

NO ACCESS

THE NEED FOR IMPROVED LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE SERVICES FOR LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT ASIAN TENANTS OF THE NEW YORK CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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翻譯服務是我們的基本人權

আমরা বাংলা ভাষায় সেবা চাই

A REPORT BY CAAV: ORGANIZING ASIAN COMMUNITIES
AND THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AT THE URBAN JUSTICE CENTER

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.

CAAHV: 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, CAAHV 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.

ENDNOTES

1 New York City Housing Authority Website. "About NYCHA." <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/factsheet.shtml> (Retrieved 6/3/2015)

2 The Official Website of the City of New York, Office of the Mayor. "De Blasio Administration Unveils 'NextGeneration NYCHA': A Comprehensive Plan to Secure the Future of City Public Housing." <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/325-15/de-blasio-administration-nextgeneration-nycha--comprehensive-plan-secure-future#/0> (Retrieved 6/3/2015)

3 The Official Website of the City of New York, Office of the Mayor. "NextGeneration NYCHA." <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/nextgen-nycha-web.pdf> (Retrieved 6/3/2015).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



CAA AV 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- CAA AV organizes communities to fight for institutional change and participates in a broader movement towards racial, gender, and economic justice.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AT THE URBAN JUSTICE CENTER

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.