acronyms

### *Navigation and Layout*

To improve the consistent navigation and layout across letters, the following ideas should be implemented:

- Ensure clear headings for each section
- Have a simple and clear purpose at the start of each letter
- Move the “call to action” to the front of each letter
- Consistent layout and formatting between all letters (where possible), including the use of icons

### *Tone and Usability*

To improve the tone and usability of all letters, JVA recommends the following are accomplished:

- Legal information broken out/divided from the main intention (i.e., a brochure)
- Clear statement of purpose and necessary action needed will decrease feelings of confusion

### *Other*

While this was not alerted often in the research, a few key players mentioned the topic of ensuring equity through language access. This leads to the following recommendations for all letters:

- Ensure equity through language access by redoing the Spanish translation and/or incorporating “Babel” insert in all letters

Figure 5: Overall Issue Areas and Recommendations (Across Correspondence)

Issue Area	Recommendations
<b>Literacy level too high (lengthy sentences and unnecessary verbiage)</b>	Shorten sentence length, font size (12) Adapt to a near sixth grade reading level Shorten sentences Use consistent terminology and definitions No jargon
<b>Formatting and layout inconsistent (purpose and call to action not always leading)</b>	Clear heading for each sentence Consistent layouts and formatting where possible, including the icons used Purpose/Call to action at the front of each letter
<b>Unclear call to action and too much legal information is intimidating</b>	Break out the legal sections from the main information (i.e., a brochure) Ensure a simple and clear statement of purpose and necessary action is given
<b>Overall</b>	Babel inserts into each letter Update the Spanish language correspondence