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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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Congressman Bruce Braley Opening Statement

**Markup of H.R. 3548, the "Plain Language in
Government Communications Act of 2007"**

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this markup.

I know that lawyers are often blamed for the legalese contained within government documents. However, the use of clear, concise language in communications has been a passion of mine since I began practicing law in 1983, when the Iowa Supreme Court adopted easy-to-understand wording for jury instructions. Since that time, I have been speaking and writing about using plain language for more effective communication.

In September, I was proud to introduce the *Plain Language in Government Communications Act*, a bipartisan bill that would require the federal government to write documents like tax returns, federal college aid applications, and Veterans Administration forms in simple, easy-to-understand language.

Anyone who's done their own taxes knows the headache of trying to understand pages and pages of confusing forms and instructions. There is no reason why the federal government can't write these forms and other public documents in a way we can all understand.

Writing government documents in plain language will increase government accountability and will save Americans time and money. Plain, straightforward language makes it easy for taxpayers to understand what the federal government is doing and what services it is offering.

Here is just one example of how the Plain Language Act can lead to real cost savings:

“Every several years the Veterans Benefits Administration writes a letter to all veterans asking them to update their listing of beneficiaries in VBA's files. If a veteran dies without a valid beneficiary listed, it costs VBA several thousand dollars in research to identify one. VBA was getting a response rate of about 35% to its letter, and the agency wanted to improve the rate to 50%. They rewrote the letter in plain language, and the response rate rose to

over 55%. This saves VBA about \$8 million dollars every time they mail the letter.”¹

Small businesses can also benefit from a reduction in convoluted language. Often times they do not have extensive resources to handle paperwork and have to hire outside consultants. The National Federation of Independent Business estimates that the average per hour cost of paperwork and recordkeeping for small businesses is \$48.72. The use of clear, easy to understand language in government paperwork could substantially reduce burdens on small businesses.

The *Plain Language in Government Communications Act* would require the federal government to write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a “clear, concise, well-organized” manner that follows the best practices of plain language writing.

The Federal Plain Language Guidelines provide an outline for these best practices. It is important to note that plain language is more than just vocabulary. It involves all of the techniques for clear and effective communications – planning the document, designing it,

¹ <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm>

organizing it, writing clear sentences, and using plain words. Just because someone has an advanced degree does not mean they have to sound as if they were writing their doctoral dissertation.

Using complex language in government forms, letters, notices and instructions can be difficult for constituents and small business owners to understand. Using plain language would improve services to the public, save time agencies spend on answering questions about what documents mean, and make it easier to hold agencies accountable for their work.

Several states have implemented plain language requirements for documents and communications from agencies. Additionally, Senator Daniel Akaka has introduced companion legislation to the *Plain Language Act* in the Senate. Implementing plain language requirements at the federal level has the potential to substantially reduce the paperwork burden on individuals and small firms.

I hope this bill makes it easier for Americans and small businesses to work with and understand their government.

Thank you again Mr. Chairman, and thank you all of the Members of the House Oversight and Government Reform Information Policy Subcommittee.