



Mayor's Office of  
Immigrant Affairs  
Bitta Mostofi  
Commissioner

**November 23, 2020**

Testimony of Commissioner Bitta Mostofi  
NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

Before a hearing of the New York City Council  
Committees on Immigration and Governmental Operations

Oversight – Language Access and Emergency Preparedness

Thank you to Chair Menchaca, Chair Cabrera, and the members of the Committees on Immigration and Governmental Operations. My name is Bitta Mostofi, and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA).

Language access poses a distinct challenge in New York City, which is one of the most linguistically diverse cities in the world, with more than 200 languages spoken. About a quarter of the City has limited English proficiency (LEP), meaning these individuals are more likely to have challenges accessing English materials. City government bears the responsibility of ensuring that those New Yorkers with LEP have the opportunity and ability to engage with the services and programs they need, both during normal times and amid a crisis.

MOIA has made a concerted effort in collaboration with city agencies to improve language access, especially after the passage of Local Law 30 (LL30), by working with them to build the City's language access infrastructure and expand the availability of language access services. We helped agencies develop language access implementation plans, designate language access coordinators, procure contracts with professional language services vendors, and incorporate guidance and best practices. Owing to this groundwork MOIA helped lay over the past few years, the City was able to promptly adapt its operation to respond to the rapid increase in demand for language services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Let me be clear: the pandemic exposed continuing language access challenges, which we take very seriously. But it is the City's work over the past few years in implementing Local Law 30 that has allowed us to begin to address those challenges. We continue to assess both the best practices and the gaps in services that were identified during these recent months as we work towards language justice. And we look forward to discussing them with the Council members today.

My testimony will discuss the ways in which MOIA has worked with City agencies to implement LL30 and how the City addressed language access needs during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **MOIA's Language Access Work**

After LL30 was passed in 2017, MOIA worked with the Mayor's Office of Operations to provide guidance and oversight to our City agency partners to develop and strengthen agencies' language access infrastructure. This has included educating agencies on the law's requirements, ensuring that agencies have language access coordinators, helping develop individualized Language Access Implementation Plans, and ensuring that contracts are secured for translation and interpretation.

Ongoing work with agencies has focused on bolstering their capacity to provide language access by developing and sharing resources and best practices and providing technical assistance. To support these efforts, we have created an online portal for agencies to share language access resources, including training materials, procedures, and tools for staff to improve how they communicate with and serve New Yorkers with LEP. MOIA has also convened language access coordinators at least twice a year to address topics such as how to work more effectively with language services vendors, how to incorporate interpretation best practices, how to develop language access procedures, and how to improve accessibility of licenses, permits and

registrations. Notably, agencies learn a tremendous amount from each other about how to implement language access, and MOIA provides opportunities for agencies to share their work and discuss success stories. In October, for example, we worked with the Department of Transportation (DOT) to host a brown bag for agencies so that DOT could share information about how it had made licenses, permits and registrations more accessible through their online multi-lingual portal.

MOIA has continued to increase its own language access capabilities and deepened its Local Law 30 coordination across Mayoral Offices as well. Our Language services team has seen a dramatic increase in the number of requests for language services, both from within MOIA and from other Mayoral Offices. For example, we have seen a 500% increase in the number of translations provided from FY2018 to FY2020. The complexity of documents and the number of languages into which documents have been translated has also increased. MOIA has nimbly responded to this rise in demand while ensuring that Mayoral Offices have access to these services. Our team has integrated professional tools and practices from the language services industry that have made MOIA's own translation work more efficient and improved the consistency and accuracy of translations. As one example, MOIA piloted a partnership with a technology vendor that facilitated the human translation of our website into 10 languages, a feat that would not have been possible without this technology. MOIA leverages these projects and lessons by sharing our know-how with City agencies to deepen their operational capacity. For example, we have drawn on our own experiences with translation vendors to advise agencies on how to ensure high quality translations. This experience has also informed the guidance we have shared to agencies on assessing vendor performance and holding vendors accountable.

The work MOIA and city agencies have done to implement LL30 has helped establish a robust and collaborative language access foundation across the City on which agencies continue to build. Today, all agencies have Language Access Implementation Plans and Language Access Coordinators, contracts with professional language services providers, and have regular conversations and collaborate with MOIA to improve language access. Agencies have made tremendous progress in translating materials into the 10 languages with some agencies providing translations in additional languages to meet the needs of their target constituents. Agencies have sought to improve the way they provide language access by procuring additional contracts, hiring additional staff, or centralizing staff to provide better internal oversight of language services. The City has also seen a greatly increased investment in language access spending. As one example, the amount spent on DCAS language service contracts effectively doubled between FY 2015 and FY2019, evidence of an increased use of and reliance on professional language services.

### **Language Access and COVID-19**

Despite this progress on language access during recent years, COVID revealed the work that remains. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that the City still faces tremendous challenges in quickly disseminating multilingual information to New Yorkers who do not speak English and in ensuring that information is accurate and accessible. We addressed—and continue to address—these challenges in various ways.

First, as in other emergencies, MOIA worked with Emergency Management to activate the Language Access Task Force in March to identify language access challenges arising from the pandemic and to coordinate resources. Through this Task Force, which also included DOHMH, we ensured that the lead agency, DOHMH, had ample language services resources, expanded the number of languages in which critical materials would be translated in up to 25 languages and coordinated pro bono translation resources.

MOIA also coordinated extensively with other agencies during the pandemic. Relying on the preexisting network of LACs, MOIA provided guidance and technical assistance on making agency websites and digital resources more accessible, spoke to how to use interpretation on virtual meeting platforms, and shared information about integrating language access into recovery planning.

Responding to the urgent needs of our community, MOIA expanded its budget and worked with our translation vendor to secure faster translations—in some cases within a matter of hours—of shorter documents. Our Language Services team alone experienced a 584% increase in the number of translation projects it delivered in FY 2020 as compared to FY 2019. Due to the work we have put in over the years to grow and professionalize our language services, we were able to step in to support other agencies with their requests for rush translations.

MOIA also adjusted its communication strategy to ensure faster dissemination of critical and ever-changing multilingual content. MOIA developed shorter content that was graphic-oriented and allowed for quicker translation. In addition, MOIA created daily updates for community partners and shared those messages in multiple languages via social media platforms and messenger apps popular among immigrant communities. Our office also embraced virtual events as another way to reach the community, hosting community and ethnic media roundtables and participating in virtual town halls in multiple languages.

Finally, MOIA developed multilingual resources that could serve as a centralized source of information about City services and made sure that document was distributed online and at physical locations. This COVID-19 resource guide provides an immigrant-centered overview of City's resources and COVID-19 guideline in plain language and translated into 25 languages. A supplementary FAQ is also available in all 10 languages on our website and is updated as needed.

Our agency partners also worked to ensure their critical materials were accessible to New Yorkers who do not speak English. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene secured a translation vendor dedicated specifically to ensuring rapid turnaround of translations of the agency's extensive COVID-related materials—from fact sheets to social media materials to audio-visual campaigns—in 25 languages.

In response to specific requests from business owners, Small Business Services (SBS) translated key pieces of collateral into multiple languages and increased access to information through webinars, technical assistance, and digital advertising in multiple languages. SBS has also

established a Business Assistance Hotline that can serve people in over 200 languages and answer business owner's questions about COVID-19 reopening, financial assistance, Personal Protection Equipment inquiries, and more.

Similarly, the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection took a number of steps to make critical information more accessible to New Yorkers with limited English proficiency. They will be speaking to this work in their testimony.

### **Conclusion**

While the City has made significant progress in integrating language access into agency operations and planning, there are still steps we need to take to achieve the vision of LL30. We are committed to continuing to work with the Council and our agency partners in improving language access across the City. As the City endeavors to support New Yorkers with limited English across the many facets of this ongoing crisis, the agencies will rely on and work to strengthen the language access infrastructure developed under Local Law 30.

Thank you again to the Committees for calling this important hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you have.

**Testimony of Steven Ettannani, Executive Director of External Affairs for the  
New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection before the  
Committees on Immigration and Governmental Operations**

**Remote Oversight Hearing on Language Access and Emergency Preparedness and  
Introduction 63**

**November 23, 2020**

Good afternoon Chair Menchaca, Chair Cabrera, and members of the Committees. I am Steven Ettannani, Executive Director of External Affairs for the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection.

On behalf of Commissioner Salas, I want to share our thanks and appreciation to the Committees for continuing to elevate the voices of New York's vibrant and diverse immigrant communities across the City. Now more than ever before, our collective work is vital to ensuring the health safety and prosperity of *all* New Yorkers.

**DCWP Language Access Efforts**

Our city has one of the most diverse marketplaces in the world, and language access is a special responsibility for our city government to take up on behalf of New Yorkers. Commissioner Salas, as an immigrant, and as an alumnus of our CUNY system and its commendable programs to serve 'new' New Yorkers of limited English proficiency, has since her appointment, made language access a priority for our agency across all our programs.

With the passage and implementation of Local Law 30, we have steadfastly worked to execute a language access plan that supports all our constituencies. First and foremost, whenever a New Yorker visits our offices, financial empowerment centers, licensing center, or small business support center, they will find multilingual signage and collateral informing them of the availability of free and real time interpretation services, through our vendor Language Line. Should constituents with limited English proficiency request assistance onsite, or contact us by other means, our staff is trained to utilize these interpretation services. Similarly, all our inspectors are trained with Language Line, and equipped with cards that describe the interpretation services in 20 languages. When they encounter a merchant with limited English proficiency in the field, they leverage these services to communicate during an inspection.

**Language Access in the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

As we testified to at our hearing on workplace safety last Friday, DCWP has continued to serve our workers, consumers, and businesses with important information and equitable language access. At the start of the pandemic, we launched "NYC [DOT] GOV [SLASH] DCWP – ALERTS" as a dedicated landing page for the public to view updated Department guidance during the crisis<sup>1</sup>. On the webpage, the information we provide is translated in, at least, the ten designated citywide languages.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dca/media/DCWP-Alerts-During-COVID19.page>

Other documents found on the landing page include those developed with New York City's Small Business Services and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. These resources, again each translated into the ten designated languages, address broad public safety protocols as well as guidance for what employers must do before they reopen, what workers should expect, and how to reach out to the City if there are questions.

Two weeks ago, we also issued reopening guidance on our landing page for domestic workers, many of whom have immigrant backgrounds or have preferences for languages other than English. As the home of the City's dedicated Paid Care Division, this guidance incorporates public health and safety guidelines on behalf of a vulnerable and traditionally underserved workforce trying to navigate safety in a unique workplace environment.

Lastly, since March, DCWP has conducted over 334 virtual and in-person outreach events. At our events, we provide translated outreach materials and real time interpretation services to New Yorkers. These events also include over 30 business education days where we visited more than 2,100 business, disseminating guidance on safe reopening standards and helping merchant associations and business improvement districts to distribute personal protective equipment.

### **Legislation – Introduction 63**

Turning now to Introduction 63, this legislation requires the agency to record the language of preference of our licensees, translate post-inspection communications to licensees, and utilize their language preference for their specific post-inspection communication.

DCWP already offers licensees the opportunity, both on their new license applications or renewal applications, to choose a language of preference. Of more than 70,000 licensees, 2,500 have indicated a language preference other than English. I would also note that many businesses we inspect are not licensees of DCWP, although they are still required to comply with the City's Consumer Protection Law, the City's workplace laws, and other consumer and worker protections. As I mentioned earlier in my testimony, when we visit any business location, our inspectors are trained on how to access real time interpretation.

DCWP has concerns regarding the fiscal implications of this legislation and, broadly, how best to approach meaningful language access. Fiscally, the agency would encounter tremendous burden in translating documents outside the scope of our language access plan.

Furthermore, the materials contemplated by this bill for translation are often uniquely specific to an individual or business. Notice of hearings, for example, include direct references to the administrative code and even contemporaneous notes by our inspectors. In such cases, DCWP believes it is more effective to provide real time interpretation to our merchants should they have questions about their inspection.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, I want to reiterate that DCWP, and this Administration, are committed to providing equitable and fair language access to New Yorkers. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to any questions you may have.





**New York City Council – Joints Committees on Immigration & Gov’t Operations  
Oversight - Language Access and Emergency Preparedness**

**Testimony from the New York Immigration Coalition  
November 23, 2020**

Good Afternoon. My name is Theodore A. Moore and I’m the Director of Local Policy and Legislation at the New York Immigration Coalition, an umbrella policy and advocacy organization that works statewide with over 200 immigrant-serving member organizations. Thank you to Chair Menchaca, Chair Cabrera, and the members of the City Council Immigration & Government Operations Committees for convening this important hearing and allowing us the opportunity to submit testimony.

On the topic of Language Access New York City took an important step with passage of the Language Access Policy (Local Law 30). However, there are still significant barriers to language access for New York’s immigrant communities, particularly those who speak languages of limited diffusion (LLDs) and we saw and are continuing to see the effects of those barriers throughout this pandemic.

To build on recent gains in this area we continue to propose that the Council support the creation a Community Legal Interpreter Bank (CLIB) modeled after the one that has been used successfully since 2007 in the District of Columbia to expand language access and increase the supply of trained, vetted immigration legal interpreters by committing funds through a City Council budget initiative to be provided to community-based nonprofit organizations. To better serve LLD’s we are also proposing that the funding for the NYC Council’s Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative be increased to enable immigrant community-based organizations to develop and launch three language services worker-owned cooperatives—one for African Languages of Limited Diffusion (LLDs), one for Asian LLDs, and one for indigenous Latin American LLDs. The existence of both the CLIB and the cooperatives would have allowed for an additional resource for individuals, community organizations, and even the City government to rely on. While I can’t claim to have known that we would have to endure a global pandemic this year, the NYIC, Masa, Asian American Federation and African Communities Together have been trying to bring attention to these issues and offering these very same solutions for about 3 years now. We hope this time our warning will be heeded and our solutions implemented.

Another issue with Local law 30 that has been made obvious throughout this pandemic is that there is no allowance for the adjustment of documents most commonly distributed to the

public that are translated for emergency purposes and there is no specificity on a timetable for when documents should be translated by. There may need to be amendments or additions to Local Law 30 to mandate such adjustments and dictate the timeliness necessary in emergency situations.

While we are focusing on solutions we must not forget our immigrant adult learners. 2.2 million people in New York City, one out of every three adults, are either lacking a high school diploma or have low English proficiency. In support of these adult learners, we call on the City Council and the Mayor in next year's budget to both restore all funding for adult literacy programs and to invest additional money over the next two years to fund a pilot program that would provide wrap-around services to adult learners will lead to greater student gains and a wider range of benefits for families and communities.

Once again, thank you for convening this extremely important hearing and allowing me to testify. Myself, our entire organization and the 140 NYIC members across New York City look forward to continuing to work with you all to come up with solutions that ensure that everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity to recover from the threat of this virus and the worst potential economic downturn since the Great Depression.



## **Asian American Federation**

### **Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Immigration**

*November 23, 2020*

#### Written Testimony

I want to thank Committee Chair Menchaca and Councilmembers Chin, Moya, Dromm and Eugene for holding this hearing and giving the Asian American Federation the opportunity to testify on this important subject. I'm Ravi Reddi and I am the Associate Director for Advocacy and Policy at the Asian American Federation. AAF represents the collective voice of more than 70 member nonprofits serving 1.3 million Asian New Yorkers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, amongst all the chaos it has wreaked on our city, clarified the glaring difficulties our immigrant and limited-English-proficiency communities face in getting their basic needs met and obtaining emergency help. Consistently, throughout our work in the Asian American community and with our allies in other marginalized communities, issues of language access present a fundamental barrier to deeper relationships between our communities and the City they help fund.

So when we discuss the relationship between language access and emergency preparedness, let's first set the stage. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a [35% increase in deaths compared to the five-year average](#) in our community. Our recently released report on the devastating impact of COVID-19 on jobs our community relies on shows that our community has been hit harder by unemployment than any other in our City. Furthermore, anti-Asian xenophobia and violence is an unfortunate fixture in our newspapers and a primary reason why our senior populations are even further isolated within their homes.

Over 1.3 million Asians live in our City, 16% of our City's total population. Overall, 14% lived in poverty, including one in four Asian seniors. And 48% of our community have limited English proficiency.

We want to thank this Committee and the City agencies who have done the hard work of surfacing concerns of language access and continuing the hard work of making sure every New Yorker knows this City is theirs. However, we are here because, especially in these unprecedented circumstances, this hard work requires greater urgency.

In September, we provided testimony before this Committee and said: "What our City Council does in defense and support of our immigrant community is only as powerful as what our people can access." Especially in this crisis, we view language access as a gatekeeper issue, a pressure point that influences the implementation of any policy we advocate for. We said in that same hearing, "good policy means nothing if cultural and logistical considerations aren't accounted for."

In the context of emergency preparedness, I'd like to make real for the Committee why language access is such an urgent issue.

#### Small Businesses



## **Asian American Federation**

88% of our Asian small business owners are immigrants. But in this crisis, there's an additional step that has continued to be a barrier to them accessing the government assistance that their English-speaking counterparts can more readily access, timely translation. Many Asian small businesses were and continue to be unable to apply for government assistance because in-language assistance and coherent instructions never materialized, or came after the damage had already been done.

Furthermore, even for the businesses that are still open, even if in a limited capacity during the pandemic, AAF is hearing anecdotes of interactions with inspectors or difficulty keeping up with ever-changing regulations due to translation issues. In our testimony last week at the Committee on Housing and Buildings, AAF reported that we received reports of multiple cases across the city where DOB inspectors who visited small businesses to monitor COVID-related compliance did not even make the effort of engaging with the business owners to explain what needs to be done if they do not speak English. Instead, they would simply give a URL to a city agency website for reference. However, City agency websites are extremely difficult to navigate for LEP small business owners—giving the address of an incomprehensible website should not replace proper efforts of outreach and information dissemination. Also, different standards for individual inspectors cause much confusion and frustration for small business owners. Inspectors from different City agencies sometimes give inconsistent advice and guidelines to business owners, even in cases where the different agencies are supposed to work together, such as the Illegal Conversion Task Force.

### Seniors

Our most isolated and vulnerable population, our seniors, are consistently coming to our community service providers before they approach our City to get their basic needs met. Our member and partner agencies are working overtime because Asian seniors, like most immigrants, will utilize services that reflect their values and ethnic identities. When it comes to emergency preparedness, language access is a function of cultural competence, and in so many ways, our community-based organizations are leveraging the goodwill they have earned in our communities to provide culturally-competent services. Providing programming and conducting wellness checks in-language goes hand-in-hand with culturally-competent food services and healthcare. Again, no matter the quality of the city program or policy, if the question of access hasn't been answered with significant dedicated resources, we will continue to leave our most vulnerable populations to struggle for themselves.

### What We're Doing

But these are only two constituencies in our community that are deeply and immediately impacted by the language access bottlenecks. New York's pan-Asian American community is made up of more than 20 ethnic groups, diverse in language, culture, and religion. Since 2017, AAF has worked in coalition with African Communities Together, Masa, and the New York Immigration Coalition to expand the number of languages covered by city social service agencies to include Arabic, French, Urdu, and Polish, in addition to Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Bengali, Haitian Creole, and Korean. While the expansion of the languages covered by the city's language access law was a major step in making City services accessible to Asian communities, there are dozens of distinct languages spoken by Asians across New York State and within



## **Asian American Federation**

New York City that are not covered by the new law. These languages, such as Karen, Nepali, and Punjabi, are known as languages of limited diffusion (LLDs).

While city and state government public-facing agencies and mainstream social service organizations primarily rely on telephonic translation to serve LLDs, experience shows time after time that there are few substitutes for in-person translation. Community-based organizations are usually best-equipped to provide local, accessible, and culturally competent services and are often the first stop for newly-arrived, limited-English-proficient (LEP) immigrants to go to for services. These culturally-specific organizations can turn unreliable language access into meaningful and equal access to services for the city's newest residents. With this in mind, there are a number of recommendations for the City and how it supports the work of our CBOs in the middle of a pandemic.

### Recommendations

- We need city initiatives to allocate the funding needed to fully implement the new citywide languages covered in Local Law 30 and we need to amend contracting processes to allow Asian-led nonprofits to more accurately reflect the cultural and language expertise they bring when serving our community members.
- Many organizations we advocate on behalf of must use their limited resources to find interpreters and translators who are not always trained in interpreting or translating legal, medical, and other sensitive terminology; or devote staff hours to these responsibilities. The City must provide better funding and support for CBOs who are already familiar with the matter, have community buy-in and are asked to provide translations.
- The City must consider creating a mechanism for central uniform translation by city agencies.
- Finally, we believe in the work we've been doing over the past 3 years alongside our partners to create a language bank to expand translation services for as many immigrant communities as possible and we ask the Council to find ways to support this effort.

With that, I want to thank this Committee for allowing the Asian American Federation the opportunity to provide testimony. This is difficult work, and there is plenty of nuance when it comes to language access, especially in the complicating context of crisis. We look forward to working with all of you and City agencies in this effort, thank you.



# SAFEST

## South Asian Fund for Education, Scholarship & Training

TESTIMONY OF:

Cindy Liang – Volunteer

South Asian Fund for Education, Scholarship and Education (SAFEST)

Presented before The New York City Council Committees

Immigration Language Access Virtual Hearing on November 23rd, 2020

My name is Cindy Liang, a volunteer from South Asian Fund For Education, Scholarship, and Training (SAFEST). SAFEST is an organization that provides services according to immigrants' needs. Since 2015, we have delivered a comprehensive array of services to thousands of children, youth, adults and entire families from South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka who reside in all 5 New York City boroughs. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak about language access issues that many of our South Asian families are facing today. As a SAFEST representative, my team and I have the first-hand understanding of challenges that our communities face on a daily basis.

Since the start of COVID19, many of our South Asian communities have lost their battle due to reasons such as overcrowding apartments shared by multi-generations and the lack of information on how to protect themselves against the virus. Many of our South Asian students have suffered inequity in education because their parents speak little or no English and could not help them with school work. Moreover due to the lack of job security and lack of income, many (mostly women and children) have been suffering from mental and physical abuse silently. Since March, SAFEST has worked overtime to help the community dealing with the loss (including assisting funeral arrangements) and finding shelters to battered women and children. But we feel that New York could do more bridging the language barrier gap for our communities. Here are a list of issues our immigrant communities encountered:

### **MTA Signage**

In the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, the MTA posted signs to remind people the proper way to put on a mask. While we appreciate MTA's effort to inform Bengali speaking riders, some of the signs were translated incorrectly and created confusion. After several community members alerted SAFEST about the issue, we provided the corrected translation to the Speaker of the City Council's office and it was corrected in time. Please ensure MTA double check their



# SAFEST

## South Asian Fund for Education, Scholarship & Training

vendor's work before the signs are used. SAFEST could assist in that process to help riders get the correct information.

### **NYC 311 Call Center**

Since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, SAFEST has made numerous 311 calls to request GetFoodNYC Emergency Home Food Delivery help on behalf of our community members. They are our most vulnerable population in our communities, they are the ones who can not go outside, have no one who can help them get food, and can't afford food delivery. However, whenever we called, we were told that only one person couldn't make multiple requests even if the requests were meant for others (who didn't speak English). As a result, we asked our community members to make the request by themselves. But they were (1) intimidated by the English speaking operator and hung up, or (2) gave up after waiting a long time for a Bangli-speaking translator to jump on the call. These language barriers further hinders our ability to help our South Asian families who desperately needed the assistance.

### **NYC 911 Call Center**

During the COVID19 pandemic, one domestic violence victim called 911 for help. She was in a dire situation and needed help desperately. There was no Bangali language translator on the line so she hung up the phone without reporting her abuser. But she didn't receive a callback from the emergency team and was further abused by her husband. She reached out to SAFEST and we were able to help her get into a shelter to escape from her abuser.

Another incident of a Bronx wife called 911 to report an abuse by her husband. She was lucky enough to get a Bengali interpreter on the line, but while she was talking to the interpreter, her husband stood in front of her and tried to listen to her conversation. Out of fear, she hung up the phone. But the emergency team did not call back and follow up with her case. As a result of their negligence, she suffered more beating from her husband. She reached out to SAFEST and we were able to help with her 3 kids and her escape from the abuser's hands.

### **NYC Board of Education**

At the height of COVID19 earlier this year, our non-English speaking parents did not know what to do with their children's school work as the schools closed down late March. Many of whom were not computer savvy, some didn't even have internet access. Their children were left behind from their school work simply because the parents didn't speak English and no one was there to help them during the lockdown. Due to the lack of language access, our parents and children are suffering, even more so after COVID:



# SAFEST

## South Asian Fund for Education, Scholarship & Training

- Some did not have any contact from their children's school. Mass emailing in a language that they didn't speak simply wouldn't work.
- Some were unaware of their rights as parents or how to request translation services when communicating with their children's schools and teachers.
- Some did not receive any communication from their children's teacher until too late (failure).
- Some did not know how to request laptops for their children's remote learning, now their children are deviceless at home. Some did not know how to request technical support when their children's school provided laptops broke down.

First, although DOE provides information on their websites, it is extremely difficult for immigrant parents with limited English capabilities and young students to understand the complicated official language (and its translation). A simpler, easier language would be extremely helpful in helping these parents understand.

Second, although DOE provides translation services for non-English speaking parents, it is extremely challenging for our parents to make such a request without being embarrassed on the phone. A simpler, easier language hotline that speaks the caller's native language could help in directing his questions to the right person would be extremely useful.

Third, our parents need access to internet-enabled ipads or laptops to do check their children's work. When the school shut down, there was no or limited offline contact from the teachers. The parents were left in the dark not knowing what to do with their children's school work. They would need access to the internet and training on how to navigate the system.

Fourth, many of our parents still have not received EBT cards for their children. The letter attached with the card only has English and Spanish translations but no mention about other languages. This would definitely pose an issue for our non-English speaking parents, without proper explanation what the card is, it could potentially get thrown out when the parents desperately needed it. Moreover, the contact number on the EBT card does not offer Bengali translation, our non-English speaking parents are left out in the dark on how to activate the card at a time when they need the assistance the most.

We understand that these would be a daunting task, but we believe that they need to be done to ensure all students have equitable education. SAFEST would be happy to partner to ensure successful implementation of these programs.





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**Testimony of Adhikaar to NYC Council Committee on Immigration  
(Jointly with the Committee on Governmental Operations)  
Hearing on Language Access and Emergency Preparedness**

Co-Chairs: Councilmember Carlos Menchaca and Councilmember Fernando Cabrera  
Presented by: Pabitra Khati Benjamin, [pabitra@adhikaar.org](mailto:pabitra@adhikaar.org)  
*Nov 23, 2020*

Adhikaar is the only women-led worker and community center serving and organizing the Nepali-speaking community on workers rights, immigrants rights, access to healthcare and language justice issues. We are one of the newer and most rapidly-growing immigrant communities in New York City. According to [South Asian American's Leading Together's 2019 Demographic Snapshot](#) there was a 207% rise of Nepali immigrants in the U.S. over the last 10 years, the highest of any other population included in the report.

We're writing today to bring forth recommendations on improving language access in the city for all immigrant communities in NYC, from our first-hand experiences within the Nepali-speaking community. We know that the following recommendations can, and most likely will, greatly improve our collective chances of beating or more adequately responding to a second wave of the pandemic. **Additionally, we request that any and all future resources for emergency services, information (virtual or in hand), hotlines and services be equipped with language access in Nepali. And that organizations like Adhikaar are resourced to support the city during an emergency crisis.**

Adhikaar is located in Woodside, Queens and serves more than 10,000 Nepali-speaking people a year. Our members who are domestic workers, nail salon workers, restaurant workers, gig drivers, and other informal industries mostly live in Jackson Heights, Woodside, East Elmhurst, Elmhurst, Corona, Maspeth, Sunnyside, Ridgewood, Jamaica and Flatbush. The majority of our members are immigrant workers working in informal sectors, and many are undocumented. These individuals are in need of public resources the most but have the most fear about reaching out directly to the government or related services. Providing more language access may not completely eliminate this fear, it will greatly help alleviate it.

This year, we were in the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis, and again we see red zones emerging in those same neighborhoods. This has had severe impacts on our community for the last nine months and will forever change the constitution of our community. In the last 9 months, we have served over 4000 individuals with direct service needs addressing things like unemployment benefit support, health care, language access to government resources and

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emergency funds, medical and food supplies. And this does not include checking in one-on-one with 4740 members between .

The lack of language access and the poor quality of language services even when members do get access, becomes the line between life or death during a crisis. During our rapid response work during the pandemic, from March to October we received more than 3500 calls from our members who had limited English literacy, as well as limited digital literacy. The requests went as far as supporting them even to call an ambulance. These language barriers made it incredibly dangerous for members as they were unable to reach out for emergency services on time. One example is when one of our members could not on his own say his address to the emergency responder, and our staff had to teach him how to call by texting the instructions to him in Nepali. This is not just a story of one individual - we have more than 50 recorded incidents of members in serious conditions of COVID-19, that needed support in this way.

When people do access resources, in order to more effectively support the community during an emergency, language needs must go beyond the initial contact. People need to be followed up with after receiving services, as they are often confused with instructions given when sent home, or when asked to come in for follow-up. Language services need to exist along the entire member's journey, all the way from the moment of first response, during the crisis, and through the check ins post-treatment, social service follow-ups and more.

There is also a large gap between the "availability" of resources and reaching the many that need it. One example is that there was an entire family who got sick with COVID-19 (one of them had cancer, making it even riskier), and after getting better enough to return home (but not fully recovered), they did not have any access to food upon returning home. They also did not know how to search online for food banks (and even if they did, banks are often not available 24/7). We ended up having a domestic worker member step in to assist them to get food and other essential needs for the family. Even after that time, our staff had to continuously check in with the family to make sure that they had enough food and medical supplies as they recovered fully.

We also saw during the height of the pandemic, that interpreters and translators were not always readily available when requested by members through government service/resource lines. We believe that people generally underestimate how much language services actually cost and how much time and preparation they require to work well. In times we have reached out directly to agencies about translation needs, the translation process takes so long that by the time they send us the translated document, the moment of need has passed. We recommend that the city set aside the funds needed, plan with and resource organizations like Adhikaar to adequately and in advance, in light of an incoming second wave. It is not a

coincidence that the hardest hit zip codes during the first wave were in areas like Queens where immigrant communities like ours are most concentrated.

Nepali-speaking community is diverse and Nepali translations or interpretation is not enough. Information should be accessible in Tibetan as well, and more importantly in visual formats or other non-written formats (i.e. video, audio, other media) to reach limited literacy people within our community. There is a misconception that sending an English factsheet to a translation company is enough. When in reality the translation often contains complex terminology that is not colloquially understood and accessible, and members who do not have the education to read or write in their own language can not access. The city must work with and resource CBOs like Adhikaar to work with translation companies and hold them accountable, or find ways to subcontract to interpreters vetted by both professional language companies as well as CBOs that know the community best.

Once information is translated (and translated well), this should be communicated through CBOs like us, ethnic media or through social media ads in a timely manner. We were fortunate this time that some members from our community stepped up to help, however this cannot be a sustainable solution, and we look to the city to address this as per our recommendations.

Additionally, scaling back rather than increasing funding for adult literacy initiatives, especially for immigrant communities, means that less people are equipped with the skills to protect themselves during a pandemic. Adhikaar has been running our English for Empowerment (Adult English Classes) program since 2007 which we continue to run unfunded and solely volunteer-facilitated. During the pandemic due to capacity and availability of volunteers, we were forced to reconsider our program. We requested the city for funds to continue our adult education classes, but received none, and therefore had to discontinue our normal schedule. If this city is to lower the curve and stop the pandemic's second wave, we recommend that groups like ourselves are funded to run adult literacy classes as a core part of emergency response. Equipping adults with the basic communication English needs to survive a pandemic is equally an important part of protecting our communities through a crisis.

Lastly, organizations like ours were not well equipped or trained to take on emergency response needs, but because of language barriers, literacy access issues or fear, we were forced to take them on starting in March of this year. This completely shifted our work priorities when we had to regroup to fill in the rapid response need gaps that the government was not able to fill. We recommend that the city provide an open, transparent mechanism through which the community can voice concerns and feedback, to better improve city response systems. We hope that in this second wave, the city will actively work to provide the necessary training, funding/resources and



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close guidance for CBOs to manage emergency preparedness for a second wave, but also for longer-term community sustainability.

We submit this testimony today representing the 5,000 members of Adhikaar, part of the community deeply affected by the pandemic (and continue to be), and are most at risk for a second wave. This is not a matter to just discussion, but rather it is an urgent issue to actively take on now given the current rise in COVID-19 in our neighborhoods once more. We can not reiterate enough the urgency of planning, resource allocation, transparent accountability work, training, ample and timely preparation needed to ensure that our immigrant working-class communities do not go through the nightmare of this year's first pandemic wave. Services must be language accessible in a nuanced and diverse way that matches our communities, quality must be held accountable, and it should be available from very beginning to end. These services should also be thought out in a way that supports communities and CBOs like Adhikaar, and looked at as an opportunity to resource life-saving institutions for the long-term.

We encourage city agencies to reach out directly to us to work together efficiently to meet the needs of the community during a crisis. We highly encourage the committees to request direct follow up with us on the results of this hearing as the potential for a second wave is coming.

# **African Life Center, ALC**

## **Re: The African Community Accessing Housing**

### **Introduction**

It is a great honor to testify on housing for the African community. The housing issues amongst others is the overburdened rent that most people can't afford. I care about housing because of safety. It is evident that housing as a permanent abode for people can contain the spread of the virus. When people are assigned to a house, they are traced easily when tested for COVID-19. Providing them with housing prevents crimes from happening in the society.

Information on Housing doesn't adequately get to the African community. Those with the information lack the skills to access the services. For instance filling out the application. When I received invitation to testify on behalf of the African community, I sampled community members and asked them questions about their experiences applying for housing. I heard stories from first and second parties on efforts they encountered in applying for housing but to no avail.

Some asked their children to fill out the application form but they failed to complete it accurately. While others complained they applied but are always told they will be called and it never happened. Using Housing Connect is difficult for all but more stressful for people with English as a second language and also for seniors.

Programs like Housing Connect Ambassador don't have any African organization contracted to organize rent and financial counseling to the community members.

### **Challenges**

1. The Housing Connect Ambassador program is not felt in the community.
2. Difficulty locating apartments from one to four bedrooms.
3. Navigating housing connect becomes cumbersome from most as they are
4. Selected candidates for housing end up not eligible. Most issues are related to their income or after the interview they are placed on a waiting list. Sometimes, nobody get's back to them.
5. Some have been winning for years but never qualified for housing.
6. Seniors housing is a major for some seniors. No African related agency helping the community on housing issues including other problems they might face.

### **Recommendation**

ALC can serve as a focal point to handle housing issues confronting the African community.

Periodic housing sessions to prepare clients for the interview. By helping those in need to complete the application and be fully prepared for the interview. I look forward to getting services for the general African community and seniors.

Thank you for your support to the people in need.

Ramatu Ahmed  
347-608-0380

**Testimony submitted to the Committee on Immigration and the Committee on  
Governmental Operations, New York City Council**

**Monday, November 23, 2020, 1:00pm**

**Re: “Language Access and Emergency Preparedness”**

Good afternoon. My name is Angelica Lara and I am the Education and Outreach Director of UnLocal. UnLocal is a community-centered non-profit organization that provides direct community education, outreach, and legal representation to New York City’s undocumented immigrant communities. Since going remote in March, our Education and Outreach team has hosted 47 remote outreach events on immigration policy changes and enforcement, Covid-19-related information, the census, and how to protect your rights. We have deep connections with NYC immigrant communities and partnerships with over 140 community-based organizations and schools. Our legal team handles complicated immigration matters for immigrants from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean. The majority of our clients are BIPOC and have limited English proficiency.

We welcome this opportunity to address the issue of language access and how it impacts the delivery of emergency preparedness information for immigrant New Yorkers. UnLocal relies

on the speed, accuracy, and availability of translations of materials and updates created by New York City agencies as we are routinely disseminating their information to the public. During Covid, updates in accessible languages are a top priority for our community members. We are grateful for our partnership with MOIA for the past two years that enables us to provide its Know Your Rights presentation materials to the public. We are hopeful that, going forward, any policy updates to these materials will be translated into languages other than English before they are released to enable our team to deliver the information as quickly and efficiently as possible to immigrant communities. We urge the City to extend its language access resources to include the translation of materials into indigenous languages.

As Covid relief programs develop, we continue to see that undocumented people are left out despite the fact that so many of them make up New York City's essential workforce. Rent relief must be expanded and extended. Small business grants must be revamped and made accessible to immigrant business owners. All webinars must be held in such a way that makes them accessible to those who speak languages other than English. Not having access to resources and information that you can understand has a profoundly negative impact on people's wellbeing, and it has a direct correlation on health, housing stability, food access and mental health. To be able to truly call ourselves a sanctuary city, we must provide accessible information to our immigrant communities, and include them in our emergency preparedness planning process, both as decision-makers and beneficiaries.

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