

# How New Jersey is Using Generative AI to Scale their Human-Centered Approach to Language Access

The New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOLE) has significantly [enhanced its unemployment insurance \(UI\) system](#), focusing on ease of use and improving access for workers who are at higher risk of falling through the cracks. Working with U.S. Digital Response (USDR), NJDOLE aimed to reduce language barriers by simplifying the application process and, for the first time, making their initial UI application form available in Spanish.

Through this effort, USDR and NJDOLE developed a human-centered approach to language access that produced dramatic results. Launched in April 2024, the new form takes 80% less time to complete than the previous version, and NJDOLE has successfully achieved parity in completion time between English and Spanish applicants. With the success of this project, NJDOLE and USDR sought to use generative AI (gen AI) technology to optimize and expand this approach as they prepare to upgrade other parts of the UI system.

This work aimed to help New Jersey's estimated 700,000 Spanish-speaking workers better access UI benefits. NJDOLE's efforts represent a significant step towards a more inclusive and effective UI system, potentially setting a new standard for benefits access nationwide.

## Pandemic exposes systemic inefficiencies

When COVID-19 struck, NJDOLE faced unprecedented unemployment claims, exposing long-standing issues in the state's UI system:

1. Complex terminology: many non-English, and even native English speakers, found the UI jargon confusing.
2. Burdensome processes: the application process was time-consuming and error-prone.
3. Overwhelmed support systems: claimants struggled with long wait times and limited language support.

NJDOLE's existing language access approach fell short. State-approved translation vendors lacked UI-specific vocabulary and didn't reflect New Jersey's diverse Spanish dialects. Bilingual call center agents helped with translations, but this was an unsustainable add-on to their regular duties. These stopgap measures proved inadequate

for the complex task of making UI truly accessible.

These issues disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, including lower-wage workers, people with limited English proficiency, and those with non-traditional employment situations.

Gillian Gutierrez, senior advisor/director at the New Jersey Office of Unemployment Insurance Modernization, saw this as an opportunity for transformation. "During the pandemic, we recognized a chance to reinvent the UI experience. We decided to use human-centered design, drawing on experiences from healthcare.gov and VA benefits, to improve how people interact with the system," she said.

## Developing a human-centered approach to language access

NJDOL partnered with USDR to develop a human-centered approach to language access.

**"USDR does everything possible to make the team functional with minimal burden on us. They find ways to present options and help us make decisions efficiently. This is crucial given how understaffed and overworked state employees often are,"** Gillian said.

Over eight months, they co-created content to serve New Jersey's diverse Spanish-speaking population. The framework was grounded in three pillars:

1. Co-creating content with policy experts and bilingual front-line staff
2. Validating translations with 15 Spanish speakers representing 10 different countries of origin
3. Staffing the team with Spanish-bilingual UX researchers and content designers

The project resulted in:

1. A new Spanish version of the initial UI application - the first time in New Jersey that the form has been made available in a language other than English
2. An initial [Plain Spanish Glossary of Unemployment Insurance Terms](#)
3. A comprehensive [Spanish Translation Guide for Unemployment Insurance](#)

These resources are grounded in plain language principles and incorporate cultural nuances and regional variations to ensure clarity and readability for New Jersey's diverse Spanish-speaking population.

## Quantifiable improvements in benefit accessibility

New Jersey's broad modernization efforts have yielded significant improvements:

- Average application time reduced from over 3 hours to 28 minutes for all users
- Call center wait times cut from 40 minutes to 2 minutes
- 14% reduction in claims requiring manual review, decreasing administrative burden
- Parity achieved in completion time between English and Spanish speakers
- 20% increase in follow-through to the next step after submitting the initial application for people who filled out the form in Spanish

These improvements have had a particularly significant impact on marginalized workers, including seasonal workers, individuals with multiple part-time jobs, and Spanish speakers. The application call center wait time reductions mean less lost wages for those who can least afford it.

"It was simple and the verification was very quick. The agent was very friendly and clear with the information," one Spanish-speaking New Jersey claimant shared. At the same time, these enhancements streamlined the process for all users, regardless of language preference, improving efficiency and reducing administrative burden across the board.

The project has created a ripple effect beyond New Jersey. The Illinois Department of Employment Security integrated the Spanish Glossary into their machine translation tool to translate their unemployment insurance website, demonstrating the initial scalability of this approach.

## Leveraging Generative AI to Scale Language Access

Building on this human-led initiative, USDR and NJDOL explored the potential of gen AI to optimize and scale language access efforts. Thanks to [support from Google.org](https://support.google.org), USDR was able to deploy a team of Google.org Fellows and Spanish bilingual content experts to further develop NJ's unemployment insurance glossary in plain English and Spanish using genAI. Together, the team developed an approach to validate genAI-assisted translation:

1. Fine-tuning large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, etc. using the human-created glossary, translation guide, and relevant UI policy guidance
2. Developing a prompt library (a list of commands for the LLM) with specific instructions for writing accessible, culturally relevant Spanish
3. Creating an evaluation rubric to measure translation quality quantitatively

Preliminary results show promise: