

Eligible but Excluded

How Systemic Inequities in Language Access are Impacting Asian, Pacific Islander, and African Immigrant and Refugee Communities During the Pandemic

August 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our communities are strongest when all New Mexicans can participate in our systems of government, which includes equitable access to public education, justice, the democratic process, and – for people who are under-resourced – assistance with food, health care, and housing. Too often, New Mexicans who speak languages other than English, particularly immigrants and refugees, are excluded because of systemic inequities in language access. The inadequacy of our state’s multilingual interpretation and translation services causes significant hardship in many New Mexico communities because language access is critical for both good health and financial security.

As we demonstrated in our previous report, *Essential but Excluded: How COVID-19 Relief has Bypassed Immigrant Communities in New Mexico*, despite their enormous economic and tax contributions, many immigrants were explicitly left out of federal pandemic relief. In this report, we bring attention to additional groups of New Mexicans – specifically, Asian and Pacific Islander (API) and African immigrants and refugees who speak languages other than English – who may be eligible for relief but are unable to readily access it. API and African immigrants and refugees have long faced language barriers in accessing public programs and services, and the ways in which these inequities create disproportionate hardship have been made increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the lack of multilingual resources on both the state and federal levels, people who speak

languages other than English have been prevented from utilizing emergency government assistance when they need it most.

Early in 2021, New Mexico Voices for Children conducted a mixed-method study in collaboration with the immigrant- and refugee-serving partner organizations United Voices for Newcomer Rights (UVNR), New Mexico Asian Family Center (NMAFC), and the New Mexico Black Leadership Council (NMBLC), to research the challenges faced by refugee and immigrant communities in New Mexico. The study found that 93% of participants worried about being able to afford necessities for their families, with food being the greatest need identified. While the majority of participants – 86% – indicated that they utilize some sort of public assistance to meet their basic needs, many also reported needing the help of a caseworker to overcome language barriers in the application process. Although such help exists, the ability to

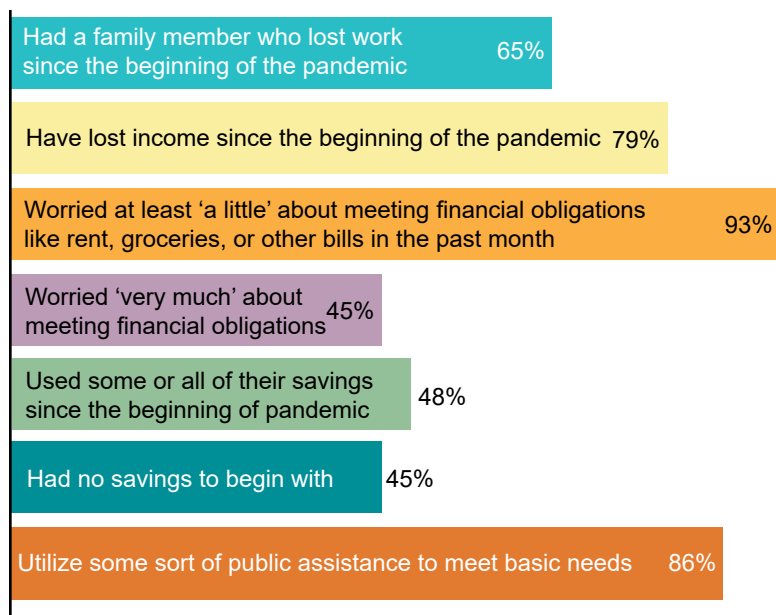


understand and complete time-sensitive paperwork on one’s own is critical. One caseworker at UVNR said, “The Department of Workforce Solutions does not take non-proficient English as an excuse for why the clients did not apply for unemployment right away when they lost their job.”

In the meantime, while community members are trying to find employment, the financial strain they face adversely affects their entire family. One caseworker at UVNR reported that some of their clients have been struggling to pay rent and utilities, and as a result their children dropped out of high school to get a job and provide additional income. In addition, language barriers and higher rates of technological unfamiliarity in refugee and immigrant parents can also hinder children’s education. Parents’ inability to help their children navigate online schooling during the pandemic resulted in many participants’ children experiencing learning loss, and several participants had children who dropped out of school entirely. One Farsi- and Dari-speaking participant told their interviewer: “My younger kids are doing online school, but my older kid dropped out because he was having a hard time.” All children in our communities deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential, and New Mexico cannot recover from the pandemic and build a brighter future when so many families in our state face these types of challenges.

The Pandemic has Led to Significant Financial Problems for Most of the Participants

The economic situation among study participants



Source: Close-ended survey of 29 study participants
NEW MEXICO VOICES FOR CHILDREN

“

My English is poor, so I relied on my case manager at NMAFC to help me apply for Medicaid and other resources. I could not apply for any assistance on my own since everything is in English.

–Chinese-speaking community member served by NMAFC

”

To move forward towards a more inclusive and equitable New Mexico, we need policy reform that addresses the inequities that New Mexicans who speak languages other than English face as a result of the exclusionary language policies and practices in our state. In order to achieve this, we urge policymakers to prioritize and fund efforts to increase multilingual access of commonly used materials, resources, and documents, as well as provide interpretation and translation services to help people who speak languages other than English utilize government assistance, support their children’s success in school, and take advantage of professional development opportunities. Refugee- and immigrant-serving organizations such as UVNR, NMAFC, and NMBLC play a vital role in making government systems more accessible for non-English speakers, and more funding through the state via grants could expand the number of community members they are able to serve and the scope of their services.

Too many New Mexicans feel isolated and disconnected, are facing disproportionate hardship during the pandemic, and are unable to readily access the government assistance for which they are eligible. It is incumbent upon the state to improve equitable language access in New Mexico in order to give all New Mexicans the best opportunities to participate in our democracy and live healthy and successful lives.

The full report is available online at www.nmvoices.org