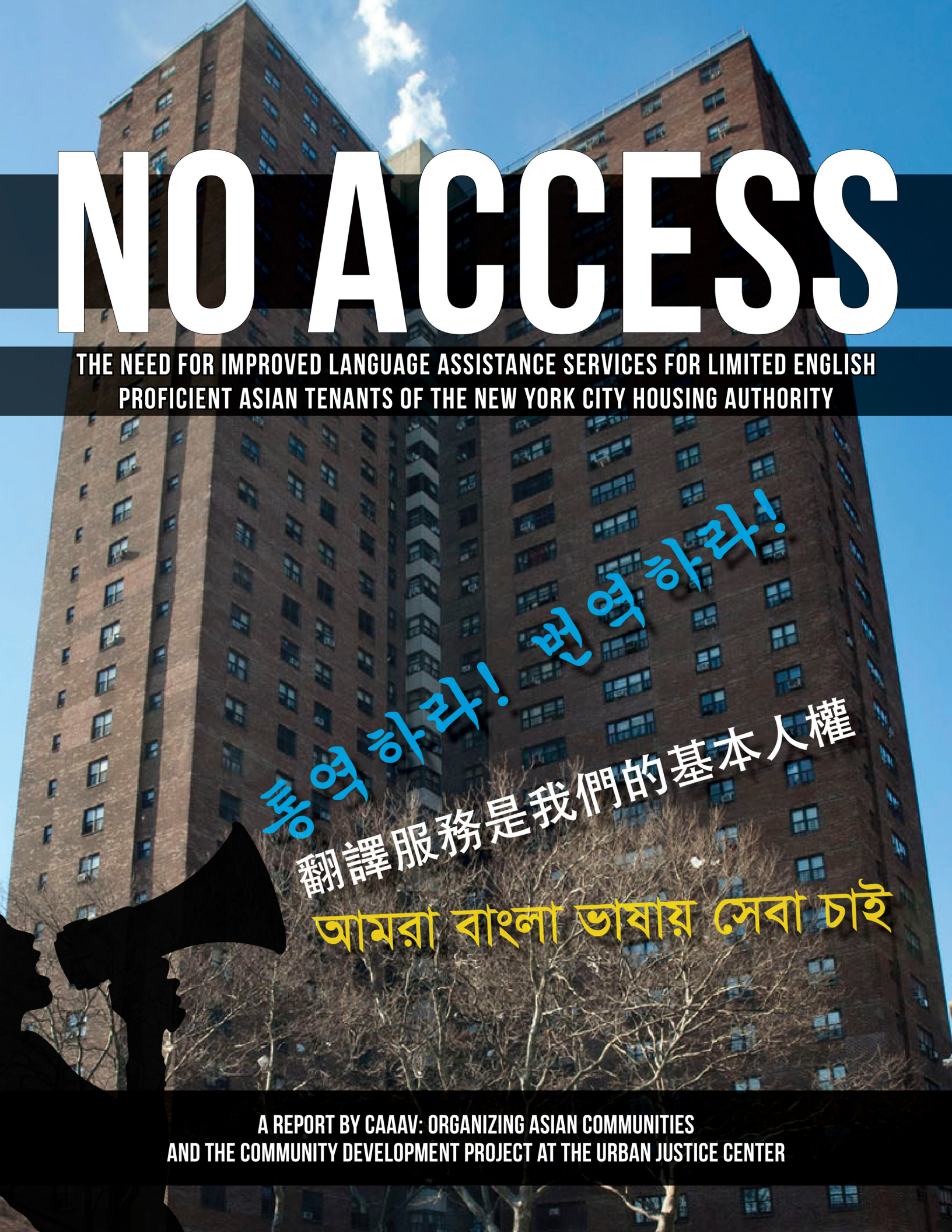
NO ACCESS
THE NEED FOR IMPROVED LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE SERVICES FOR LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT ASIAN TENANTS OF THE NEW YORK CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY
필요해요! 필요해요!
翻譯服務是我們的基本人權
আমরা বাংলা ভাষায় সেবা চাই
A REPORT BY CAAAV: ORGANIZING ASIAN COMMUNITIES
AND THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AT THE URBAN JUSTICE CENTER

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CAAAV works to build grassroots community power across diverse poor and working class Asian immigrant and refugee communities in New York City. Through an organizing model constituted by five core elements- basebuilding, leadership development, campaigns, alliances, and organizational development- CAAAV organizes communities to fight for institutional change and participates in a broader movement towards racial, gender, and economic justice.

The Community Development Project (CDP) at the Urban Justice Center strengthens the impact of grassroots organizations in New York City's low-income and other excluded communities. We partner with community organizations to win legal cases, publish community-driven research reports, assist with the formation of new organizations and cooperatives, and provide technical and transactional assistance in support of their work towards social justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NYCHA tenants discuss the importance of language access.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 400,000 New Yorkers live in public housing developments run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).[1] For them, NYCHA is property manager, landlord and super. NYCHA systems and staff are the points of interface for repair issues, rental payments, emergency information and more.

For NYCHA tenants with limited proficiency in English, navigating the policies, procedures and paperwork associated with their housing can be fraught with challenges. Issues of language access have serious implications. Tenants whose rents are raised incorrectly may be taken to housing court for non-payment of rent because they were not able to communicate with NYCHA to resolve the error. Tenants may be forced to miss work because they have to schedule repeated meetings in an attempt to communicate their needs. Victims of domestic violence who are in need of emergency housing transfers may not be able to make that need known. The safety of tenants' apartments can be jeopardized by a lack of language access in the repairs process. Crucial housing information, such as emergency protocols, may not reach tenants because they are not translated. Lack of language access impacts the day-to-day experience of tenants in interaction with NYCHA staff and their ability to participate meaningfully in the NYCHA community, perpetuating isolation.

CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities in partnership with the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center has conducted research on the experience of limited English proficient Asian tenants living in NYCHA. Our findings reveal that NYCHA is not executing its current language access policies in full, and that those policies, even if fulfilled, fall short of meeting the needs of Asian tenants.

In May of 2015, Mayor de Blasio and Shola Olatoye, NYCHA's Chair and CEO, announced a ten-year plan for NYCHA reforms, titled "NextGeneration NYCHA."[2] The stated goals of the plan include stabilizing NYCHA's financial situation, operating as an efficient and effective landlord, (re)building and preserving housing stock, engaging residents, and connecting residents to services.[3] This presents an opportune moment to review and reform NYCHA's language access services and processes. As NYCHA takes stock of its current challenges and plans for the future, limited-English proficient tenants must not be left behind.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

For this research, CAAAV administered surveys to 221 NYCHA tenants from 14 developments. Survey data was complemented by an analysis of documents received in response to a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request, secondary source and legal background research, and interviews with limited-English proficient tenants. Key findings include:

1: NYCHA is Not Providing Language Access Services to Most LEP Asian Tenants Who Need These Services.

- Of surveyed tenants who had a need for spoken interpretation in the past three years, only about 40% were connected with NYCHA to request services.
- Of those who had a need for written translation of a housing-related document, fewer than 1 in 5 (18%) connected with NYCHA to request services.

2: Family and Friends are Filling the Gap.

Despite NYCHA's policy that informal interpretation and translation (by family members, children or friends) should be discouraged, in practice, tenants must rely on family and friends.

- 86% of non-English speaking tenants who needed written translation asked someone who does not work for NYCHA to help translate.
  - o Of these tenants, 66% asked a family member to translate, and 21% asked a friend.
- Similarly, 74% non-English speaking tenants who needed spoken interpretation asked someone who did not work for NYCHA for help with interpretation.
  - o Of these tenants, 71% asked a family member and 22% asked a friend.

3: NYCHA Does Not Comprehensively Identify or Track Tenants Who Need Language Access Services.

- No comprehensive census of NYCHA tenants is taken to identify language needs.
- The Language Identification cards that are intended for use by NYCHA staff are not being presented to LEP Asian tenants: more than 90% of non-English speaking tenants had not been given a card.

4: NYCHA Does Not Effectively Inform LEP Asian Tenants of Language Access Services.

- NYCHA's advertising of language access services is limited in scale and scope. Much of the advertising is presented in only three non-English languages (Spanish, Chinese and Russian) and sometimes only in Spanish, and these advertisements are not sufficiently widespread.

5: NYCHA's Customer Contact Center (CCC) and Repairs Process are not accessible to LEP Asian Tenants.*

- Nearly one in three (31%) non-English speaking tenants reported that there was a time when they decided not to request a repair via the Customer Contact Center (CCC) because they did not think they could talk to someone in their language.
- Of non-English speaking tenants who called the CCC to request a repair, more than 70% had not been able to talk to someone who spoke their language.
- Of non-English speaking tenants who had been asked to sign something related to a repair in their apartment, 92% had been asked to sign a repair-related document that was *not* written in their language.

6: NYCHA's Language Access Staffing Structure is Not Sufficient to Meet the Needs of LEP Asian Tenants.

- NYCHA has a small language access staff—only six people for the entirety of the of NYCHA population (over 400,000 people). Only two of these staff people speak an Asian language (Cantonese and Mandarin).
- NYCHA relies on employee volunteers to supplement language access services. Asian languages are not sufficiently represented among this volunteer bank. In addition, while it is admirable that employees volunteer in addition to their regular job duties, volunteer service is not a desirable way to comprehensively meet the needs of tenants.

7: NYCHA Does Not Have Mechanisms In Place to Solicit, Evaluate Or Utilize Feedback From Tenants About Language Access Services.

- More than two-thirds (67%) of non-English speaking surveyed tenants did not believe that NYCHA took sufficient steps to communicate with them in their language, however NYCHA does not currently have mechanisms in place to solicit, evaluate or utilize comprehensive feedback from tenants with limited English proficiency.

* Note that the discussion of reforms to NYCHA proposed by the de Blasio administration have included the prospect of closing the call center and instead processing repair requests through the City's 311 system. In the event of such a change, all findings and recommendations related to the CCC should be applied to 311's system to ensure that LEP tenants have meaningful access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Language access issues impact tenants' ability to understand crucial housing matters, and can impact their health, safety, the stability of their housing, and their sense of belonging to NYCHA's community. Our research shows that language access services are lacking, and tenants suffer as a result. Key recommendations are highlighted below, and expanded upon in the full report.

We call on NYCHA to:

Conduct Comprehensive Assessment and Tracking of LEP Population.

- Take additional steps to identify and track tenants with limited English proficiency, including implementing a comprehensive census on the languages spoken by NYCHA tenants and developing a single, centralized database to track the language service needs of limited English proficient tenants.

Inform Tenants of Language Access Services.

- Disseminate information about language access services widely, and ensure that information about available services is shared in the languages tenants speak.
- Develop strategies to ensure that tenants with low levels of literacy in their primary language are notified of NYCHA policies and services.

Provide High Quality, Professional Language Access Services through Targeted and Streamlined Systems.

- Arrange for language access services proactively, whenever possible.
- Tailor language services to developments with limited-English proficient tenants, including translating all signage, forms and informational materials into the languages spoken at the development, and holding language-specific "office hours" in the languages that tenants speak.
- Ensure that non-English speakers can successfully navigate the CCC system, and the 311 system in the event that repair requests are directed to 311.
- Ensure that the repair process is accessible to tenants with limited English proficiency.

Ensure Language Access in Key Areas of Tenant Community: Community Centers and Tenant Associations.

- Support expanded language access at NYCHA community centers and Tenant Associations.

Ensure Language Access Services Receive the Appropriate Resources.

- Dedicate sufficient resources for language access staffing and services, including:
    - o Increasing the staffing of the language services unit to meet the needs of tenants.
    - o Identifying and allocating sufficient resources to improve language access services.
    - o Ensuring that senior services, services for people with disabilities, and other services at NYCHA are sufficiently resourced and equipped to offer language assistance.
    - o Offering supplemental funding for interpretation and translation to Tenant Associations and Community Centers in developments where more than 10% of residents are not English proficient.

Ensure Clear Systems for Quality Assurance, Tenant Input, Collaborative Evaluation of Language Access Services.

- Update and publish NYCHA's language access plan.
- Widely advertise the new 311 language access complaint system.
- Include tenants and community groups as partners in evaluating and improving language access services.

INTRODUCTION

More than 400,000 New Yorkers live in public housing developments run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).[4] For them, NYCHA is property manager, landlord and super. NYCHA systems and staff are the points of interface for repair issues, rental payments, emergency information and more.

For NYCHA tenants with limited proficiency in English, navigating the policies, procedures and paperwork associated with their housing can be fraught with challenges. Issues of language access have serious implications. Tenants whose rents are raised incorrectly may be taken to housing court for non-payment of rent because they were not able to communicate with NYCHA to resolve the error. Tenants may be forced to miss work because they have to schedule repeated meetings in an attempt to communicate their needs. Victims of domestic violence who are in need of emergency housing transfers may not be able to make that need known. The safety of tenants' apartments can be jeopardized by a lack of language access in the repairs process. Crucial housing information, such as emergency protocols, may not reach tenants because they are not translated. Lack of language access impacts the day-to-day experience of tenants in interaction with NYCHA staff and their ability to participate meaningfully in the NYCHA community, perpetuating isolation.

In 2013, when CAAAV began outreach to public housing residents as part of our broader voter engagement work, language access emerged as a common issue affecting Asian public housing residents. Organizers knocked on hundreds of doors in Queensbridge and Ravenswood developments to register tenants to vote, and educate them about the upcoming elections and on where and when to vote. While conducting this outreach, canvassers also spoke to tenants about their experiences in NYCHA: asking them about common issues such as language access, access to repairs, and residents' experiences with the police. It became clear that many Asian tenants, who spoke a variety of languages, were facing language access issues in NYCHA. Following the elections, CAAAV held a Know Your Rights training at the Queensbridge development, where over 50 Asian residents identified language access as their primary issue.

These initial tenant stories inspired CAAAV to take a deeper look at language access issues impacting NYCHA residents, and particularly the experiences of Asian public housing residents. We found that literature and reporting on NYCHA rarely highlights the experience of Asian tenants, and the reporting on Asian New Yorkers rarely includes public housing tenants. Our project sought to fill those gaps. This report is the result of tenant surveys, interviews and background research about NYCHA's language access policy.

In May of 2015, Mayor de Blasio and Shola Olatoye, NYCHA's Chair and CEO, announced a ten-year plan for NYCHA reforms, titled "NextGeneration NYCHA."[5] The stated goals of the plan include stabilizing NYCHA's financial situation, operating as an efficient and effective landlord, (re)building and preserving housing stock, engaging residents, and connecting residents to services.[6] This presents an opportune moment to review and reform NYCHA's language access services and processes. As NYCHA takes stock of its current challenges and plans for the future, limited-English proficient tenants must not be left behind.

While NYCHA does have policies and procedures in place on paper for providing interpretation and translation to tenants with limited English proficiency, our research identifies gaps between NYCHA's stated policies and the experiences of tenants. We find that NYCHA is not executing its current language access policies in full, and that those policies, even if fulfilled, fall short of meeting the needs of Asian tenants.

Key findings include:

- **NYCHA is not successfully identifying or tracking the diverse Asian tenants in need of language assistance.**
- **NYCHA is not informing tenants of NYCHA's existing language access services.**
- **NYCHA is not providing language access services to tenants in need. Family and friends are filling the gap.**
- **The Customer Contact Center (CCC) and repair process are inaccessible to many non-English speaking tenants.**
- **NYCHA's language access staffing structure does not meet the needs of Asian tenants.**

These findings and more are explored in detail in our report. While we focus on the experience of Asian tenants, who form CAAAV's constituency, this report is intended as a contribution to a larger conversation about language access for all non-English speaking tenants of NYCHA.

In the following pages we will examine NYCHA's existing policies, compare them to our findings, and make a series of recommendations that would move NYCHA towards ensuring that tenants with limited English proficiency do not feel alienated or isolated in their homes and communities, that language barriers do not jeopardize their health or safety, and that they have meaningful access to NYCHA's written documents, meetings, systems and programs.

Queensbridge tenant meeting on language rights and services.

DIVERSE ASIAN COMMUNITIES IN NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC HOUSING

Nearly one in seven New Yorkers identified as Asian on the 2010 Census—at least 1,134,919 people. [7] Asian communities are New York City's fastest growing major race and ethnic, growing by 30% between 2000 and 2010.[8]

As of 2012 (the latest data made publicly available by NYCHA via a FOIL request) at least 19,351 Asian tenants live in NYCHA developments, representing approximately 5% of the total public housing population.[9]

While NYCHA groups all Asian tenants together in their demographic reporting, we know through our organizing and outreach efforts that there are many diverse Asian communities in NYCHA, each with unique needs when it comes to language access. This section is designed to give an overview of these communities, and to help readers and policy makers better understand their needs.

As outlined in our methodology section, our research was conducted primarily with three growing Asian communities that we knew to be living in public housing: Bangladeshi, Chinese, and Korean communities. While we had to select certain languages to survey due to our capacity, we know through our organizing that other Asian community members live in NYCHA and have service needs that must be addressed.

BANGLADESHI COMMUNITY

Bangladesh was created as a state in 1971, when it gained independence from Pakistan. Many Bangladeshi immigrants came to the U.S. through the diversity visa program.[10] The Bangladeshi community in New York City has grown significantly in the recent past—growing by more than 40% from 2008 to 2011, making it one of the fastest growing Asian ethnic communities in New York City.[11] Nearly three quarters (74%) of the Bangladeshi community in New York City is foreign born, and the community has very high rates of limited English proficiency (53%, compared to 23% city wide).[12]

The Bangladeshi community in New York City also has high rates of poverty, with nearly one in three Bangladeshis living in poverty (32%) as of the 2010 Census, compared with 20% in the general population.[13]

CHINESE COMMUNITY

The Chinese community is the largest Asian community in New York, with over 500,000 Chinese New Yorkers recorded by the 2011 American Community Survey.[14] While the poverty rate for Chinese communities is similar to that of the overall New York population (20%), the 31% percent poverty rate for Chinese seniors was significantly higher than that for the overall elderly population (18%).[15] The Chinese community also has one of the highest limited English proficiency rates in New York, with 61% of Chinese people being LEP and nine in ten (88%) of Chinese seniors being LEP.[16]

CHINESE DIALECTS

Although there is some vocabulary overlap between Chinese dialects, they are distinct from one another due to tonal and pronunciation differences. Changes in migration patterns to New York over time have resulted in an extremely diverse linguistic and ethnic population. This diversity is significant, as government agencies and local organizations can not expect to have simply a Mandarin or Cantonese speaker present in order to meet the needs of a diverse and growing linguistic population.

The earliest immigrants to New York have been predominantly Cantonese and Toisanese speaking people from the Southern province of Guangzhou. However, since the 1980s, New York saw increasing numbers of immigrants from the Fuzhou province in China, and the Fuzhounesse community now makes up the majority of new Chinese immigrants to the city.[17] Thus, the population of people speaking Fuzhounese and Mandarin have grown significantly. While our survey methodology captured primarily Cantonese and Mandarin speakers,

through our organizing work we know there is a significant presence of Toisanese speaking residents, particularly among the elderly population. Given the growth of the Fuzhonese speaking population in the city, this dialect is also important to issues of language access. When conducting its language assessments, NYCHA should be sure to collect information on dialects, and provide services to speakers of each dialect.

INDO-CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

The Indo-Caribbean identity reflects the migration of indentured workers from India to the Caribbean region (including Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Suriname) during the 19th and early 20th centuries.[18] While the Indo-Caribbean identity is not adequately captured by census data,[19] it is known that there is a significant Indo-Caribbean population in New York. Queens is home to many Indo-Caribbean New Yorkers, particularly the Richmond Hill neighborhood, a major Indo-Caribbean enclave in the borough,[20] a section of which is commonly known as "Little Guyana."[21] There is significant immigration to New York City from the Caribbean region—though not all immigrants would identify as Indo-Caribbean. As of 2011, immigrants from Jamaica were the fourth largest immigrant group in New York City, followed by those from Guyana, with immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago also among the top ten. [22]

KOREAN COMMUNITY

The Korean population, which grew to over 100,000 people in 2010, is the third largest Asian population in New York City.[23] About half of the Korean population in New York City is limited English proficient (49%). Korean seniors in particular have language barriers, as 94% of Korean seniors had limited English proficiency.[24] The Korean community in New York has been documented as having particular issues accessing services in their language. A 2010 report found that Koreans had the most difficulty accessing services in language at city agencies including HRA and NYPD: in a survey that included multiple language groups, Koreans were least likely to receive translated materials, receive language assistance in office, or have a case worker who spoke their language.[25] While the poverty rate of Koreans was consistent with that of other New Yorkers (20%), Korean seniors have a higher poverty rate (25%) when compared to 18% of all elderly New Yorkers.[26]

PAKISTANI COMMUNITY

Pakistan gained sovereignty from British India in 1947, when the India Independence Act established Pakistan and India as separate nations, a split that fell largely along religious lines, with most Muslims going to Pakistan and Hindus to India.[27] A relatively recent increase in immigration to the U.S. from Pakistan can be traced to the diversity visa program, part of the 1990 Immigration Act.[28] In New York City, Pakistanis are the sixth largest Asian ethnic group, and one of the fastest growing.[29] The majority of Pakistanis in New York City reside in Queens and Brooklyn.[30]

The most common non-English languages spoken by Pakistani Americans are Urdu and Punjabi,[31] though Pakistan is home to diverse ethnic and ancestral dialects including Baluchi, Gujrati, and Sindhi. In New York City, 40% of Pakistanis were limited English proficient (compared to around 23% of New Yorkers overall) and Pakistani seniors had a much higher rate of limited English proficiency (71%) than the overall senior population in the city. (33%).[32] Approximately one in four Pakistanis in New York live in poverty, compared to 20% of the overall population of the city.[33]

METHODOLOGY

SURVEYS

221 NYCHA tenants were surveyed from 14 NYCHA developments, with the majority of respondents living in Smith Houses in Lower Manhattan and Queensbridge Houses in Queens.

NYCHA's 2012 NYCHA Resident Data Book (obtained via Freedom of Information Law Request), which lists basic demographic characteristics of each NYCHA development, was used to identify developments with ten or more Asian households, which we considered for possible survey sites. This information was coupled with an analysis of last names in the Voter Activation (VAN) database, to identify likely Asian tenants and their likely language.* CAAAV's surveyors spoke Bangla/Bengali, Korean, Cantonese, and Mandarin (see "Research Limitations" for more on our survey languages). In accordance with CAAAV's commitment to pan-Asian, multi-lingual organizing, a survey plan was developed to target tenants who spoke Korean and Bangla/Bengali first, as we know these communities are traditionally more underrepresented in Asian research. Canvassers prioritized developments with significant populations of Korean and Bangladeshi residents, mostly in Queens (identified through last name analysis using the voter file). Later, developments in and near New York's Chinatown, which had a high density of Chinese-speaking tenants, were visited. Once developments had been identified, CAAAV organizers, interns and volunteers door-knocked to connect with and survey tenants. We utilized an intentional sampling strategy to survey these tenants, capitalizing on buildings where organizers had established relationships and are currently building a base. This was necessary as our target population was widespread and no comprehensive information or list existed to identify their locations. As a result, some developments yielded more surveys than others.

Surveys were conducted in Bangla/Bengali, Cantonese, Korean, Mandarin, and English (note that responses from tenants whose primary language is English were not included in this analysis).

221 surveys from 14 developments				
Development	**Percentage of surveys**	**Percentage of Asian Households in Development** (2012 Resident Data Book)	**Number of Asian Households in Development** (2012 Resident Data Book)	**Borough**
Smith	24%	41%	786	Manhattan
Queensbridge (North & South combined)	20%	7%	217	Queens
Rutgers	10%	51%	366	Manhattan
Leavitt	9%	48%	40	Queens
La Guardia (including La Guardia Addition)	8%	29%	358	Manhattan
Ravenswood	8%	4%	82	Queens
Pomonok	5%	5%	100	Queens
Woodside	5%	11%	152	Queens
East River Housing	3%	6%	72	Manhattan
Marlboro	2%	14%	243	Brooklyn
Cassidy-Lafayette	2%	11%	38	Staten Island
Baruch Housing (including Baruch Addition	1%	14%	322	Manhattan
Farragut	1%	8%	109	Brooklyn
[No development listed]	1%			

* Because NYCHA does not track the languages tenants speak, this last name analysis was used to identify likely languages spoken at a given development. The correlation between last name and likely language is imperfect, and was used only to identify target developments for surveying, not to make claims about the languages tenants actually speak or about demographics of tenants or developments.

Surveys conducted in 4 non-English languages	
Language survey was conducted in	Percent
Cantonese	31%
Mandarin	20%
Korean	14%
Bangla / Bengali	14%
English	14%

n=219. Note that responses from tenants whose primary language is English were not included in this analysis.

TENANT INTERVIEWS FOR PROFILES

Targeted interviews were conducted with NYCHA tenants with whom CAAAV has been actively working. These interviews inform the tenant profiles in the report. Interviews were conducted in Korean, Mandarin and Bangla/Bengali.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

A Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request was submitted by the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center to the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to gain access to data relevant to this research study. Over 1,000 pages of documents were received in response, which included:

- Information about the staff composition and languages spoken by NYCHA's Language Services Unit and volunteer language bank.
- Sample Language Identification Card used to identify the language a tenant speaks.
- Language Assistance Services policy distributed to staff.
- Completed Interpretation Requests tracked by the Language Services unit for 2010-13.
- Completed Translation Requests tracked by the Language Services Unit for 2013.
- Application and Tenancy translation requests.
- 2013 interpretation requests by development.
- Sample translated documents.
- Resident Data Books (demographic data, by development) for 2011 and 2012.

SECONDARY SOURCE AND LEGAL RESEARCH

Legal research was conducted to investigate NYCHA's obligation under federal, state and local laws to provide language assistance for limited English proficient residents of NYCHA housing. In addition, news coverage and reports related to public housing, Asian New Yorkers and language access were reviewed.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Nearly all of the tenants we surveyed were immigrants: 95% were born outside the United States. Approximately 60% identified as Chinese, 20% as Korean and 20% as Bangladeshi. Correspondingly, most listed a Chinese dialect as their primary language (35% Cantonese, 18% Mandarin, 3% Toisanese 1% Fuzhounese, and 1% Shanghainese), 20% listed Korean, 16% listed Bangla/Bengali and 1% listed Urdu. The majority (61%) identified as female.

Most tenants were long-time NYCHA residents: half had lived in public housing for more than 10 years. Tenants were primarily very low-income, with more than half (57%) reporting estimated household incomes below $15,000. Most did not have formal education beyond a high school graduate level; nearly a third reported less than 9th grade.

Demographics of surveyed tenants		
Gender (n = 206)	Female	61%
	Male	39%
Race / Ethnicity (n = 220)	Chinese	58%
	Korean	20%
	Bangladeshi	20%
	Pakistani	1%
	Other Asian Ethnicity	1%
Language most comfortable using (n = 218)	Cantonese	35%
	Korean	20%
	Mandarin	18%
	Bangla / Bengali	16%
	English	13%
	Toisanese	3%
	Urdu	1%
	Shanghainese	1%
Place of birth (n = 210)	China	46%
	Korea	21%
	Bangladesh	19%
	Hong Kong	6.2%
	United States	5%
	Pakistan	1%
	India	1%
	Trinidad	1%
	Indonesia	1%
	Vietnam	1%
Length of time living in public housing (n = 210)	0-2 years	11%
	3-5 years	19%
	6-10 years	21%
	11-15 years	13%
	16+ years	37%
Highest level of formal education (n = 204)	Less than 9th grade	30%
	9th to 12th grade, no diploma	12%
	High school graduate, GED, or alternative	31%
	Some college, no degree	6%
	Associate's degree	4%
	Bachelors degree	13%
	Graduate of professional degree	3%
Employment status (n = 207)	Employed full-time (40 or more hours per week)	23%
	Employed part-time (less than 40 hours per week)	11%
	Not working (retired, homemaker, etc.)	56%
	Unemployed	10%
Estimated annual household income (n = 182)	Under $10,000	40%
	$10,000 - $14,999	17%
	$15,000 - $24,999	17%
	$25,000 - $34,999	9%
	$35,000 - $49,999	8%
	$50,000 or more	10%

CAAAV organizers facilitate a tenant meeting.

SURVEYED TENANTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Nine in ten tenants (91%) indicated that they speak a primary language other than English. The majority of non-English speakers reported that it would be "extremely difficult" for them to understand written information from NYCHA in English or to have a conversation about housing matters in English.

	How difficult would it be to understand written information from NYCHA (such as a letter or a lease) in English? n=198	**How difficult would it be to have a conversation about housing matters (such as at a hearing or an interview) in English?** n=197
Extremely difficult	58%	59%
Somewhat difficult	16%	10%
Not very difficult	11%	15%
Not at all difficult	16%	16%

Note that responses in the "not at all difficult" category include tenants who indicated both English and another language as primary languages. The analysis in the following pages includes responses primarily from tenants who indicated they had a need for interpretation or translation in the past three years.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Asian tenants of NYCHA are multi-lingual and widespread. The discrete resources and capacity of CAAAV, a community-based organization, meant we had to select certain languages in which to conduct surveys (Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean and Bangla/Bengali) as well as select developments to target for surveying. When possible, our surveyors administered surveys to those with whom they had other languages in common, but overwhelmingly the primary languages of our survey respondents correspond to the languages our surveyors spoke. Surveyors prioritized developments with tenants suspected to speak our target languages (based on last-name analysis), and our intentional sampling strategy capitalized on those developments with existing relationships and where CAAAV was currently building a base. Last name analysis was used only to identify developments with likely Asian tenants (and the languages they were likely to speak), not to make claims about actual demographics of tenants or those developments. Outreach to some developments yielded more surveys than others, and limits in capacity meant that no surveys were collected from the Bronx. (See our methodology section for more on the selection of developments).

We know that the languages spoken by Asian tenants extend beyond the languages in which we collected surveys. Asian tenants speak Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Vietnamese and more. The fact that additional Asian languages are not substantially represented in our survey is a result of our limitations in capacity and a lack of information from NYCHA about where LEP tenants live, not an indication that tenants do not speak these languages, or that they do not have language access needs. We also know that Asian tenants live in developments beyond those we surveyed. It is incumbent on NYCHA to take a comprehensive census to assess the full scope of tenant needs.

In addition, because NYCHA has no census of the languages spoken by its tenants, and presents demographic data only under the broad umbrella of "Asian", we cannot compare our sample to the overall populations of Asian tenants in public housing.

Our sample allows us to show a snapshot of the experience that Asian tenants have with language access in NYCHA. It reveals significant gaps, and allows us to make recommendations. The limitations on the scope of our research highlight the importance of NYCHA taking on a broad, comprehensive census of tenants with the goal of understanding the language needs of the NYCHA population.

ORIGIN OF NYCHA'S LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE SERVICES IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

In 2008, Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed Executive Order 120, instructing all city agencies providing direct services to "ensure meaningful access to such services" for Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals.[34] NYCHA adopted its Language Assistance Services Implementation Plan in 2009, following the implementation of the Executive Order. While not exclusively a city agency, NYCHA references the Executive Order when introducing its language plan on its website.[35] As a recipient of funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) NYCHA must also follow HUD's guidelines related to language access. See our "Legal Landscape" section for more on these guidelines.

NYCHA's language access services are outlined in the plan, which is available online. While the plan includes a commitment to annual review and updating, the most recently updated version is from 2011.

LANGUAGE LINE

Language Line Solutions (referred to as Language Line for the remainder of the report) is a language access services vendor, which provides an array of services including over-the-phone interpreting, onsite interpreting, document translation and training and testing services.[36] Initially founded as a non-profit, it later became a commercial business.[37] Language Line's headquarters are in Monterey, California, with global locations across 18 time zones.[38]

Language Line provides services for various industries, including healthcare providers, insurance providers, and individual business. It provides services for government agencies at the federal, state and local level.[39] NYCHA contracts with language line to provide over-the-phone interpretation services for the Centralized Call Center (CCC) as well as for tenants who need interpretation (in situations when interpretation cannot be provided by a staff interpreter/translator or a volunteer Employee interpreter).

THE CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTER*

NYCHA's Customer Contact Center (CCC), previously referred to as the Centralized Call Center, is described by NYCHA as providing "residents with one central point of contact for their apartment and development maintenance needs." [40] Tenants are instructed to call the center for emergency repair needs, scheduling of regular repairs, heat and hot water issues, and information about Housing Applications offices.

Tenants first point of contact when calling the CCC is the Interactive Voice Response system (IVR), which provides the following prompts:

- [In English]: For English press one
- [In Spanish]: For Spanish, press two
- [In English]: All others press 3 or stay on the line for the next available representative

Despite the fact that the CCC utilizes Language Line, the vendor contracted by NYCHA, to provide interpretation for non-English speaking tenants, our research finds that the CCC is largely inaccessible to Asian LEP tenants. These findings discussed on page 20.

** Note that the discussion of reforms to NYCHA proposed by the de Blasio administration have included the prospect of closing the call center and instead processing repair requests through the City's 311 system. In the event of such a change, all findings and recommendations related to the CCC should be applied to 311's system to ensure that LEP tenants have meaningful access.*

FINDINGS

FINDING 1:

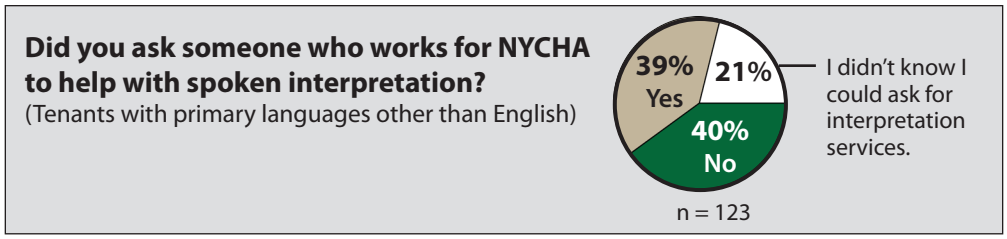
NYCHA IS NOT PROVIDING LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES TO MOST LEP ASIAN TENANTS WHO NEED THESE SERVICES

We find that most surveyed tenants who had a need for interpretation or translation did not receive these services from NYCHA, and had to instead rely on others, particularly family and friends, to interpret and translate potentially crucial and technical housing matters. The lack of connection to professional interpretation or translation can have serious consequences. We also find a disconnect between NYCHA's stated policies and the actual experience of tenants.

While NYCHA's stated policy is that interpretation can be scheduled as needed for key housing meetings such as eligibility interviews, rental appointments, or termination of tenancy hearings, we find that the majority of surveyed tenants are not being served by NYCHA when they need interpretation. Similarly, we find a disconnect between NYCHA's translation services as stated and the actual experience of tenants. According to its Language Access Plan, NYCHA provides residents with translated versions of "vital documents," as defined by guidelines set forth by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These documents include leases, 30 day notices to vacate, and notices of public hearings.[+] However, fewer than one in five surveyed tenants who needed translation in the past three years were connected with NYCHA to receive translation services.

Moreover, NYCHA's policy states that these vital documents are translated on an ongoing basis into Spanish, Chinese and Russian. This falls below the guidance of Executive Order 120, which calls for service provision in at least the top six non-English languages in New York City.

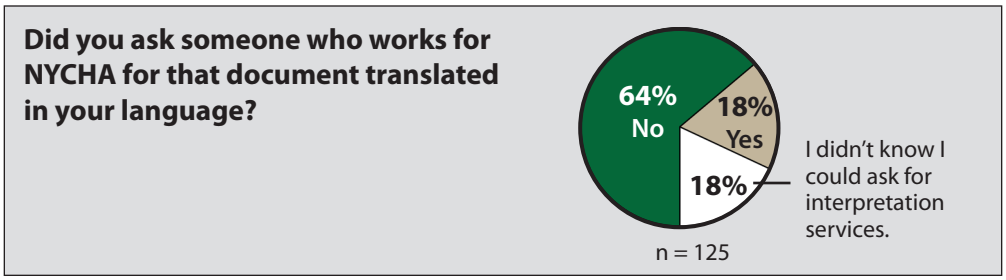
- Most LEP Asian tenants in need of spoken interpretation do not receive interpretation from NYCHA, and must rely instead on family members and friends.
    - o Of surveyed tenants who had a need for interpretation in the past three years, only about 40% were connected with NYCHA to request services.



    - o Despite the fact that NYCHA claims that Chinese is one of the primary languages it provides services in, fewer than 40% of surveyed Chinese dialect-speaking tenants who needed interpretation connected with NYCHA for that service.
    - o Of those LEP Asian tenants who were able to pursue NYCHA's interpretation, not all were successfully connected to services. Of the tenants who asked NYCHA for help with interpretation, about a quarter did not receive the interpretation they asked for.
    - o Of tenants who needed interpretation, nearly three-quarters (74%) asked someone who does not work with NYCHA for interpretation.
    - o Of those who asked someone else for help, 71% asked a family member, and 22% asked a friend.

+ NYCHA's language access plan indicates that vital documents, based on HUD guidelines, are those " that solicit or contain information for establishing or maintaining eligibility to participate in NYCHA's programs or services, or documents that create or define legally enforceable rights or responsibilities." Additional vital documents available according to NYCHA include, but are not limited to: applications to receive services and/or participate in programs and activities; annual reviews; income re-certification; notices containing information regarding eligibility or participation criteria, notices of rights, denial, loss, or reduction of benefit services; discrimination complaints.

- Most LEP Asian tenants in need of written translation do not receive translation from NYCHA, and must rely instead on family and friends.
    - o Of surveyed tenants who had a need for translation of a written housing-related document in the past three years, fewer than 1 in 5 (18%) connected with NYCHA to request services.



    - o Despite the fact that New York City Executive Order 120, which NYCHA references in the introduction to its language assistance plan, calls for service provision in at least the top six non-English languages in the city, NYCHA's vital documents are proactively translated into at most three languages (Spanish, Chinese and Russian) and our findings show that tenants are not actually receiving those translations.
    - o Despite the fact that NYCHA claims Chinese as a priority language in its translation services, only about a quarter (23%) of surveyed Chinese-speaking tenants who needed translation were connected with NYCHA for that service.
    - o Of those tenants who did request a translated document, about half report they did not receive the translation they requested.
    - o 86% of tenants who needed translation asked someone who does not work for NYCHA to translate for them. Of those who asked someone else for help, 66% asked a family member and 21% asked a friend.
    - o Of non-English speaking tenants who had been asked to sign something related to a repair in their apartment, 92% had been asked to sign a repair-related document that was not written in their language.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS FILLING THE GAP

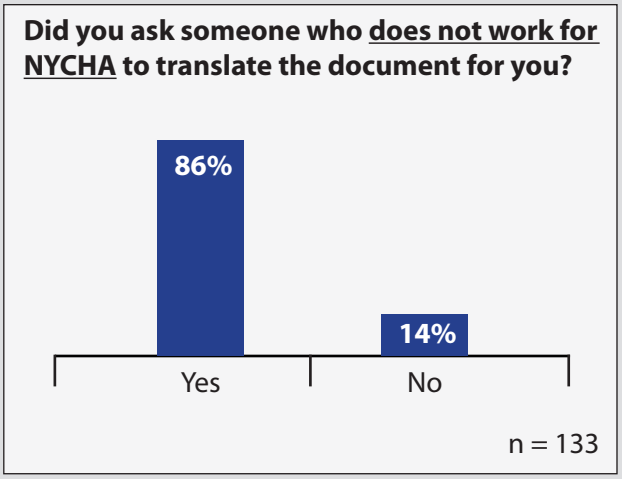
NYCHA's language access policy notes that informal interpretation will be actively discouraged:

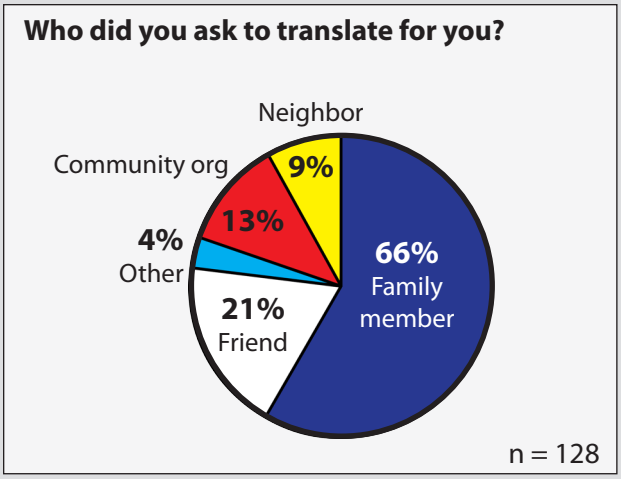
> *"NYCHA's policy and standardized procedure will discourage the use of informal interpreters such as family members, children or friends, particularly where important interests…are involved. However, a LEP person may utilize an adult family member or friend (18 years of age or older) as an interpreter after s/he is informed about the availability of free language assistance services and chooses not to use them."*[41]

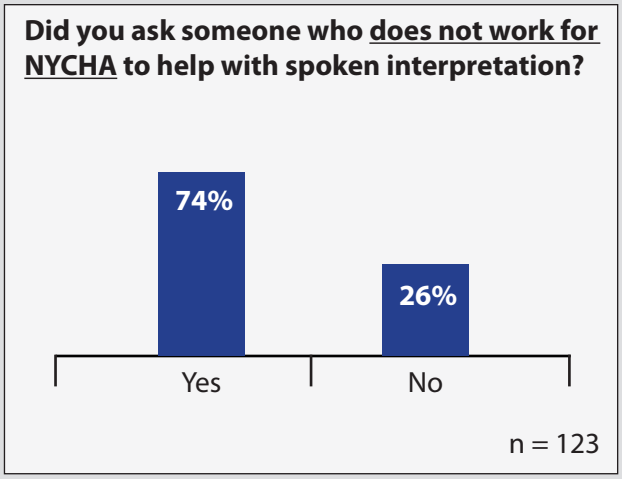
Despite this stance, our research shows that, in practice, tenants must rely on friends and family to fill the gaps in services:

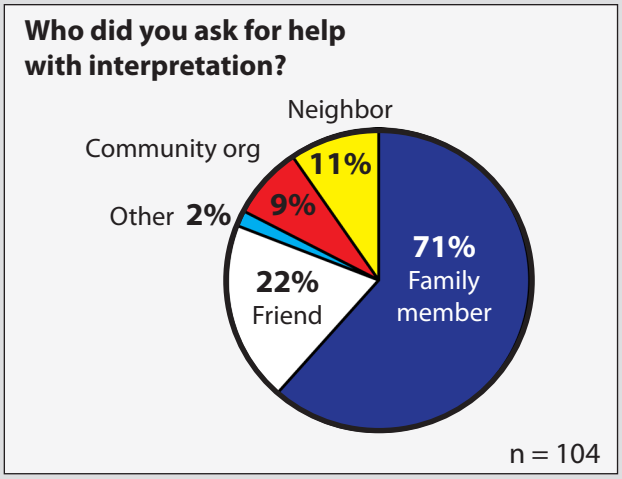
- 86% of non-English speaking tenants who needed written translation asked someone who does not work for NYCHA to help translate.
    - o Of those tenants who sought help with translation elsewhere, 66% asked a family member, and 21% asked a friend.

- Similarly, 74% non-English speaking tenants who needed interpretation asked someone who did not work for NYCHA for help with interpretation.
    - o Of those tenants who asked someone who does not work for NYCHA to interpret, 71% asked a family member and 22% asked a friend.









FINDING 2:

NYCHA DOES NOT COMPREHENSIVELY IDENTIFY OR TRACK TENANTS WHO NEED LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES

The first step in providing language assistance services to tenants is the ability to identify those tenants in need. We find that NYCHA's current practices fail to identify Asian tenants with limited English proficiency.

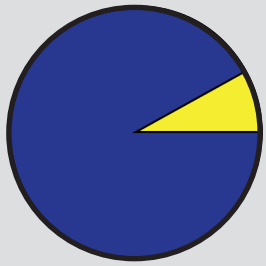
In its language access plan, NYCHA claims to identify LEP tenants through the use of language identification cards and information collected during the application and annual review processes, but we find that the methods for identifying tenants that NYCHA claims to employ are not well utilized, and that information about tenants' language needs is neither sufficiently gathered nor tracked by the Language Services Unit. If the language needs of tenants are not tracked, NYCHA cannot be proactive in providing services, and tenants must request them every time they are in need. Not only is this burdensome to tenants, but it makes NYCHA's process more cumbersome internally than is necessary. Without effective methods of identifying tenants in need of language assistance and recording those needs, the entire system of language service provision begins at a deficit.

The following are the major gaps for NYCHA in identifying LEP tenants:

- NYCHA does not take a complete census of the primary languages of tenants.
  - o Identifying tenants in need of services is crucial. NYCHA does not currently take a full census of the languages tenants speak or their English proficiency. Without a comprehensive census of the languages that residents speak, NYCHA cannot make an accurate assessment of the need for services.

- Language Identification Cards are not reaching LEP Asian tenants.
  - o NYCHA's plan notes Language Identification cards, which include the printed question "Do you speak…" in 28 different languages, are used by NYCHA staff to identify the language needs of non-English speaking tenants. Tenants are asked to point to their language on the card, and are then—ideally—connected to services in the appropriate language. However, our findings show that LEP Asian tenants are not being presented with Language Access cards.

More than 90% of tenants who listed a language other than English as a primary language did not know that NYCHA used language identification cards to help identify people with limited English proficiency.



- Information about language collected during the application and annual review processes is not comprehensive, nor is it utilized by the Language Services Unit to provide proactive language access services.
  - o NYCHA's Language Assistance Plan states that information about applicants' language needs is captured during the public housing application process and during the annual review process. However, responses to questions about language preference during the application process do not appear to be shared with the language services unit and are not used to inform the future provision of services to LEP tenants.

  - o NYCHA's Annual Review Booklets, distributed for completion by residents, asks tenants about their primary language. However, the booklet is distributed in English (with a note in Spanish, Russian and Chinese that a translated version is available) and the language questions are optional. Thus, the very question about language preference is not accessible to many LEP tenants. In addition, as with

information collected during applications, a tenant's language preference indicated in an annual review process does not appear to be shared with the Language Services Unit or used to inform service provision services.

- NYCHA's current LEP population assessment is based in part on language data collected by the Centralized Call Center (CCC), despite the fact that the CCC system is not accessible to most LEP tenants.
    - o NYCHA's language assistance plan notes that their population assessment is based on "data regarding language access services requested at LSU [Language Services Unit] and the Centralized Call Center (CCC.)" As discussed further on page 20, the call-in system for the CCC is largely inaccessible to LEP tenants who speak languages other than Spanish, because the automated voice prompts for the system are only in English and Spanish. Thus, many callers in other languages are not able to navigate the system, and the language they speak (as well as the concern they are calling about) is never identified or recorded. Despite this, NYCHA uses an assessment of calls into this system to determine the language needs of NYCHA tenants. NYCHA is using a system that is not accessible to most LEP people in an attempt to capture who those people are.

TENANT PROFILE: JUNG JAE YOUNG (정재영)

Born and raised in Gyeonggi-do, South Korea, Jung Jae Young moved to the United States in 2005. He has one son and one daughter and he has been living at the Queensbridge development for 3 years.

Young faces a language barrier with respect to NYCHA staff. "I can't communicate with them because I can't speak English," he says. Young has relied on English-speaking friends to interpret for him, noting "I went [to the office] a couple times but I always brought an English speaker. I've called them as well…I can't express my opinions strongly on the phone, so I think that we need a Korean employee that you can talk to about your problems."

The language barrier prevented him from reporting a concern about the cleaning of his development. "They don't clean around the apartment's vicinity," he says. "So I just end up cleaning outside. I want to tell them to clean, but I can't because of the language barrier." Young has relied on a senior center to fill translation needs. He has received documents from NYCHA and says: "They're all in English, of course…. I go to a [senior] daycare for a translation. They take care of it well….But for the other people who don't' have outside resources, it would be very hard for them."

"I feel very frustrated," Young says of the language barriers. "I can't talk to them, so I don't feel good….I just wish that there was someone in the [Queensbridge] office that speaks Korean , that way we can talk to them about the problems…If we could communicate, everything would be solved."

FINDING 3:

NYCHA DOES NOT EFFECTIVELY INFORM LEP ASIAN TENANTS OF LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES

Tenants in need of language access support must be aware of existing services in order to utilize them. This means that posters, flyers and other advertisements of services must effectively reach tenants with limited English proficiency; postings about services are insufficient if they don't actually inform people in need of those services. We find that the existing methods by which NYCHA advertises its language access services are not sufficiently accessible, multi-lingual, visually engaging or widely disseminated. The following findings indicate that NYCHA's current efforts are not successful in informing LEP tenants about their language access options.

- Much of NYCHA's advertising about its language access services is only in two or three non-English languages. This is despite the fact that, in introducing its language access plan online, NYCHA references New York City's Executive Order 120, which governs language access for city agencies,[42] and which calls for the provision of services in "at least the top six LEP languages spoken by the population of New York City."
    - o The Language Access Plan states that services are advertised in The NYCHA Journal, NYCHA's official newspaper. However, this newspaper is only published in English and Spanish.
    - o NYCHA's stated policy is to include written notification at the bottom of key documents (such as hearing notices and leases), which reads "translation of this document is available in your management office." However, this notice—when it appears on such documents— is only written in English, Spanish, Russian and Chinese. Moreover, many important notices do not include this notification at all, and are only in English.
    - o In failing to make services accessible to those who speak other languages, NYCHA falls short of the expectations outlined in Executive Order 120, signed by Mayor Bloomberg in 2008, which calls for service provision by city agencies in at least the top six LEP languages spoken by the population of New York City. While not a city agency, NYCHA makes reference to the Executive Order on their website when introducing their language access plan, yet does not live up to the standards the order sets out.
    - o These limited-language notifications cannot reach tenants who speak other languages.

- Advertisements that include additional languages are much less widespread and harder to read.
    - o There are posters intended for display in management offices with a note in 30 languages which reads: NYCHA offers free interpretation to Limited English Proficient residents and applicants, please speak with a staff person who will be able to assist you. These multi-lingual posters are not posted widely in the buildings in which tenants live, and they are small print and not visually engaging.

- As result of insufficient publicity about language access services, many LEP Asian tenants have never been informed that NYCHA provides language access services.
    - o In addition to the advertising methods listed above, it is also intended that NYCHA staff will identify limited English proficient tenants in the course of interaction with them, and connect with the Language Services Unit to provide appropriate services. However, we find that these advertising and identification methods are not sufficient to inform tenants of services.
    - o Of those tenants who needed interpretation or translation for a housing/NYCHA-related matter, approximately one in five had NOT been informed about NYCHA's services. 18% of those who needed a translated version of a NYCHA document did not know they could ask NYCHA for a translation, and 21% of those who had difficulty communicating with NYCHA staff or management because of a language barrier did not know they could ask NYCHA for interpretation.

- In addition, nearly one in three tenants (31%) reported that there was a time when they decided not to request a repair via the Customer Contact Center (CCC) because they did not think they could talk to someone in their language, indicating they were not aware of the interpretation options at the CCC, or had unsuccessfully tried to access interpretation in the past and become discouraged. (For more on language access and the CCC, see page 20.)

TENANT PROFILE: TONG YUN RU

Tong Yun Ru moved to Queensbridge Houses 5 years ago with his wife. He was born and raised in Shanghai and speaks Mandarin and Shanghainese.

Ru has struggled to request repairs in his apartment due to language barriers. "Repair issues have been incredibly problematic," he says. "We were really happy to receive a home. We arrived in the United States and only after a little while we had a place to live. But in the office there aren't any Chinese people so when we have repair issues…it's hard to communicate about it. We've had this wall repair issue for over half a year now. They come in and work but they leave and it's still not fixed."

"It'd be better if the workers at least understood Chinese. For us there's no way to resolve the issue because we can't learn English."

Of the Customer Contact Center, which tenants are instructed to call to request repairs, Ru says: "It doesn't work for us to call the call center. We have to have our daughter call for us. It's a bit of a bigger issue. We have to wait hours for them to come and do repairs. Sometimes they tell us they're coming and we wait for hours, or even the next day one time. When they come they give us a sheet to sign after repairs. They're all in English and we can't understand it. We have to trust they won't trick us."

FINDING 4:

THE CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTER (CCC) AND REPAIRS PROCESS ARE NOT ACCESSIBLE TO LEP ASIAN TENANTS*

NYCHA's Customer Contact Center (CCC), previously referred to as the Centralized Call Center, "provides residents with one central point of contact for their apartment and development maintenance needs."[43]

We find that this extremely important system is largely inaccessible to Asian LEP tenants. Many tenants have been deterred from calling the CCC because they did not think they could talk to someone in their language, and most of those who do call have not been able to connect to an interpreter.

In addition, the repairs process itself is inaccessible. The broader repairs crisis in NYCHA—massive repair back logs, requests that go unacknowledged, extremely long wait times, repairs that are marked as completed even though no work has been done—is exacerbated by language access issues. NYCHA does not proactively provide language access services to LEP tenants during the repair process, even if they have requested the repair in a language other than English. Nearly all surveyed tenants who have been asked to sign a document related to repairs have not been given a document in their language.

- The Customer Contact Center's Call-In System is Inaccessible.
  - o While NYCHA contracts with Language Line, a translation vendor, to provide interpretation services for the CCC, tenants must first attempt to navigate a number of steps without translation in order to reach a translator. The Interactive Voice Response system (IVR) that provides prompts to tenants calling the CCC has three options:
    - [In English]: *For English press one*
    - [In Spanish]: *For Spanish, press two*
    - [In English]: *All others press 3 or stay on the line for the next available representative*

  Clearly, for tenants who speak languages other than English or Spanish, this initial interface is inaccessible. The intended procedure for non-English and non-Spanish speakers to connect to interpretation services is to select the third option. Then, the tenant should be connected to a NYCHA representative, who should determine that they are in need of interpretation, and call in to Language Line, who will identify their language needs and connect to an appropriate interpreter. Each step of navigating the CCC system—until the connection to an interpreter—is in a language that the tenant does not speak.

- Tenants are deterred from calling the CCC because of language barriers, and most of those that do call are un able to talk to someone in their language.
  - o Nearly one in three (31%) non-English speaking tenants reported that there was a time when they decided not to request a repair via the Customer Contact Center (CCC) because they did not think they could talk to someone in their language, indicating they were not aware of the interpretation options at the CCC or that they had not been able to navigate the system when they made previous attempts to do so.

  - o Of non-English speaking tenants who called the CCC to request a repair, more than 70% had not been able to talk to someone who spoke their language.

* Note that the discussion of reforms to NYCHA proposed by the de Blasio administration have included the prospect of closing the call center and instead processing repair requests through the City's 311 system. In the event of such a change, all findings and recommendations related to the CCC should be applied to 311's system to ensure that LEP tenants have meaningful access.

- The repairs process itself is not made accessible to tenants.
    - The broader repairs crisis in NYCHA is exacerbated by language access challenges. For those tenants who do successfully schedule a repair through the CCC system, language access issues continue. NYCHA does not proactively provide interpretation or translation during the repairs process to tenants who request a repair in a language other than English.
    - Of non-English speaking tenants who had been asked to sign something related to a repair in their apartment, 92% had been asked to sign a repair-related document that was not written in their language.

TENANT PROFILE: SHAKILA AKHTHER

Shakila Akhther has lived in Ravenswood for almost 12 years with her husband and three sons, the eldest of whom is disabled. She grew up in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and speaks Bangla/Bengali.

Akhther has long-standing repair issues in her apartment, including damage in her bathroom caused by a leak upstairs. She has had varied experience calling the Centralized Call Center to request repairs:

"When I call, sometimes they have nice people who can understand. And sometimes I can't explain very well. Then that becomes a problem, they can't understand… I definitely have problems sometimes since I can't explain it to them in their language, when I have to explain in English, then it's hard for me."

Akhther was not aware that she could request interpretation over the phone. "I never told them [that I wanted services in Bangla/Bengali], and they didn't tell me either. And actually I didn't even know that that service existed."

Peeling paint in her apartment poses a health risk to Akhther's young child, and she has been forced to make her own repairs (taping over the paint) in an attempt to protect him. She isn't certain why her call for repairs to the paint has not been addressed. "I don't know if they have trouble understanding me or if they don't believe me. I have requested repeatedly, that instead of speaking to me, why don't you send someone to inspect the situation at my place. I have a little kid. This lead—this paint—you see how I have tape all over, he keeps putting it in his mouth. This is very dangerous for my child. I don't understand if it's because of my language or what, but I haven't received any kind of help as of yet."

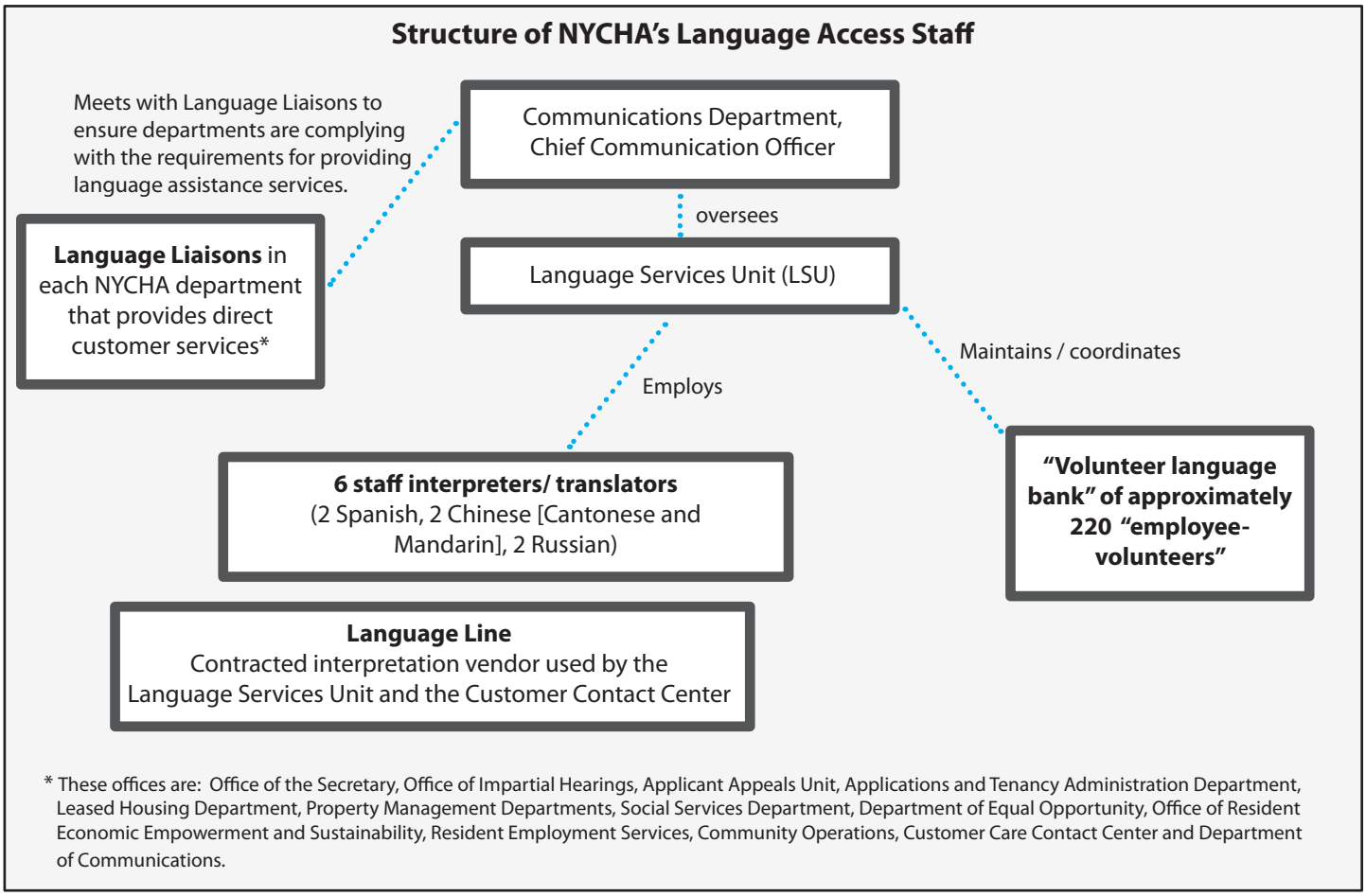
Akhther also describes being treated rudely by NYCHA staff when she has attempted to have her issues resolved. When she spoke to a staff member about her apartment condition, "He was extremely annoyed…he wanted me to go away, he wanted me to leave. The way he behaved! He said I was crazy....We have been here for 12 years...Their behavior is extremely bad. I don't understand. Maybe because I am Asian, because I am Bengali."

When asked what she would change about NYCHA's services, Akhther says: "The biggest thing is, if I can get services in my language, that would be very good because I could explain properly and share my problems. I think then they would be able to understand me properly. And I think I would get better services if I was able to explain my problems properly, maybe I would get them faster."

FINDING 5:

NYCHA'S LANGUAGE ACCESS STAFFING STRUCTURE IS NOT SUFFICIENT TO MEET THE NEEDS OF LEP ASIAN TENANTS

Our analysis finds that the composition of NYCHA's staff and volunteer interpreter pool is not sufficient to meet the needs of Asian tenants with limited English proficiency.



- NYCHA's language access staff is small and can only provide services in limited languages.
  - o NYCHA has a small language access staff—only six people for the entirety of the NYCHA population. The languages spoken by these interpreter/ translators break down as follows: two Spanish-speakers, two Russian-speakers and two Cantonese and Mandarin-speakers (two staff people who speak both dialects). Thus, Mandarin and Cantonese are the only Asian languages represented among NYCHA language access staff.

- NYCHA relies on employee volunteers to supplement its language access services. Asian languages are not sufficiently represented among this volunteer bank, and volunteer service is not a desirable way to meet the needs of tenants.
  - o NYCHA relies largely on volunteer employees, who agree to assist with language access in addition to their regular, full-time job duties. An analysis of NYCHAs 2014 Language Volunteer Bank of 213 people (received in response to our Freedom of Information Law Request) shows that few of their volunteers speak the languages represented by survey respondents, particularly Korean and Bangla/Bengali.

(finding 5 continued)

In addition, while it is admirable that so many employees are willing to volunteer their time in addition to their regular job duties, relying on them to do so has not yielded quality services for tenants. High quality interpretation and translation require significant training and time, so a pool of volunteers who are also working full-time jobs rather than professionals (either professional staff or interpreter/translators from a contracted vendor) is not a desirable or effective way to meet the language needs of NYCHA tenants.

Asian Languages Represented in NYCHA's Volunteer Language Bank

Language spoken by volunteers	Number of NYCHA Staff Volunteers	Percent of total language bank that speak this language
Cantonese	27	13%
Mandarin	22	10%
Hindi	21	10%
Bangla / Bengali	10	5%
Gujarati	9	4%
Urdu	7	3%
Punjabi	5	2%
Malayalam	5	2%
Korean	2	1%
Marathi	2	1%
Farsi	2	1%
Tagalog / Filipino	2	1%
Arabic	1	<1%
Burmese	1	<1%
Japanese	1	<1%

Note that there are a total of 74 NYCHA employee volunteers represented in the table above; some speak more than one language.

TENANT PROFILE: APRIL SIMPSON

April Simpson was elected president of the Queensbridge Tenants Association (TA) in January 2013. Simpson is dedicated to the Queensbridge community. "I'm a resident first before any title," she says. "That's why I'm so passionate about making sure all the residents have…what is substantially good for them to be better residents in the community."

Though Simpson feels strongly about engaging limited English proficient Asian tenants in the monthly meetings of the TA, she faces challenges doing so. "I'm the president of the Queensbridge Tenant and Housing Association, this also means I'm an advocate for all the residents," she says. "It's frustrating because I want to help [LEP tenants] but I don't speak their language and they don't speak mine. There is also a cultural trust barrier. You don't ask for help from somebody that can't identify what you are going through. You want to speak with someone that can understand what your barriers are. I feel hurt because I want to help all of them and it's not fair to them…I want to reach out to them to unify the community."

"The main issue is the language barrier," Simpson says. "I believe [LEP tenants] are not informed and we just cannot get across the barrier. We want to add them and welcome them into our community. It would be a blessing to bring everyone together and brainstorm in order to bring out community better."

Additional resources from NYCHA would enable Simpson to bridge these gaps. "If someone can facilitate and provide translations for fliers [that would help], and someone that can reach out to our residents," she says. "I look at my community as my family. We want everyone to be included. I want the residents to tell me what they want to see and what I can do to help them."

FINDING 6:

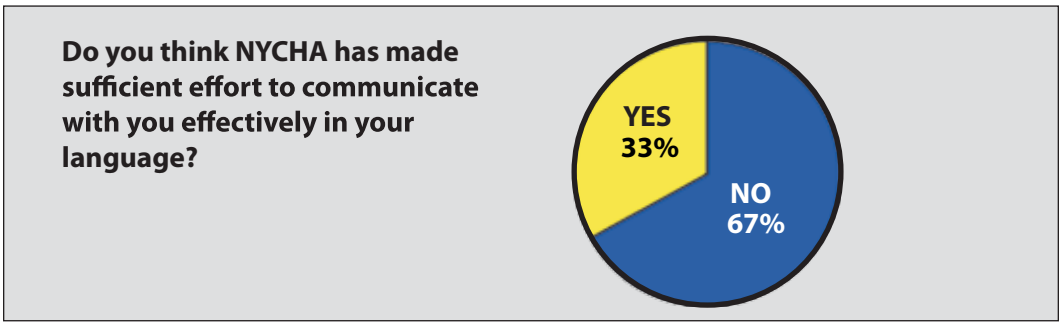
NYCHA DOES NOT HAVE MECHANISMS IN PLACE TO SOLICIT, EVALUATE OR UTILIZE FEEDBACK FROM TENANTS ABOUT LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES

Quality control and internal assessments are crucial to good service provision. We find that tenants—the intended recipients of language access services at NYCHA—feel there is more that NYCHA could do to communicate with them effectively. However, there is no formal mechanism for tenants to give this feedback.

- Tenants do not feel NYCHA's language access services are sufficient, but there is no formal way for them to share feedback or generate recommendations for improvement.

  The extent to which NYCHA formally evaluates the quality of its service provision is unclear. The Language Liaisons (staff in each NYCHA department that provides direct services) report to the Director of Communications about language access issues in their departments, and the Language Services Unit does overall review and evaluation of what services were provided. However, there is no widely used mechanism for the recipients of these services—the tenants themselves—to give feedback or rate the quality of services or identify gaps.

  o Overall, more than two-thirds (67%) of tenants who speak a language other than English do not believe that NYCHA has taken sufficient steps to communicate with them in their language.



  o Feedback from service recipients is essential for quality control and improvements of any system. NYCHA does not currently have mechanisms in place to solicit, evaluate or utilize comprehensive feedback from tenants with limited English proficiency. More than two thirds of tenants do not feel NYCHA has made sufficient efforts to communicate with them effectively in their language, but have no formal channel by which to communicate this to NYCHA or to make recommendations for improvement.

Queensbridge tenant meeting.

TENANT PROFILE: WANG FU GEN

Wang Fu Gen moved to the United States in 2009 to be with his daughter. He was born and raised in Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province in China and speaks Mandarin and Shanghainese. He and his wife have lived in Queensbridge Houses for two years.

Gen identifies two issues with the office at his development: "First is the language problem; we can't communicate. The other is that the staff towards Asian immigrants are not very warm; in fact they're very indifferent. When you have issues and you go into the office they're not friendly. Also their materials are in English so we cannot read and understand them."

In addition, the signage at his development is often inaccessible to him: "[T]he front door usually has signs and advertisements. It's always just in English and Spanish, it's rarely in Chinese. It'd be good if it was in Chinese."

"Sometimes my daughter comes to the office to help me translate," Gen says. "It's a strategy that works. Sometimes it's a bother though. Because we have this language issue we don't have any way of solving our issues."

These communication challenges are taxing for Gen: "When we have language barriers I feel really embarrassed and awkward. No one in the office understands Chinese. I'm 66 years old; it's tiring to have these language communication issues."

"I'd like there to be someone in the office who could speak and understand Chinese," Gen says. "I'd also want to make sure that all the materials, documents and posters on the wall be translated into Chinese as well as Spanish and English. Lastly, another option would be to have a comment/ complaint box where I could write my name, phone number and issue. Then once a week someone who speaks Chinese could come in and follow up."

LEGAL LANDSCAPE

NYCHA's services to tenants with limited English proficiency are governed by federal and city laws, in addition to the policies of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

FEDERAL REGULATIONS

As a federally funded program, NYCHA must avoid policies that have a discriminatory impact on the basis of national origin.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits federally-funded programs from discriminating against participants based on race, color, or national origin. The Supreme Court has ruled that preventing Limited English Proficient (LEP) persons from realizing the intended benefits of a federally-funded program constitutes discrimination based on "national origin."[44]

NYCHA is subject to Title VI's requirements, as it receives its federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

In 2000, President Clinton issued Executive Order 13166 to reinforce the Title VI obligations of federal funding recipients as they pertain to the provision of services for limited English proficient individuals. This executive order also required all federal agencies to issue Title VI guidance on this subject to recipients of their federal funds.

GUIDANCE FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD)

HUD provides guidance to NYCHA and other funding recipients about language access.

Following President Clinton's executive order reinforcing the Title VI obligations of federal funding recipients, HUD issued a guidance document in 2007 for its funding recipients, including NYCHA.[45]

HUD's guidelines require:

- Provision of both oral (interpretation) and written (translation) services.
- A written language access plan detailing staff training, notification of language services, and the monitoring of language access policies.
- Identification and ongoing assessment of the language needs of LEP individuals.

HUD's guidance document offers "flexible and fact-dependent" standards for determining "reasonable steps" service providers need to take to comply with Title VI. Four factors govern this assessment: (1) the number or proportion of LEP persons served by a grantee; (2) the frequency with which LEP persons are in contact with the program; (3) the importance of the program to people's lives; (4) the resources available to the grantee to implement LEP focused measures. The more significant and frequent the interaction between the recipient of HUD funding and LEP individuals, the greater the federal funding recipient's obligation is to provide language access services.

HUD reserves the right to sanction funding recipients who do not comply with HUD's Title VI requirements. Sanctions may include suspension or termination of funding or referring the matter to the Department of Justice for enforcement proceedings or litigation.

NEW YORK STATE LAWS

New York State Human Rights Law

New York State Human Rights Law prohibits discrimination in "publicly-assisted" housing on the basis of national origin.

CITY LEVEL LAWS

Executive Order 120

Signed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2008, Executive Order 120 requires city agencies to ensure meaningful access to direct public services for LEP individuals. While the housing authority is not exclusively a city agency, NYCHA references Executive Order 120 on their website in introducing their Language Assistance Services Implementation, which was first developed in 2009, shortly after the order was signed. Despite a commitment to update the plan annually, NYCHA has not made a revised version of its available since 2011.

New York City's Human Rights Law

New York City's Human Rights Law prohibits discrimination on the basis of national origin in the "terms, conditions, and sale" of housing as well as the "furnishing of facilities or services in connection therewith in." Individuals who feel their rights have been violated under the City's Human Rights Law may file a complaint with the New York City Commission on Human Rights.[46]

PROPOSED LEGISLATION

In New York State, there have been repeated legislative attempts to improve NYCHA's language access policies. Since 2009, New York State legislators in both houses have annually re-introduced a bill that would require NYCHA to implement language assistance services in its public housing developments.[47] The proposed legislation would require NYCHA to provide the following accommodations in any development where it is found that 10% of residents are not proficient in English:

- Employing at least one person proficient in the languages spoken by residents;
- Considering language proficiency when hiring staff;
- Training staff on how to use the Language Services Unit;
- Providing translation of all commonly-used forms and informational material.

To date, these bills have been referred to the relevant committees and have died in committee in each session without coming up for a vote.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis of NYCHA's existing policies and practices, coupled with the findings from our surveys and researcher observations, inform the following set of recommendations for NYCHA.

Our research shows that tenants who speak Asian languages are not sufficiently served by NYCHA's current systems. While we emphasize the need for quality services in Asian languages—including Cantonese, Mandarin, Toisanese, Fuzhounese, Shanghainese, Korean, Bangla/Bengali , Urdu and Arabic—we offer recommendations to reform NYCHA's services for all tenants with limited English proficiency.

Language access issues impact tenants' ability to understand crucial housing matters, and can impact their health, safety, the stability of their housing, and their sense of belonging to NYCHA's community. To move toward a system that provides meaningful access to all tenants, NYCHA should implement the following reforms.

LEP POPULATION ASSESSMENT AND TRACKING

1. **Take additional steps to identify and track tenants with limited English proficiency**.

   o **NYCHA should develop a single, centralized database to track the language service needs of limited English proficient tenants**. This would streamline NYCHA's process, allow them to proactively identify tenant needs, and eliminate the need for tenants to repeatedly request services. NYCHA should review the system utilized by Family Independence Administration (part of the Human Resources Administration), which has built a "Tracking Language Access Indicators" screen into their Paperless Office System (POS) that records a client's language preferences, need for interpretation and translation, and the type of interpreter services used.[48] NYCHA should tailor its system to its client base and administer it properly and reliably.

   o **NYCHA should, at a minimum, do the following to populate this central database of language service needs**:

   - **Modify the Language Identification Cards already designed so that they can be used to *record* the primary language of tenants** rather than only being used as a one-time, in-person way of identifying a tenant's primary language. These cards should be more widely used, as most surveyed tenants did not know about them. Cards should also be distributed to tenants so they can bring them to NYCHA appointments.
   - **Input into a centralized database all information about primary language that NYCHA collects**, including information collected during eligibility interviews, in the Annual Review Booklet, from requests to the Language Services Unit and elsewhere.

   o **Implement a comprehensive census on the languages spoken by NYCHA tenants, to be conducted every three years.**
   Without an accurate picture of its population, NYCHA cannot accurately assess the need for language services, tailor services to developments with high density of particular languages, or evaluate their service provision. Every three years, NYCHA should undertake a census of its tenants to understand what the language needs are (as recommended in proposed state legislation).[49]

2. **Improve data collection and reporting on demographics of residents**.

   o NYCHA should collect and make available comprehensive, disaggregated data about race, ethnicity, country of origin and primary language of NYCHA tenants.

   o NYCHA should differentiate between dialects when collecting and reporting information about language needs and services.

   o NYCHA should collect and make available comprehensive, up-to-date data about the tenants served through its language access programs.

INFORMING TENANTS OF LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES

3. **Disseminate information about language access services more widely, and ensure that information about available services is shared in the languages tenants speak.**
   Our research shows that many tenants in need of language access services are unaware of NYCHA's current policies and procedures. To more widely inform tenants of its services, NYCHA should:

   - **Post a language access services poster widely in every housing development**. NYCHA's existing interpretation services poster, currently in some management offices, should be widely posted in the housing developments.

   - **Work with a designer to create eye-catching, visually appealing, culturally competent, large print and legible posters** about language services, and solicit tenant feedback about the posters before they are finalized to ensure they are accessible and effective.

   - **Expand the notice about available translation to include at least the top ten languages spoken by NYCHA tenants** (to be identified via the language census). Include the notice at the beginning, rather than the end, of documents. This notice, which reads "A translation of this document is available in your management office," is currently printed at the bottom of leases, hearing notices, and other documents in Spanish, Russian and Chinese. It should be printed in at least the top ten languages spoken by NYCHA tenants, and should be more prominently featured on the document. These languages should be identified by a census of NYCHA tenants; until that time, the list of languages identified in the Department of Education's language access policies should be used.*

   - **In addition, a separate page notifying tenants of translation availability should be included with all mailings**. This stand-alone document could include information in the 30 languages that NYCHA's language access services poster includes.

   - **Ensure that Tenant Associations and Community Centers have information about NYCHA's language access services**, so they can provide appropriate resources and referrals to tenants with limited English proficiency.

4. **Develop strategies to ensure that tenants with low levels of literacy in their primary language are notified of NYCHA policies and services.**
   Most of NYCHA's current strategies for informing tenants of language access services are written (written notices, signage, etc.). Tenants with low levels of literacy in their primary language will not be able to access this information. To ensure that these tenants are informed of language access services, NYCHA should:

   - **Set up in-person trainings at developments with non-English speaking tenants**, to review the language access policies, procedures and services.

   - **Train staff to call Language Line (or other language vendor, if applicable) if they are with a tenant who they have identified as non-English speaking** and who is not able to utilize the written materials (like Language Identification Cards) used to identify language needs.

* These languages are: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Urdu.

PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY, PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES THROUGH TARGETED AND STREAMLINED SYSTEMS

5. **Arrange for language access services proactively, whenever possible.**
   With the establishment of a centralized database to track tenant needs, NYCHA could be proactive about providing interpretation and translation. This would streamline their process, and reduce the burden on tenants (who currently have to request services every time they are needed) as well as on the staff who respond to each request. NYCHA should:

   o **Proactively translate key written documents**:
   - With adequate tracking of the language needs of tenants, NYCHA could translate vital documents (such as leases, hearing notices, and/or applications to receive services) in advance. Documents could be sent to tenants in the appropriate language, without a tenant having to request translation for each document they receive.

   o **Proactively arrange for interpretation in advance of meetings**:
   - If a database were developed to track the language needs of tenants, interpretation at key meetings could be arranged in advance.

6. **Tailor language services to developments with limited-English proficient tenants.**
   For developments where ten percent or more of tenants are not English proficient or where ten households or more speak a given non-English language, NYCHA should:

   o **Ensure that every tenant has access to at least one staff person who speaks their language**.

   o **Translate all signage, forms and informational materials** into the languages spoken at the development.

   o **Hold regular, language-specific "office hours" at developments in the languages that tenants speak.**

   - NYCHA should hold regular "office hours" at the developments in the languages that tenants speak. A bilingual NYCHA staff person should be available at specified times to answer questions, connect tenants to necessary services, and ensure that tenants are aware of the array of language access options that NYCHA offers.

7. **Ensure that non-English speakers can successfully navigate the CCC system.***
   o Our research finds that the Customer Contact Center (CCC) is currently inaccessible to many tenants who speak Asian languages. To improve access to the call system, NYCHA should:

   - **Expand the language prompts in the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system, to include the top ten languages spoken by NYCHA tenants.** These languages would be determined by NYCHA's language census. Until that census takes place, the list of languages identified in the Department of Education's language access policies should be used.** Language prompts could be ordered from most to least commonly spoken, to reduce the number of prompts that most callers will listen to.
   - **Train all staff answering phones to identify limited English proficient tenants and connect them with an interpreter via Language Line (or other language vendor, if applicable).**
   - **Produce multi-lingual materials with instructions for limited English-proficient tenants on navigating the CCC, and insure that any materials (in print and online) that instruct tenants to call the CCC include multi-lingual instructions.**
   - **Conduct in-person trainings for tenants in appropriate languages at developments on how to utilize the call-in system, as well as other language access systems.**

* Note that recently announced NYCHA reform plans have included using the City's 311 system, rather than NYCHA's call center, to process repair requests. In the event that this change takes place, recommendations related to language access at the CCC should be applied to navigation of the 311 system.

** These languages are: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Urdu.

8. **Ensure that the repair process is accessible to tenants with limited English proficiency.**
   - **o Provide interpretation during the repair process** so that tenants can communicate with those performing the repairs.
     - Tenants should be able to indicate their need for interpretation in advance of the repair, and/or this need should be identified by use of a centralized database. All repairs that are requested in a non-English language should be flagged as needing interpretation.
     - Those performing repairs should be trained in the use of NYCHA's language access services, so that they can call for over-the-phone interpretation as needed.

   - **o Require that documents related to repairs are made available in the languages tenants speak.** NYCHA should ensure that all documents tenants are asked to sign related to repairs are translated into their language. Of non-English speaking tenants who signed a document related to a repair, *more than 90% signed a document that was not in their language.*
     - Tenants should be able to indicate their need for a translated document in advance of the repair, and/or this need should be identified by use of a centralized database. All repairs that are requested in a non-English language should be flagged as needing translated documents.
     - A multi-lingual document explaining that translation is available, and how it can be obtained, should be included with any English-only repair documents.

ENSURING LANGUAGE ACCESS IN KEY AREAS OF TENANT COMMUNITY: COMMUNITY CENTERS AND TENANT ASSOCIATIONS

9. **Support expanded language access at NYCHA community centers.**
   Community centers can be important social, recreational and service sites for tenants. To ensure these sites are accessible to tenants with limited English proficiency, and that they are equipped to inform tenants of language access services, NYCHA should:
   - **o Hold language access trainings for community center staff,** to ensure they are aware of NYCHA's language access policies and services.
   - **o Provide community centers with materials advertising and explaining NYCHA's language access services.**
   - **o Ensure that all ESL programs run at community centers have a relationship to NYCHA's Language Services Unit and are able to connect tenants to NYCHA's language access services.**
   - **o Provide supplemental financial resources for interpretation and translation to community centers in developments where ten percent or more of tenants are not English proficient or where ten households or more speak a given non-English language** to ensure they can build language access in to their programming.

10. **Support expanded language access at NYCHA Tenant Associations.**
    Tenant Associations are another crucial site of tenant engagement. NYCHA should ensure that TAs are knowledgeable about language access services, and are accessible to non-English speaking tenants.
    - **o Hold language access trainings for Tenant Association leadership,** to ensure they are aware of NYCHA's language access policies and services.
    - **o Provide Tenant Associations materials advertising and explaining NYCHA's language access services.**
    - **o Provide supplemental resources for interpretation and translation to Tenant Associations in developments where ten percent or more of tenants are not English proficient or where ten households or more speak a given non-English language,** to ensure they can build language access in to their programming.

ENSURING LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES RECEIVE THE APPROPRIATE RESOURCES

11. **Dedicate sufficient resources for language access staffing and services.**
NYCHA's tenant population is large and linguistically diverse. Our research shows that NYCHA's current language access systems and staffing need to be expanded and improved, and this cannot be done without sufficient resources. To that end, NYCHA should:

- **Increase staffing the Language Services Unit to meet the needs of tenants.** NYCHA needs sufficient staff to serve its LEP population, and should move away from a reliance on an employee-volunteer pool. Our research shows that the current staffing structure is not successfully meeting the needs of tenants who speak Asian languages, particularly Korean, Bangla/Bengali, and other languages not staffed in the LSU. Without sufficient support from NYCHA, tenants must rely on others, particularly family members, to interpret or translate.

- **Identify and allocate sufficient resources from their budget toward improving their language access services,** including: staffing an expanded Language Services Unit, assessing and tracking the languages spoken by their tenants, updating the CCC's Interactive Voice Response system, and disseminating information about their services more widely and in additional languages.

- **Ensure that senior services, services for people with disabilities, and other services at NYCHA are sufficiently resourced and equipped to offer language assistance.**

- **Offer supplemental funding for interpretation and translation to Tenant Associations and community centers in developments where ten percent or more of residents are not English proficient.** These dedicated funds will ensure that Tenant Associations and community centers—both crucial sites of tenant engagement, services, and information—are able to serve non-English speaking tenants.

ESTABLISHING CLEAR SYSTEMS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE, TENANT INPUT, COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES

12. **Update and publish NYCHA's language access plan.**

- Despite a commitment to update the Language Assistance Services Implementation Plan annually, and updated version of the plan has not been made available since 2011. The plan should be revised, updated and published on an annual basis.

13. **Widely advertise the new 311 language access complaint system.**
For purposes of quality control, and in the interest of improving language access services, a formal mechanism by which tenants can make complaints about language access service provision is crucial. Beginning in April 2015, LEP New Yorkers can call 311 to file a language access complaint related to services from New York City government agencies or mayoral offices. Agencies will have 14 days to investigate, resolve the issue and respond to the complaint Complaints related to services at NYCHA can be received through this system. Posters advertising this system have been developed. NYCHA should post these 311 complaint posters prominently in all offices, including those at developments, that serve tenants. Posters should also be displayed in all buildings where ten percent or more of tenants are not English proficient or where ten households or more speak a given non-English language.

14. **<u>Include tenants and community groups as partners in evaluating and improving language access services</u>.** Tenants with limited English proficiency are uniquely qualified to give feedback on NYCHA's services, and community based organizations that work closely with these tenants can also provide valuable feedback. NYCHA should:

    - **Solicit regular feedback from tenants with limited English proficiency** about the quality of language access services.
    - **Pilot newly developed materials and language access advertising strategies with tenants before they are finalized,** to ensure that materials are accessible and effective.
    - **Establish a language access task force which includes tenants and community groups, and convene regular meetings to review and discuss language access services, and generate recommendations for improvement.**

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