

May 31, 2006

# HEAR THIS!

The Need for Multilingual Housing Services in New York City



A report of the Communities for Housing Equity Coalition:  
Asian Americans for Equality, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities,  
Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center, Make the Road by Walking,  
Neighbors Helping Neighbors, The New York Immigration Coalition, University Settlement Society of New York

Report writing and research support provided by the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center

## Executive Summary

Strong housing code enforcement is necessary to ensure safe and healthy living conditions for all residents in New York City. However, without adequate, multi-lingual outreach and services from the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD), immigrant and limited English proficient (LEP) residents are unable to hold negligent landlords accountable and ensure lawful and safe housing conditions for themselves and their families.

Based on the findings from 697 surveys conducted between July 2005 and February 2006 with immigrant and LEP tenants, this report shows that immigrant and LEP New Yorkers are living in unhealthy and unsafe living conditions, and yet overwhelmingly do not know that there is a city agency, HPD, designed to help them address their housing needs.

- **60% of survey respondents reported living with one or more critical housing code violation(s) in the past 12 months.**
- **62% of respondents did not know that there is a governmental agency, HPD, dedicated to meet the housing needs of New York residents.**

Moreover, our research shows that immigrant communities are significantly under-accessing the important code enforcement housing services provided by HPD, and that, when they do, the lack of comprehensive and consistent language service provision presents barriers to effective service implementation and the timely correction of their housing problems.

- **Only 18% of survey respondents reported their housing problem to HPD.**
- **Almost half (43%) of those who did not file a complaint with HPD said that it was due either to a lack of knowledge about HPD, or because they did not speak English well enough and they did not feel comfortable asking someone to interpret or could not find an interpreter.**
- **Nearly half (46%) of those who did successfully file a complaint reported that written correspondence about their case was not translated into their primary language.**
- **Only 10% of those who had an inspector come to their apartment reported that he or she showed them the required language card to help identify language needs in order to connect them to HPD-contracted translation services.**

Communities for Housing Equity's startling survey findings confirm the necessity of the provision of multi-lingual services to ensure that all City residents are equally accessing critical government services. Providing equal access to government services is not only the right thing to do, it is mandated by federal, and in many cases, state and city, laws. Therefore, we call on Mayor Bloomberg, HPD Commissioner Shaun Donovan, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and other public officials to take the necessary administrative and legislative action to ensure that all New Yorkers are guaranteed access to the city's critical housing services by ensuring appropriate outreach strategies, bilingual informational materials and correspondence, and most importantly the adequate staffing of bilingual inspectors.

## Introduction

Strong and effective housing code enforcement is fundamental for New York City residents to live under safe and healthy living conditions. However, due to lack of adequate, multi-lingual outreach and services from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), immigrant and limited English proficient (LEP) residents are unable to hold negligent landlords accountable and ensure lawful and safe housing conditions for themselves and their families.

The city government must ensure that all residents in the city have equal access to the critical services it provides. This is specifically important for immigrant and low-income communities that are particularly vulnerable to landlord abuse and are exposed to living conditions that put their health and that of their families at risk. Where over 40% of New York City residents were born outside of the U.S. and nearly half (47%) of all New Yorkers speak a language other than English, all levels of City government must make language access a priority.<sup>1</sup>

During the months of July 2005 through February 2006, Communities for Housing Equity, a coalition of community-based and advocacy organizations that provide housing related services and/or organize tenants in immigrant communities across the city, conducted 697 surveys with New York City residents from diverse immigrant communities to understand and document the existence of serious housing code violations, immigrants' knowledge of HPD, and their experiences with HPD if services were ever accessed. This report outlines our main findings and recommendations stemming from that research.



These images are from an apartment in Sunset Park that Neighbors Helping Neighbors organizes. The first image is a hole in the kitchen ceiling that has resulted from extensive water damage. The following picture is of a child who lives in the same apartment complex. This child is pointing to an area in the kitchen that has lead paint.

Photo Credit: Neighbors Helping Neighbors

## What We Found:

### Immigrant residents with limited English proficiency are marginalized from access to important City housing services

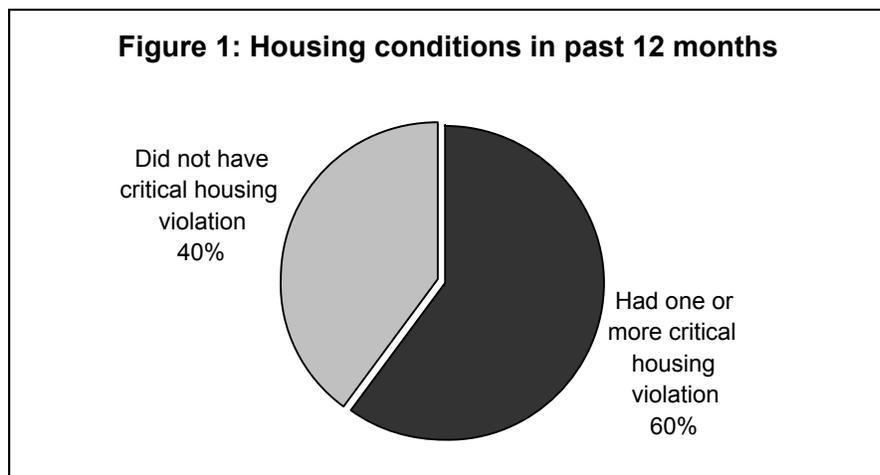
Our research found that while immigrant residents live with serious and hazardous housing problems, they overwhelmingly are not aware of the existence of HPD or are unable to access the important assistance this agency is mandated to provide them due to the lack of interpretation and translation services. Moreover, immigrant LEP residents are significantly less likely to know about HPD or access HPD services than residents who are proficient in English.

The following sections highlight the barriers that prevent immigrant and LEP residents from accessing the housing services provided by HPD. In addition, we outline concrete steps that can be taken to address these barriers to ensure that all New Yorkers live in a safe and healthy environment for themselves and their families.

### 1. Residents of immigrant communities are exposed to unsafe and unhealthy living situations.

Our research highlights the poor living conditions of many immigrant residents. We found that a majority of respondents reported living with critical housing code violations such as little or no heat, hot water, and running water; collapsing ceilings; leaking pipes and leaking gas. As shown in Figure 1:

- **60% of respondents reported living with one or more critical housing code violation(s) in the past 12 months.**



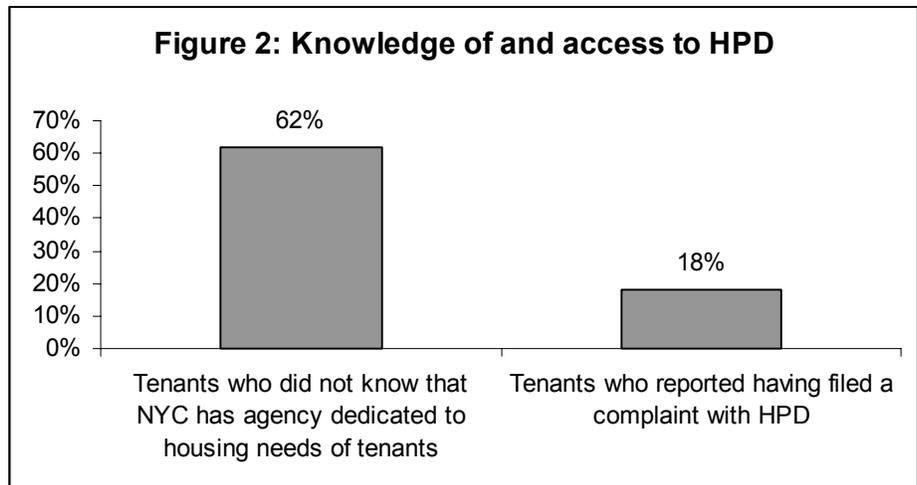
## 2. HPD services are seriously under accessed by residents of immigrant communities due to lack of knowledge and language barriers.

*HPD outreach efforts are failing to reach immigrant communities where its services are critically needed.*

Our research found that a startling percentage of LEP residents do not know of the existence of HPD, as shown in Figure 2:

- **62% of respondents did not know that the city has an agency dedicated to meet the housing needs of New York residents (called HPD).**

HPD's current outreach strategies largely depend on free media and public relations, the HPD website and the provision of



relatively small grants to non-profit organizations in select communities. Given the percentage of survey respondents who do not know of HPD, these strategies are clearly not sufficient or entirely effective in meeting the need of immigrant communities. For example, although HPD has made great strides in updating and posting multilingual documents on their website, only 2% of those surveyed reported having accessed the site. While their efforts should be continued, web-based outreach strategies cannot be relied on to reach the vast majority of immigrant communities.

While we support HPD collaboration with and the provision of financial support to community-based organizations as Neighborhood Preservation Consultants, the grants are not sufficient to reach large numbers of the community and only a very small portion of each grant is dedicated to outreach.<sup>ii</sup> It is imperative, therefore, that HPD implement comprehensive, targeted and linguistically and culturally sensitive outreach strategies (e.g., regular and multilingual communication and information from the agency; culturally and linguistically appropriate community-based outreach; including street outreach and neighborhood events; and increased support to community organizations and institutions) in order to ensure that immigrant and LEP tenants know of the resources and assistance available to them through HPD.

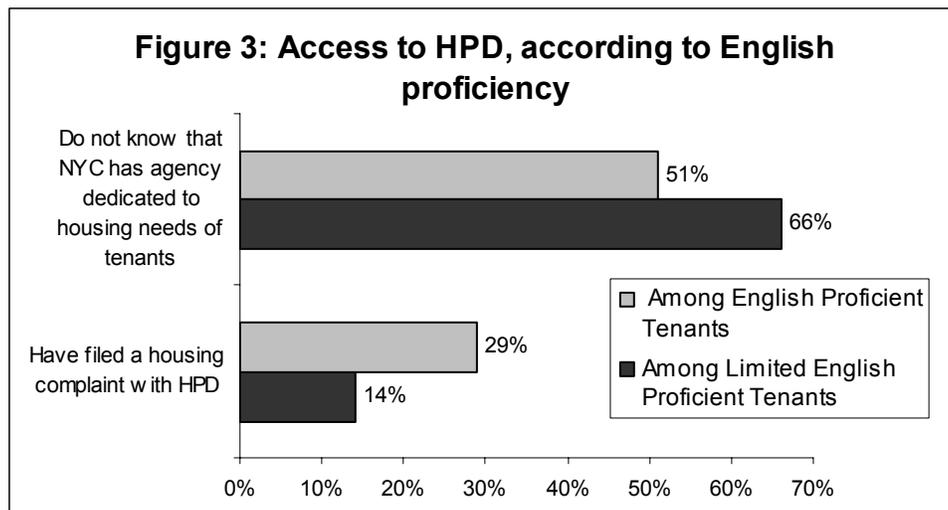
Given the percentage of survey respondents who do not know of HPD, it is not surprising that very few residents reported turning to HPD as a resource, as shown in Figure 2:

- **Only 18% of those with serious housing violations had reported their housing problem to HPD.**

***Language and Knowledge of HPD as Principal Barriers to Filing Complaints.***

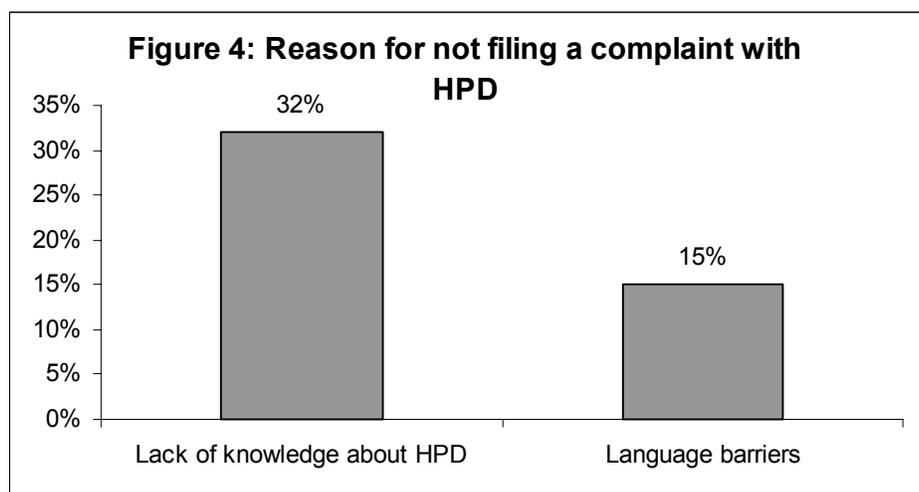
Our research shows that LEP residents are significantly less likely to know that HPD exists, much less file a complaint to HPD than residents who are proficient in English, as shown in Figure 3:

- **Two-thirds (66%) of LEP residents reported that they did not know of HPD, as compared to 51% of English proficient residents.**
- **English proficient residents were more than twice as likely (29%) to have filed a complaint with HPD than their LEP counterparts (14%).**



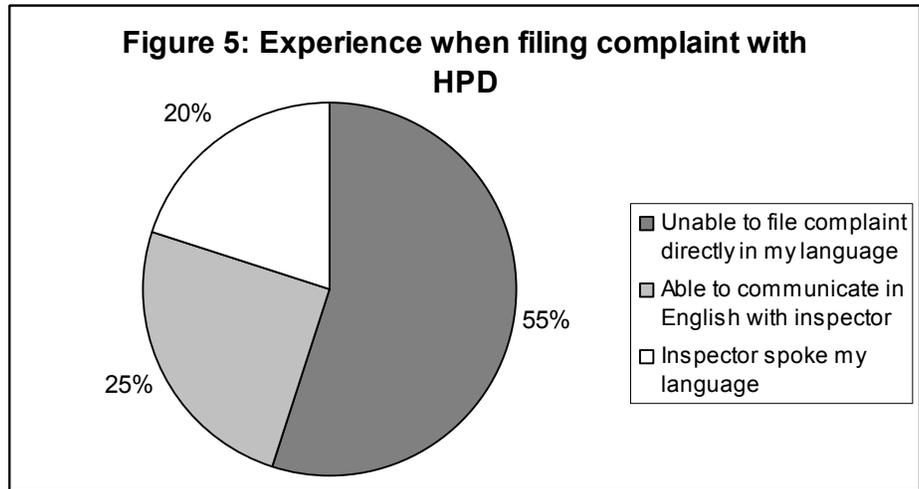
While some respondents said they were able to turn to their landlord and others said they would just fix the problem themselves, many identified lack of knowledge about HPD and language barriers as the reason for not accessing this important service. As shown in Figure 4:

- **Nearly a third (32%) of those who never filed a complaint with HPD said that it was due a lack of knowledge about HPD;**
- **15% said that it was because they did not speak English well enough and did not feel comfortable asking someone to interpret or could not find an interpreter.**



Language barriers continued to present a problem even among those who had the necessary information and felt comfortable enough to attempt to file a complaint. As shown in Figure 5:

- **Over half (55%) of those who tried to file a complaint were either unable to file the complaint due to language barriers or filed it only with the help of a translator that they personally supplied (generally a family member<sup>iii</sup> or neighbor).**



### **Tenant Profile # 1:**

#### ***Lack of knowledge and language assistance as barriers to accessing critical housing services***

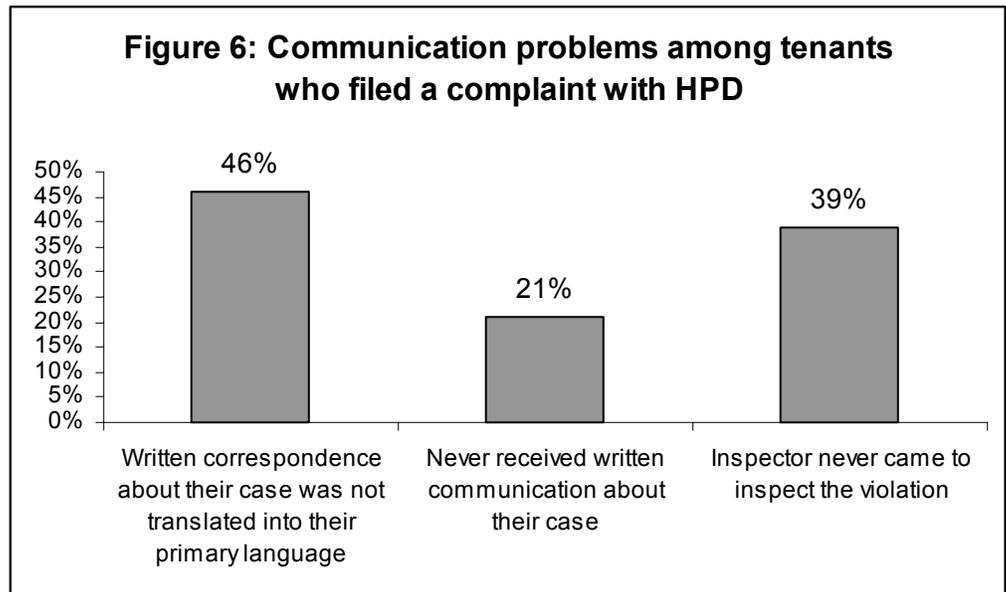
Ms. Pierre<sup>iv</sup> is a Haitian immigrant tenant living in the Bronx. Her primary language is French. Ms. Pierre has endured a number of housing violations in her apartment. She has water leaking into her bathroom from the apartment above. There is also water flowing through a ceiling light fixture and it appears that the fixture is about to fall. When she first moved into her unit the bathtub was in terrible condition, her landlord expressed no interest in either re-glazing or replacing the tub despite her complaints. As Ms. Pierre was in need of housing, she was forced to attempt to repair the tub to the best of her ability with cleaning supplies. Despite her best efforts the tub's condition remains poor. In addition, garbage is often strewn around the building and Ms. Pierre often feels compelled to clean it herself as the super often fails to do so. There have also been several times when the building's elevator did not work. At one point, a portion of the ceiling in her apartment collapsed and Ms. Pierre called African Services Committee (ASC). ASC staff called the appropriate people to have the ceiling fixed, but Ms. Pierre does not know whom they called. At no point did Ms. Pierre feel she could call HPD and no inspector has ever been to her home. When asked about this she explained that she would call a city agency like HPD or 311 if she knew the correct entity to contact and if she felt confident that someone would be able to speak to her in her own language. She said that it was the language barrier and the lack of information that prevented her from calling HPD herself.

### 3. Inadequate Language Access in Code Enforcement Provision

Given that HPD and 311, a hotline to file complaints with the city, have a contracted service to bring in language assistance when needed, language barriers in theory should not exist. However, our research as well as communities served by the Communities for Housing Equity tell us that many residents do not know that HPD provides language assistance services. And if they are aware, the services are not utilized consistently. Therefore, many LEP residents do not even attempt to call, they hang up when they are unable to communicate directly, or must seek out others to file the complaint rather than doing so themselves. Immigrant residents commonly rely on family members, often children, to communicate with City agencies. This presents an additional problem because HPD does not accurately capture the real language needs of that tenant, resulting in continued language access problems in case-related communication. Once a complaint is filed, HPD's follow up communication with tenants can include calls placed to the resident to check if the landlord remedied the problem, written communication about the status of the case, and in-person inspections by HPD personnel. As shown in Figure 6, LEP New Yorkers often continue to face language-related problems during this code enforcement process:

- **Nearly half (46%) reported that written correspondence about their case was not translated into their primary language.**

Many respondents who filed a complaint reported that they neither received corresponding written communication about the case nor did an HPD inspector come to inspect the problem, as shown in Figure 6. Although various factors play a role in missed communication with HPD, the lack of written and verbal communication in the



primary language of the resident certainly increases the risk of confusion and misinformation about their case, and often results in missed appointments with inspectors.

- **21% of respondents who filed a complaint with HPD said that they never received written communication about their case.**
- **Well over a third (39%) of those who filed a complaint reported that an inspector never came to inspect the housing problem.**

## Tenant Profile #2:

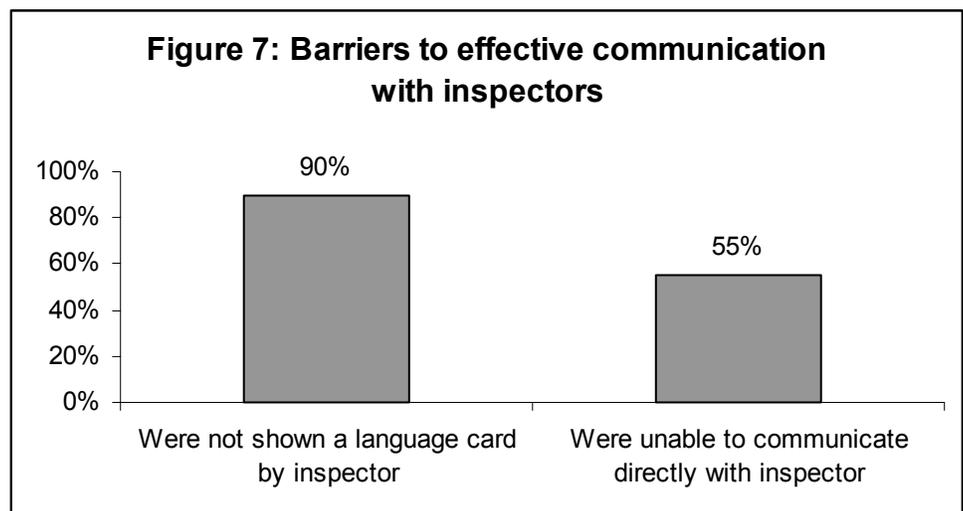
### *Failure to track a tenant's primary language prevents effective housing code enforcement*

Ms. Li is an active member of the Chinatown Tenant Union. She has lived in Chinatown since she immigrated to the United States over 20 years ago. Her apartment building is very poorly maintained, and the landlord generally fails to respond when tenants call him with housing problems. Ms. Li often files complaints with HPD through her children, who are fluent in English, because she is not fluent in English. Most of the tenants in her building are Chinese immigrants, and do not speak English. When they need to make a housing complaint, they often go to Ms. Li and her children for help. During the winter months, the landlord frequently fails to provide adequate heat or hot water. During the summer months, there are often blackouts in the entire building. Her landlord is a notorious slumlord—HPD has commenced housing actions against the landlord for his failure to provide heat and hot water.

On December 31, 2005, Ms. Li did not have electricity in her apartment. Her son called 311 to make a complaint. A few days later, HPD called her home to see if the problem had been resolved. But because the HPD staff spoke English only and did not utilize the translation line, Ms. Li could not communicate directly with him.

In the past few years, HPD has made important efforts to recognize the need to ensure language access to its services, and has instituted two important strategies to facilitate communication between inspectors and LEP residents. Starting in 2003, HPD developed a language card to help inspectors identify the language needs of the resident and call in the appropriate translation services. In addition, as is true for housing specialists receiving complaints through 311, inspectors are able to call into a contracted translation service while on-site with the tenant. While inspections conducted by multi-lingual inspectors are preferable, these strategies do at least ensure a basic level of communication between inspectors and tenants. Unfortunately, these resources are not employed by HPD personnel consistently, as shown in Figure 7:

- **90% of those who had an inspector come to their apartment reported that he or she was not shown a language card by the inspector.**
- **Over half (55%) reported being unable to communicate directly with the inspector.**



## Spotlight:

### *HPD does not adequately meet the need for bilingual housing inspectors*

HPD has 416 housing inspectors to respond to the needs of over one million New York tenants. Currently, 231 of those inspectors are bilingual or multilingual. These numbers are simply inadequate to meet the demand of the city, and particularly of the 25% of LEP New Yorkers who are most in need of language assistance and are particularly vulnerable to unhealthy and unsafe living environments. Even with the existing bilingual inspectors, there is no guarantee that they will be sent to LEP tenants who speak the corresponding language. Currently HPD does not have an effective and comprehensive system to track the need for language assistance and ensure that inspectors who can communicate in the primary language of the tenant are appropriately deployed to the households who require their services. Indeed, this is a poor utilization of the language assistance that is available in the agency.

Primary Language	# of City Residents	# of HPD Inspectors Fluent	Primary Language	# of City Residents	# of HPD Inspectors Fluent
African Languages <sup>v</sup>	54,271	7	Italian	139,698	9
Albanian	24,577	1	Japanese	20,563	0
Arabic	49,080	5	Korean	77,172	1
Belorussian	11,187	1	Malayalam	1,368	1
Cantonese	323,517	8	Mandarin	323,517	8
Creole	89,085	5	Persian	12,458	1
Dutch	19,402	1	Polish	60,772	8
French	105,994	5	Portuguese	18,517	0
German	33,311	1	Russian	194,696	31
Greek	58,476	3	Spanish	1,832,402	89
Gujarati	9,386	2	Tagalog	45,861	3
Guyanese	99,526	4	Ukrainian	62,695	16
Hebrew	50,372	1	Urdu	38,466	4
Hindi	25,083	11	All other languages <sup>vi</sup>	183,379	1
Indian languages <sup>vii</sup>	97,212	17	Yiddish	82,870	0
			<b># of Bilingual Inspectors 231*</b>		
Source for # of Inspectors: Provided to CHE by HPD, January, 6, 2006			* Some inspectors are multilingual		
Source for languages spoken: U.S. Census 2000					



Building in Bushwick, Brooklyn that has extensive water damage.

Photo Credit: Make the Road by Walking

### **Tenant Profile #3:**

#### ***Lack of bilingual inspectors prevents effective and respectful service delivery***

Ms. Vasquez<sup>viii</sup> is a Spanish-speaking resident originally from Mexico who has been living in Bushwick for the last 10 years. She lives in an apartment with seriously hazardous living conditions with her husband Miguel and their two children Christopher, who is 3, and Sandy, who is 13. Despite an order from the city to remove the lead paint in their apartment, the landlord has failed to comply. As a result, Ms. Vasquez's son suffers from lead poisoning. Among other symptoms, Christopher throws up when he drinks milk, has constant headaches and has speech impairments. Ms. Vasquez's building is infested with cockroaches, mice and rats. There are holes in the walls and floors which allows the rats to get into the living space from the basement and the backyard. Recently, her 8-year-old brother who also lives in her building with her mother was bitten by a rat on his leg. In addition to the vermin infestation, Ms. Vasquez and her family are forced to live with other hazardous conditions, such as mold in the bathroom due to a major leak from the apartment above, and her apartment has gone without heat for two years. Ms. Vasquez has sued the landlord to obtain the necessary repairs four times, but the landlord has failed to appear in court, rendering the housing case useless in getting repairs done in the apartment. Now the landlord has disappeared.

Ms. Vasquez has reported her housing problems to HPD on numerous occasions and has had translation assistance over the phone with the agency. When the HPD inspectors came to the apartment, however, Ms. Vasquez was not able to communicate with the inspectors because they did not speak Spanish. On limited occasions, Ms. Vasquez's family members have served as translators; however she is unable to depend on their being at home when HPD calls or inspectors come to her apartment. HPD knows that Ms. Vasquez does not speak English, but it continues to send inspectors who do not speak her language. When the inspector comes and a family member is not present, she feels frustrated. She knows what she needs to say and ask, but can not do it. "One does not know what is really going on [during the inspection]", she says; rather, she is simply left to hope the inspector is able to do his or her job without any communication with her.



Rat bite bruise on the leg of a young boy who lives in a Bushwick apartment building organized by Make the Road by Walking.

Photo Credit: Make the Road by Walking

## Recommendations

New York City is a city of immigrants. Over 40% of New York City residents were born outside of the U.S., and over 47% of New Yorkers speak a language other than English in the home. Twenty five percent of New Yorkers are limited English proficient.<sup>ix</sup> Communities for Housing Equity's startling survey findings confirm the need for multi-lingual services to ensure that all City residents have equal access to critical government services. Providing equal access to government services is not only appropriate, it is mandated by federal, state and local laws.

Based on the clear need for language access to HPD documented through our research with hundreds of New York City residents, Communities for Housing Equity seeks to work with HPD and the City Council to ensure access to HPD's critical services for all New Yorkers by ensuring appropriate outreach strategies, bilingual informational materials and correspondence, and the hiring of an adequate number of qualified bilingual inspectors.

Through both administrative and legislative avenues, Communities for Housing Equity calls on the following public officials to do the following:

### **Mayor Bloomberg and HPD Commissioner Shaun Donovan need to ensure that HPD:**

- **Conducts targeted outreach to immigrant communities:** It is imperative that HPD continues to improve its outreach to the immigrant community. This includes expanding outreach to new immigrant communities and creating comprehensive new procedures, such as increased capacity to field informational calls and complaints in multiple languages, improved capacity to send bilingual housing inspectors to buildings where tenants do not speak English, and improved capacity to provide a variety of informational materials in languages other than English. In addition, there should be a specific outreach campaign to targeted immigrant communities through an annual multi-lingual mailing before the heat season begins each year. This mailing should describe HPD services generally and code enforcement in particular, and provide information to tenants on how they can access the full range of HPD's tenant services.
- **Diversifies media outreach:** In addition to mass mailings, HPD must make use of local and ethnic T.V., radio, and newspapers and magazines that reach non-English speakers in their primary languages.
- **Implements effective tracking of language needs of tenants, and maintains records on language services provided:** The primary language of the tenant filing the complaint should be identified and recorded at the time of the filing in order to trigger language needs for written communication, follow up and inspection. Moreover, inspectors should report language needs of tenants to facilitate further language-appropriate communication with that tenant in the future. This is especially important where multiple tenants who are not English proficient may make complaints in a single building, thereby identifying a potential "problem" building; aggressive outreach should be conducted in those buildings, in languages the tenants can understand, to ensure that all tenants are aware of the HPD resources at their disposal. In addition, HPD must implement record-keeping and monitoring

practices to ensure that all new procedures are leading to improved services for LEP New Yorkers.

- **Hires more qualified bilingual inspectors and ensures that appropriate bilingual inspectors are sent to LEP tenants:** HPD must continue to improve the quality of communication between code inspectors and tenants. HPD must recruit and hire more bilingual inspectors to meet the needs of non-English speaking tenants. Moreover, HPD should prioritize matching the language skills of bilingual inspectors with the language needs of complaining residents.
- **Ensures communications about complaint and pending case are accessible:** HPD should ensure that follow up calls related to a filed complaint are made in the primary language of the tenant, or that appropriate translation is provided by the agency. Moreover, written communication about the case and/or inspection should be done in the primary language of the tenant.
- **Improves and expands translation of published materials and HPD website:** While HPD has made significant advances with respect to offering translated materials through its website, and we urge HPD to continue that effort, HPD must also make all written materials and publications available in multiple languages.
- **Targets code enforcement offices:** HPD should hire additional staff members who speak more languages, train staff members on how to handle non-English speaking inquiries, and increase voice mailbox capacities so that no client is ignored based on the language he or she speaks.
- **Enforce usage of existing protocol to ensure that tenants can directly communicate with HPD personnel:** Usage of the language card by all inspectors must be enforced to ensure identification of language assistance services. Moreover, the language assistance line must be consistently used in all cases of verbal communication with LEP tenants, including during the filing of complaints, follow up calls, and during inspections when the inspector does not speak the primary language of the tenant.
- **Increase funding for community groups to do outreach:** With the financial support from City Council, HPD should grant an adequate amount to community groups for outreach purposes.

**City Council Speaker and Council Members need to require that these recommendations carry the force of law by passing legislation requiring that all HPD communications, oral and written, must be conducted in the top nine languages spoken in New York City other than English, including legislation that would require that HPD:**

- Must provide qualified translation services at meetings, training, or events at which HPD reasonably believes that one percent or more of the persons expected to attend speak any of the top nine languages spoken in New York City other than English.
- Must provide an adequate number of qualified bilingual housing inspectors in the top nine languages spoken by New York City residents to ensure that housing inspectors can communicate with limited English proficient individuals in their primary languages.
- Must translate all written forms, correspondence, applications, informational materials and all other written communications into the top nine languages spoken in New York City other than English.

## About Communities for Housing Equity and this Study

Communities for Housing Equity (CHE) is a coalition of affordable housing providers, community organizations and advocates who have come together to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to affordable and safe housing conditions. The coalition began to work together in early 2004, when community groups and advocates began to see an increase in grievances from community members due to the lack of city housing services for people with limited English skills. Since then, the coalition has created various forums and avenues through which immigrant tenants can directly share their experiences and discuss alternatives to improve city services. CHE also has an on-going working partnership with HPD to address these issues.

Communities for Housing Equity Members:

- Asian Americans for Equality
- CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities
- Community Development Project, Urban Justice Center
- Make the Road by Walking
- Neighbors Helping Neighbors
- The New York Immigration Coalition
- University Settlement Society of New York

### About Our Study

During the months of July 2005 through February 2006, members of Communities for Housing Equity conducted 697 surveys with New York City residents from diverse immigrant communities throughout the five boroughs to understand and document the existence of serious housing code violations, immigrants' knowledge of HPD, and their experiences with HPD if services were ever accessed. Surveys were conducted on the street, through door-to-door outreach, during intake processes conducted by organizational staff, and when community members accessed other services offered by the organizations. While this is not a strict random sample, it is reflective of the breadth of experiences and perspectives in New York City's immigrant communities, representing residents of 104 zip codes and 48 ethnic backgrounds.

The Communities for Housing Equity Coalition would like to thank the law firm of Schulte, Roth & Zabel, LLP, for the photocopying of this report and Christopher Chaput for the layout and design of its cover.

<sup>i</sup> New York Department of City Planning, *New York City Newest New Yorkers*. 2005 and US Census Bureau.

<sup>ii</sup> HPD provides contracts to 41 non-profits throughout the city as Neighborhood Preservation Consultants primarily to carry out building surveys and tenant counseling. Outreach is a very limited amount of their grant. For example, in the case of one NPC, outreach only represents 3% of their contract of \$1,600. While the outreach provided by groups are important, they are unable to alone address the problem of widespread lack of knowledge of HPD.

<sup>iii</sup> In many occasions, the tenant's child acts as the interpreter for their parent.

<sup>iv</sup> Name has been changed to protect the identity of the individual and her family.

<sup>v</sup> "African languages" includes Amharic, Ibo, Fulani, Twi, Yoruba, Bantu, Swahili, Somali and Wolof.

<sup>vi</sup> The one bilingual inspector in this category speaks Uzbek.

<sup>vii</sup> The category "Other Indian languages" includes Bengali, Marathi, Punjabi, and Romany.

<sup>viii</sup> Name has been changed to protect the identity of the individual and her family.

<sup>ix</sup> U.S. Census 2000.