Health First COLORADO™
Colorado's Medicaid Program

Member Communications Standards

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Version history

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v09bc	Feb 3, 2022		
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Preface

This guide uses industry best practices for plain language and person-centered design. It is intended for HCPF staff who draft member communications. You can also use these standards to create materials and messaging for providers, eligibility partners and other stakeholders to improve communications for all of our audiences.

Use the standards in this guide to craft messaging that will help members find what they need, understand what they find and use it to meet their needs. You can use these standards before presenting to providers, eligibility partners and other stakeholders to create consistent, unified and recognizable voice, language and vocabulary for all of our audiences.

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Introduction

Health First Colorado strives to make sure that our communication with members is always easy to read, understand and use. These Member Communications Standards are intended to help writers improve Health First Colorado member correspondence. The guide includes planning, writing, grammar and style standards. It also includes design and formatting best practices.

This guide emphasizes using plain language in all correspondence. Plain language is friendly and clear, with a direct, conversational tone and active voice. The information is organized in logical order for the reader. Paragraphs are one-topic and brief, and sentences are simple and short. Plain language includes using common, everyday vocabulary consistently across correspondence, with few technical or bureaucratic words. The aim of plain language is to lower barriers for the audience and increase understanding of the message and any required action.

Health First Colorado follows the Associated Press Stylebook (AP style). Refer to it if your topic or question is not addressed in this guide.

Part I: Planning

The best writing begins with careful planning. Planning will help you reduce barriers for your audience, focus on your communication goals, and make sure your messages are clear and actionable. There are six steps to writing effective correspondence. Steps 1 and 2 and 3 happen in the planning stage, **before** you begin to write. There is more detail on each step in the pages that follow.

Step 1: Identify the purpose. Ask yourself "What is the goal? What are we trying to achieve? What do we want this communication to accomplish?"

Step 2: Identify your audience. Ask yourself "Who is the audience? Is there a primary and secondary audience? Who will read this?"

Step 3: Make a list of the key messages you want the correspondence to convey. Ask yourself "What are the main points we want to communicate?" This will help you decide whether your communication should be in the form of a notice, a flyer, a brochure or a chart. Write your list of messages as brief, concise sentences or bullet points.

Step 4: Write in plain language. Plain language addresses the reader directly in a clear, concise and friendly way. It sounds conversational when read aloud. Plain language communicates messages efficiently while teaching needed vocabulary and raising health literacy. And it reduces user error, costly revisions and miscommunication.

Step 5: Include organizational aids and visual cues. Descriptive titles, greetings and closings, headings, sections, questions and answers, bulleted lists, numbered instructions, and a footer with contact information all guide your reader to important messages and required actions.

Step 6: Design for readability. Use appropriate margins, font, text size, white space, line length, page breaks and images. This style guide has more on best practices for person-centered design.

Purpose

Always start your planning by identifying specific communication goals. Think about the primary purpose of the correspondence. What is its job? What do you want to happen after the readers receive it? For example, are you:

- Notifying a member about eligibility?
- Sending a notice of action to take with a deadline to meet?
- Giving members information, such as an overview of a program or process?
- Sending a form or application to be completed and returned?

The purpose is your most important message, and it influences what key messages to include. Put it first. And keep in mind that knowing your goal helps you identify your audiences since there is sometimes a primary and a secondary audience.

Audience

Next, think about your audiences. Ask yourself:

- Who are the intended readers?
- What are the most important messages for them?
- What actions do they need to take, and when?
- What communications have been effective before?
- • How did you know they were effective?
- What barriers are there to your readers' understanding?

Think about your correspondence from the **reader's point of view**. Try to anticipate what readers will need and what they expect to learn. You do not know all your readers, but you do know things about them.

Some readers are new to the program — and new to your correspondence. Some are new to the language and culture or have limited health literacy. Some readers have vision or cognitive disabilities, and many are very busy. This knowledge should inform your writing style and affect the way you want the correspondence to look.

Think about your readers' likely **prior experience** with your topic. Do they have experience with it? If not, can you connect the new information to something

in their lives so it is meaningful to them? Readers learn by connecting new information with something they already know. Introduce new information by using relevant and familiar concepts, vocabulary, examples, illustrations and photographs. If you are revising existing materials, think about how the program and the audience may have changed.

Consider your readers' **cultures and beliefs** to make sure your message respects their values and practices. Consider cultural communication styles and practices, too. And consider "transcreation" — working with translators to make sure new program names and key concepts translate well into other languages.

Stakeholders are part of your audience. Besides members, stakeholders include project managers, programmers, lawyers, printers, program staff, reviewers and community advocates. The standard operating procedure includes working with the communications team to develop plans for involving stakeholders in the review of drafts as appropriate.

The member communications SOP includes guidance for working with the Communications team to develop plans for involving stakeholders in review of drafts as appropriate. Members and stakeholders should not be considered together as an audience. Consider them distinct audiences for the purpose of plain language writing.

Members are your most important stakeholders. If you are writing something new, test it with members before it is sent. Get member input through formal field testing or informally. HCPF has a Member Experience Advisory Council (MEAC), and our standard procedure strongly recommends member testing when possible. State statute calls for member testing of all appealable correspondence. Members are the focus of plain language writing. Get member input through our Member Experience Advisory Council (MEAC) when possible.

Our **Communications team** should be involved in the planning of correspondence. Include them from the start. They can help with plain language and suggest communication channels. To get help or learn more, complete the Communications and Design Requests form.

The **Colorado Benefits Management System (CBMS)** team will tell you what the system can and cannot do.

Our **Legal team** may have requirements for compliance language you must include.

Customer service should be notified of any communication that lists them as a resource. Provide copies of communications to customer service and front desk staff so they will better understand member calls. Consult with them when appropriate to learn about member feedback and questions.

Key messages

Knowing your purpose, goals and audiences will lead you to identify your main messages and how they might need to be modified for different audiences. It is a good idea to make a list of all the messages you want to include. Then:

- Determine the main message from the purposes and goals of the communication — this will come first.
- Consolidate the rest of the messages in your list to three or four key messages.
- Arrange the secondary messages to follow the main message in the order that best suits the communication and the audience.

Keep in mind that including too many messages in one correspondence is confusing for the audience and dilutes the impact of the main message.

Vehicle

Once you know the messages you intend to convey, you will be able to choose the best vehicle for the communication. Work with the communications team to choose the vehicle that delivers your messages effectively, balancing design and text. Is it a notice? Brochure? Social media message? Web content? Or a video?

Consult with the communications team to choose the best vehicle for your message.

Part 2: Writing

Writing

Now that you have finished the planning steps — identifying your purpose, audience and key messages — you are ready to write the communication itself! The writing part of the process includes writing from the reader's point of view, using organizational strategies that enhance readability and writing in plain language.

All readers have a difficult time absorbing too much information at once, regardless of literacy level. Being clear and concise reduces the need for multiple notices. Do not bury key messages in supporting text. Give them room. But keep in mind that length can intimidate readers. They may conclude based on the number of pages alone that reading the correspondence will be too hard or too time consuming.

Reader focus

Know what your readers expect to learn. When members receive your correspondence, very few will start by reading it carefully from beginning to end. Most will first skim it quickly to decide whether to read it or toss it. In a few seconds, and without even being aware they are doing it, readers first assess whether it is worth their time. They ask themselves:

- Who sent this and why?
- Is it important?
- Is it going to be easy or hard to read?
- What is it about (key messages)?
- What do I have to do and when?
- Where can I get help if I need it?

Skimming should give them quick answers to those questions. It is important to get the readers' attention, focus on what they need and expect, and give them the information they need with as few barriers as possible. To do those things, you need to organize the content in a logical order that makes sense to your readers and emphasizes the key messages.

Organization

If you organize the information **for** your readers, you make it possible for them to grasp what they need to know and do. You also make it easier for them to find important action items and dates again later if they need to. Organizing the information with titles, headings and sections reduces the work readers must do — and increases the chances that they will take the right actions and meet deadlines.

Title

Create a title centered just below the letterhead, name and address, member number, and date. Each communication should have a meaningful, descriptive title that tells readers right away what the communication is and what is in it. The title should identify the document in a few words or a phrase. The title should welcome readers and motivate them to read on, without sounding punitive or intimidating.

Headings

Write brief, descriptive headings to help readers anticipate what is coming next. Headings and subheadings organize the text and guide the reader. They alert readers to what is in the section, capturing the essential points. Headings that describe the sections help you organize the content for readers, and help readers find your messages.

Use sentence case (or "downstyle"), in which only the first word is capitalized, for headings where possible. It is easier to read. Single words or action phrases (**What to do next**) or questions (**What happens next?**) work best. If the headings are in bold, readers can skim to find what they need and return to it easily. Stay with one convention in a document, such as all questions or all brief phrases, rather than mixing the two. Do not switch between referring to the reader as "I" and "you" in the headings (or anywhere in the document). Choose one and stick with it.

Sections

When you organize information into short sections under each heading, called "chunking," you keep the information focused on one topic at a time. Increased white space between chunks improves visual appeal, makes documents more inviting and helps readers follow the flow of information. Chunking offers the information in readable bits, reducing information overload and reader anxiety.

Plain language

Write in plain language to help your readers understand. Many of your readers bring their own barriers to your document. They may be unfamiliar with the topic or concepts or new to the culture or language. They may have limited literacy or they may be in a distracting environment. Too often, the document itself sets up barriers for the reader. Writing that makes member correspondence more difficult to read includes:

- Passive voice
- Unfriendly tone
- Unfamiliar words, undefined abbreviations and technical terms
- Complex sentence structure
- Complex, multi-topic paragraphs

With plain languagewriting:

- Considers the reader's prior knowledge and lived experience
- Limits the message to what is necessary
- Arranges information in logical order
- Uses simple sentence structure and familiar words

Plain language doesn't dumb things down; it clears things up. It simplifies and clarifies by making the content less complex and helping readers locate key details. Readers can find things, return to them, remember them and take required actions.

Plain language lowers barriers to comprehension and increases readability using:

- Active voice
- Friendly tone
- Common vocabulary
- Simple sentences
- Brief, one-topic paragraphs

Each element raises comprehension and lowers barriers. Plain language helps you communicate with a diverse audience. No matter how literate or educated they are, readers never complain that a communication is too easy to understand.

Active voice

Active voice is much easier to read than passive voice. It is friendlier and more conversational. Active voice is especially important for readers who might be intimidated by applications, forms or notices. Good readers benefit too because active voice is smooth, clear and easy to read.

Active voice tells you who does what, in that order. With active voice, "An application may be completed over the phone" becomes, "You can apply by phone." Active voice reduces the number or words, making it easier to read.

Use active voice to show readers who is taking the action. Change "Your application for benefits was denied" to "We denied your application for benefits."

It sometimes seems easier to deliver bad news in passive voice, and it avoids attributing the action. ("Mistakes were made.") But active voice improves readability and makes the tone friendlier.

Friendly tone

Readers respond positively when the tone of your writing is respectful and encouraging. An authoritative or intimidating tone discourages readers. A conversational tone, using personal pronouns, draws readers in and motivates them to read on. A friendly tone can even inspire readers to take the actions you want them to take.

Use a direct, conversational, friendly tone that avoids as much bureaucratic language as possible. You are very familiar with the language of health and health care, but it may be foreign to many of your readers.

To create the right tone, remove introductory and dependent clauses where possible, use the active voice, and use pronouns to speak directly to the readers. Personal pronouns such as "I," "we" and "you" make the writing smoother, friendlier and less intimidating.

Instead of "SSNs will be used to verify income and prevent participation duplication," try "We use Social Security numbers (SSNs) to check income and make sure you're not already enrolled." Note that sometimes active voice does add a few words.

A **positive** tone works much better to motivate readers than a negative one. If the letter is to notify a reader that they have missed a deadline or need to send proof, do not write, "Failure to comply with documentation requirements by the due date delays the application process."

Instead, give your readers a reason for the request, a motivation to comply and a specific deadline to meet, in bold so they can find it again. Write "The proof you send helps us process your application faster. Send your proof by **July 24**."

The best way to check the tone of your writing is to read it out loud or read it to someone who is unfamiliar with the topic. You will hear whether it is conversational and friendly or authoritarian, punitive and unfriendly.

Common vocabulary

Tell your readers what they need to know in the clearest way possible, using common, everyday words that most adults understand. Why ask your readers to "utilize" the plan comparison chart when you can ask them to "use" it? Why ask them to "reach out and contact" you when you can invite them to "call"?

Use the same words consistently to mean the same thing, so readers become familiar with the program's vocabulary and can learn any program-specific terms they need.

Legal, technical and bureaucratic language and jargon can read like a secret language. Jargon is usually at a high reading level, and people who are not lawyers, technical experts or in the agency do not know that language. Avoid technical terms when you can and explain them when you cannot. Remember that some in your audience are going to be suspicious. They are going to think you are being obtuse deliberately, to put up a barrier.

Get rid of the jargon in "The redetermination period is used to verify your continuing eligibility for benefits," for example, and just say it in plain language: "It is time to renew, when we check to find out if you still qualify."

Use common, everyday words in place of less familiar, more complex terminology.

Simple sentences

Build simple sentences using the first three plain language best practices of active voice, friendly tone and short, common, familiar words. Then shorten sentences by removing unnecessary words and clauses.

Where possible, break up long sentences by removing conjunctions ("and," "but," "or," "nor") and dividing the sentence in two. Readers often skim text, so make every word count. Practice simplifying your writing by imagining you are explaining the topic to a friend who knows nothing about your work. Or picture one member or person, such as your grandmother, as you write.

Place nouns and verbs near each other so readers can grasp easily who does what. Keep the most important information together. Always check for unnecessary words you can cut to shorten sentences. Simplify! Then, if you string together short, simple sentences and keep to one topic, you will write the right kind of paragraphs.

Brief, one-topic paragraphs

Keep paragraphs short and focused on a single subject. Eliminate unnecessary details, and provide necessary supporting information **only** after you have given the key message and any action you want your readers to take.

Deliver your information one paragraph at a time, "chunking" it in reader-sized bites. Make sure important messages are visible. Readers are more likely to overlook a key message buried in the middle of a paragraph, and to have difficulty finding it again if they need it. Place key messages at the beginning of the communication and of the paragraph. Or put them in the headings and reinforce them in the paragraphs.

One way to shorten paragraphs is to examine them after you have written them. Find a place to cut them in two. If you keep most of your paragraphs to no more than six to eight lines, with a few shorter paragraphs, readers will comprehend more. This also makes the correspondence look more manageable and less intimidating and increases the likelihood that the reader will read the whole thing.

Cultural considerations

> "The ideas people have about health, the languages they use, the health literacy skills they have, and the contexts in which they communicate about health reflect their cultures."
>
> Centers for Disease Control
> cdc.gov/healthliteracy/culture.html

Culture can mean race, ethnicity, language, age, gender identification, socioeconomic group, even geographical region.

Remember that communication rules within cultures include:

- Who communicates with whom
- When and where something may be communicated
- What to communicate about
- How to communicate

Make sure your writing is inclusive, welcoming and respectful of cultural differences. Know and avoid what could be offensive. Avoid idioms. Choose images that show a variety of ethnicities, ages, and communities. Make sure images don't

stereotype or exclude groups. And be sure anyone in your targeted audience is reflected.

Person-centered language

How people like to be identified changes over time. Most audiences prefer person-centered language (for example, "people with disabilities" rather than "disabled people"). Some audiences prefer identity-first language ("Deaf people," rather than "people who are deaf or hearing impaired"). Contact the Communications Team if you are unsure.

Use:

- "People" or "members." **not** "individuals" or "persons"
- "People who qualify," "people who do not qualify." **Do not** use "low-income" or other income modifiers.
- "Undocumented Coloradan," "People who are undocumented," "mixed status households." **Do not** use alien, illegal alien, illegal immigrant, not lawfully present.
- "Adults 65 and older" **not** "elderly," "older adults" or "over 65" because that means 66 and older.
- "People or members experiencing homelessness" **not** "a homeless person"
- "Substance use" **not** "substance abuse"
- "Pregnant members" **not** "pregnant women"
- "End of a pregnancy" **not** "abortion" or "termination." Pregnancy can end in many ways. "End of a pregnancy" expresses concern for the mother and does not imply judgment.

Reading level

HCPF does not use readability formulas or grade level readers and does not recommend them. If you are working with a contractor who uses them, please contact the Communications team through the SharePoint request form for guidance and more information.

Mobile Apps

When writing for mobile apps, it's important to keep your audience and their goals in mind. Use plain language strategies such as the active voice. Keep content to groups of two or three words or short sentences. You want the UX (user experience) to be a positive one, and you want users to accomplish what they need to.

SMS

Text messaging can be an effective and efficient way to correspond. Be sure to stick to one key message in a text and keep that message brief. It's a good idea to cut after you write. Remember that people like reminders and alerts, but don't like to receive too many texts.

Emails

The main problem with writing emails is resisting the temptation to throw in a lot of messaging just because you can. Make sure the subject line describes exactly what is in the message, and then stick to that topic. If an email looks cluttered and dense, people will delete it, even without reading it. As with all correspondence, plain language strategies such as using personal pronouns for friendly tone help you compose emails that people will read.

Part 3: Grammar and style conventions

Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations, including acronyms, are useful shorthand. But your audience may not know them, and they can be distracting. To teach readers an abbreviation, write it out the first time you use it in the communication. Write the abbreviation in parentheses right next to it. From there on in the document, use the abbreviation. For example, the first time it appears in a notice, write "Hospital Back Up (HBU)." Wherever the word appears in the notice again, simply write "HBU."

When the word is only used once, and there is no compelling reason to abbreviate, write out the complete word or words instead, as in "U.S. Department of Health and Human Services." If the abbreviation is well known, it is safe to use the abbreviation from the start, as with "MRI." Acronyms are abbreviations formed from the first letter of each word and pronounced as a word, like SCUBA. Follow the abbreviations rule with acronyms, writing out each word first before you use the acronym unless the acronym is so common everyone knows it, such as PIN.

Active vs. passive voice

Active voice is one of the elements of plain language recommended in this guide. You can check your use of passive voice in Microsoft Word with the "Check Document" feature in "Review." Active voice makes the tone friendly, attributes the action and is much easier to understand. (See Active voice above.)

Addresses

It is best to write addresses as they would appear on an envelope. This takes up a little more room, but it is a lot easier for the reader than an address buried in a sentence. Readers will have trouble figuring out the address if you write, "Send the form to the Department of Health Care Policy & Financing at 1570 Grant Street, Denver, Colorado 80203." It is much easier for the reader if you write:

> Send your completed form to:
> Department of Health Care Policy & Financing
> 1570 Grant Street
> Denver, CO 80203

And vs. &

While state brand standards call for the use of the ampersand symbol in state agency names, please avoid using it in member communications.

Bold

Bold is preferred over italics or underlining for emphasis. If you use too much bold, it loses its impact and effect. Do not write whole sentences or paragraphs in bold. Use it sparingly, for titles and headings and to call out one thing, such as a date or a number. Bold is better than all capital letters to emphasize words like "not" or "all." (See Capitalization below.) When creating electronic communications like webpages, do not underline anything that isn't a hyperlink.

Bullets

Use bullets to call out important information readers might miss. But be careful not to overuse bulleted lists. When using bullets, always write a brief lead-in phrase and a colon to introduce the list. Be sure the first word of each bullet starts with the same part of speech. Only place periods at the end of each bullet if each is a complete sentence. And avoid overly complex punctuation. It is sometimes best to use no punctuation at all, unless you need a comma and "or" before the last bullet item.

Capitalization

Follow standard rules for capitalization. Do **not** capitalize words to show that they are important. Capitalize proper nouns. Proper nouns include specific names of persons, places, schools and organizations, and titles of a person, organization or document.

Use sentence case for titles and headings. Sentence case capitalizes only the first word of the title or heading.

Do not capitalize federal, state, county, government, regional and national unless they are part of a specific proper noun.

Do not write words in all capital letters for emphasis. The letters run together for many readers. When words are written in all capital letters, readers with

limited literacy cannot use the decoding skill of recognizing a word by its shape. Sometimes words in all capital letters are misread. For example, in the phrase "if you are reporting ANY resources," does "ANY" mean "any"? Or is it an acronym for a certain type of resource?

Words in all caps look like you are shouting. Bold all-capital words shout even louder. And italicized words in all caps are nearly impossible to read. Only use all caps for abbreviations and acronyms where it is appropriate, as in "HCPF."

Contractions

Use contractions to help establish a friendly, conversational tone and help the reader move along smoothly. But because some are harder to read and are easily confused or misread, avoid ones like "we'll" (which can be misread as "well") and she'll (which can be misread as "shell").

Dates

Your correspondence often includes very important due dates and deadlines. It is important to help readers find them. It is also important for readers to be able to return to them again easily when they need to. It is often helpful to put the date in bold.

When you can, place important dates at the ends of sentences or lines. For example, this is harder to read: "The due date is Sept. 12, 2020, for the form." This is easier: "We need your completed form by **Sept. 12, 2020**."

The bold date at the end of the sentence is easier to spot, skim to and return to.

To avoid confusion, always write out or abbreviate the month followed by numbers for the day and year. When you write "9/12/20" readers whose country of origin is not the United States will think you mean "December 9, 2020." In most countries, the day comes first rather than the month.

Use a comma with the month-day-year format (March 21, 2021), except when writing just a month and year (March 2021).

Gender

Use "their" when you are unclear whether the sentence refers to a male-identifying or female-identifying person. For example, "Each member who is renewing needs to fill out their own form." Or rework the sentence to avoid using gender at all. "Each renewing member must fill out a form."

Do not use "his/her," "he/she." For many, the words blend and are hard to read. (See Slashes below.)

Italics

Do not use italics except when writing out Child Health Plan Plus. CHP+ branding calls for an italicized "*Plus*."

Legal citations

If you are required to include legal citations, put them where they will not interrupt the flow of the text and distract readers from the message. It is easier for the reader if you can place them at the bottom of the page. Most people do not know what they are. So, if you need to insert one, tell readers what it is, with a colon before the citation. For example, instead of:

"Pursuant to 10 CCR 2505-10, Section 8.057.13.A., you have the right to file a request for reconsideration of the Final Agency Decision," try:

"By law, you have the right to ask for a "reconsideration" (review) of the Final Agency Decision. This is the law: 10 CCR 2505-10, Section 8.057.13.A."

Line length

If a line is too long, word-by-word readers who "plow" through text will find it hard to read and comprehend. By the time they get to the end of the line, some readers will forget what they read at the beginning. Long lines of text are also tiring as the eyes sweep left to right and then down and left to right again.

But lines that are too short can also be hard to comprehend. The information gets chopped and divided in places that do not fit with the meaning.

Readers with limited literacy often skip lines that are too long or too short.

Readers get lost in the content and become frustrated and more likely to give up. It is important to keep lines to a comfortable length for readers, with groups of words they can grasp for meaning. This is true for all writing forms, including, and maybe especially, website pages.

Numbers

Spell out numbers that begin a sentence, then use the Arabic numeral form (249) for all other numbers. This supports readability for people with low numeracy skills. Do not put the Arabic numeral in parentheses after a spelled out number.

Use the AP style guide for percentages and fractions.

Use numbers for steps or instructions so readers know the exact sequence. Begin each with an action verb, keep them in the right order, and give only one instruction in each step. Keep them simple, with just the number and a period. And do not bury them in sentences. It is better to list numbered items vertically. Here is how to write brief, clear instructions:

1. Number each step.
2. Write one step at a time.
3. Put steps in the order they occur.
4. Give one action for each step.
5. Begin each step with an action verb.

Parallel structure

One of the best ways to increase clarity and readability is to use parallel structure. This is useful when you are writing sentences with coordinating conjunctions, even if you split them into two sentences. It is also important for bulleted lists, instructions and steps. Parallel structure helps the rhythm of your writing, which helps readers follow smoothly. And it helps to align related ideas.

Items in a list should begin with the same part of speech (noun, verb, adjective). For example, if the first item in your list is a noun, use nouns for each item. If the first action is a verb in present tense, put all other actions in present tense, as in the instructions above (“Number,” “Write,” “Put,” “Give,” “Begin.”) Do not write, “You will need to sign, date and remember to send the form.” Instead, write, “You will need to sign, date and send the form.”

Punctuation

Know rules for punctuation and follow them. When there are agency style conventions, such as whether to use the serial or Oxford comma, know the policy and follow it. HCPF uses AP style, which only uses the Oxford comma when it's needed to clear up potential ambiguity in a sentence.

Colons

Use a colon before a bulleted list or to indicate that something will follow, such as information, an example or a series.

Commas and commas in series

Use commas to set off phrases, in locations, in dates and large numbers, between a title and a person's name, and before academic degrees. Use commas before and after direct quotes. Use commas also to separate elements in a series. If you are concerned that a sentence may be confusing without the serial comma, you may use it.

Exclamation marks

Limit exclamation marks. Use them very sparingly, and only to show excitement. ("Good news!") They lose their effectiveness when overused and can be perceived as shouting.

Hyphens

Use a hyphen when two or more words act together as a single adjective before the word they are describing. When the same word pair is in the adverb position, after the noun, do not use a hyphen, as in "part-time work" and "work part time."

Parentheses

Limit the use of parentheses. Some readers skip the words in parentheses because they think the parentheses means the part within is unimportant or unnecessary. It is best to rework the sentence so parenthetical information is incorporated. Often you will realize you did not need to enclose the information in parentheses at all.

Avoid using parentheses to show possible plurals, as in "child(ren)" or "provider(s)." Those words are hard to read. It is best to use the singular or the plural form of the

word, or use both words if they are both needed, such as "the child or children."

If you do use parentheses, make sure you punctuate them correctly. If the punctuation mark is part of the content within the parentheses, it goes inside. If not, it goes outside.

Periods

Follow periods at the ends of sentences with **one** space. If a sentence ends with an abbreviation, use one period. Do not use ellipses.

Quotation marks

Place quotation marks outside commas, question marks and periods at the ends of direct quotes. Commas and periods go inside quotation marks, but question marks and exclamation points go outside. Write, "You will need the form titled "Redetermination." But write, "Do you have the form titled "Redetermination"?

Slashes

Do not use slashes between words. They are very hard to read. Revise sentences to avoid word constructions such as "and/or" and "he/she."

Plurals

Follow the rules for using plurals. Know when you need a plural "s" and when you need a possessive (’s) or plural possessive (s’).

Tables

Tables help readers see information in an organized way. But be sure to organize tables with the readers’ needs in mind. It is best to keep tables to two columns. Write brief, descriptive, parallel headings and keep the items in each column parallel. Cut unnecessary words. Bulleted lists can help you place more information in a table without making it too large and wordy. Tables must be accessible for people who use screen readers and other assistive technology to access electronic content. Contact the Design team for more information.

Telephone numbers

Use hyphens in between the digits: "800-452-6789."

Websites and links

Whenever possible, place links at the ends of sentences and lines so the reader does not click away before finishing the sentence and can find the link again easily. Do not write, "Please go to ourwebsite.com to read the form." Instead, write "To read the form, go to ourwebsite.com."

Use underlines and blue font to denote live links. Remove "www" from the hyperlink. Spell "web" with lowercase, unless it starts a sentence. Use meaningful link text so your readers will know they are in the right place when they get there. Instead of "Click here," write "Go to Provider search." This is also helpful for readers who use assistive technology like screen readers.

Part 4: Design

As the correspondence enters the design process, keep in mind that the aim is a clean, clear, human-centered design that increases readability. Some design features, while clever or aesthetically pleasing, can interfere with comprehension. When creating member correspondence, your aim is a reader-friendly design.

Adherence to Health First Colorado brand guidelines

For specific information on fonts, formatting, photographs and images, logos, color palette, typeface and other design requirements, read the Department Brand Kit Index. HCPF has brand guides for Child Health Plan *Plus* and other programs we run.

For example:

- Always write "Health First Colorado (Colorado's Medicaid program" on first reference and Health First Colorado on the subsequent references
- Do not capitalize "program"
- Do not refer to the program as "Medicaid"
- Always use italics for the word "Plus" in Child Health Plan Plus

Fonts

For readability, a clean, legible, 12-point, sans-serif font is best. There are many fonts that are easy to read.

Formatting for readability

Use proper white space and line spacing, left alignment, a line length of between 15 and 18 words, and logical line and page breaks. These increase readability and clarity, lower barriers and aid comprehension.

Images, icons and graphics

Pictures, illustrations, photographs, icons and other graphics can help guide the reader and point out important messages. But they can also distract and overwhelm. Be sure they reinforce rather than detract from the message.

Only use images, icons and graphics when they add to the message. And only use ones that are culturally appropriate for the audience and for the tone of the correspondence. Be careful with icons. If they are too abstract, many readers will not understand what they stand for or why they are there. Aside from common icons, it is better to avoid using them at all than to cause confusion and possible misinterpretation.

Please do not download and use images without checking with the Design team. Online images may be copyrighted or have poor image quality.

Part 5: Languages and alternate formats

Translation

All member-facing communication must be translated into Spanish. HCPF must use certified translators and cannot allow bilingual staff or stakeholders to translate materials. To request a translation of member-facing content, use the Communications and Design Requests form.

Language access

Section 1557 is the nondiscrimination provision of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The law prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, age or disability in certain health programs or activities and ensures meaningful access for individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP).

Health First Colorado must provide information about language access services in the top 15 threshold languages: Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Amharic, Arabic, German, French, Nepali, Tagalog, Japanese, Oromo, Farsi and Polish. We call this a "Babel sheet."

Contact Emelie Esquivel for more information.

Part 6: Glossary

Writing conventions for specific words

Health First Colorado (Colorado's Medicaid program) — use the full name in the first reference, use "Health First Colorado" in subsequent references.

Writing conventions

- case number (8 alpha-numeric characters used to identify your household or family.)
- co-pay
- CO.gov/PEAK (not Colorado.gov/PEAK)
- Coloradans who qualify (not low-income person or family)
- end of pregnancy (not abortion or termination)
- health care (not healthcare)
- Health First Colorado Member ID or Member ID (not State ID or Medicaid ID)
- Health First Colorado member (not low-income person or family)
- health coverage (not public health insurance or health care coverage)
- managed care plan or health plan
- member ID (1 letter followed by 6 numbers used for state benefit programs.)
- older adults or age specific (62 and older) not seniors or senior citizens
- pregnant members (not pregnant women)
- prior authorization request (PAR) (defined as "pre-approval")
- primary care provider (PCP)
- Regional organization (not Regional Accountability Entity or RAE)
- renewal (not redetermination)
- telehealth (not telemedicine)
- webpage
- website

Word substitutions

Avoid	Use
accurate	true, correct
additional	other, more
allowed	may
alter	change
ascertain	find out
assist	help
be eligible for	qualify
can be found	is
complete an application	apply
comply	follow
currently	now
determine	find, decide
discontinue	stop, end
disenroll	drop
effective	on
eligible	qualify
employment	work
enroll	join
exceeds	is more than
excess	too much, too many
expired	ended
failure to	does not
following	after
indicate	show
individuals	people

Avoid	Use
ineligible	does not qualify
inform	tell
initial	first
notify	tell
obtain	get
optimum	best
option, opt	choice, choose
prior to	before
provide	give, send
receive	get
recover	take, take back
redetermination	renewal
reduce	lower
reenroll	join again
repay	pay back
requisite	needed, necessary
retain	keep
reveal	show
see	find or read
sequentially	in order
submit	send
subsequent	next
sufficient	enough
terminate	end, stop
utilize	use
verify	confirm