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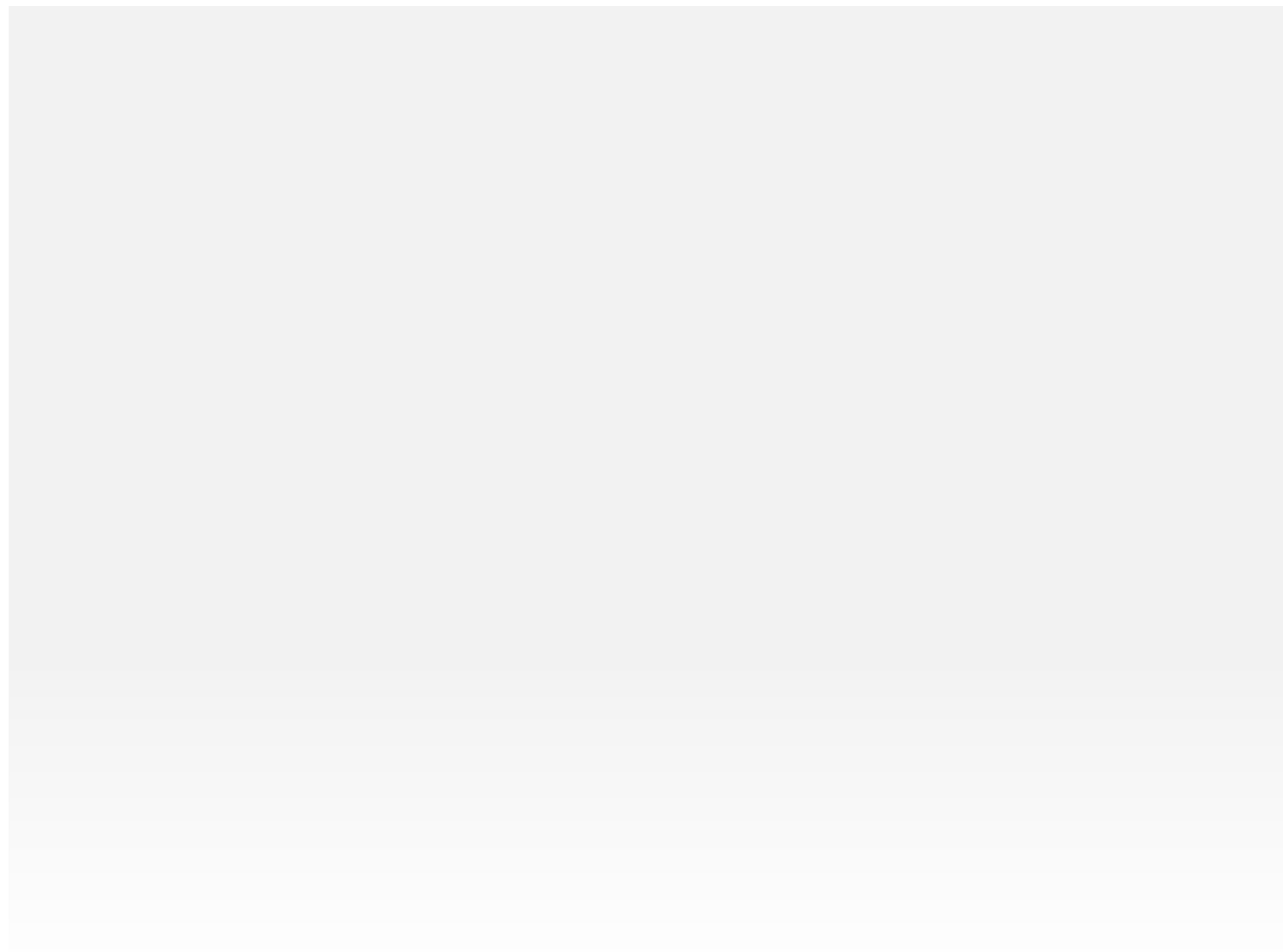
# For Non-English Speakers, Language Is A Barrier During The COVID-19 Pandemic

By [Esther Yoon-Ji Kang](#)

Saturday, May 2, 11 AM UTC

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Grace Padoo (standing), a volunteer with the Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment, talks with others attending the group's May 2019 event during Asian American Action Day in Springfield, Ill. Courtesy of the Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment



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### Race, Class & Communities

# For Non-English Speakers, Language Is A Barrier During The COVID-19 Pandemic

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Grace Padao has been making lots of calls to members of Chicago's Filipino community to check up on them and alert them to resources they may need during the COVID-19 crisis.

Padao is a volunteer with the Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment (AFIRE). When she makes her calls, they are almost always in Tagalog or Bisaya, two Filipino dialects.

"Saying 'hi' is so very big deal with them," said Padao, a 63-year-old former domestic worker from the Philippines. "We inform them [of] some of the resources that we know ... from AFIRE."

During this COVID-19 crisis, language is a major hurdle for many Illinois residents. Information about public health guidelines and policies, relief funds or public benefits is not being delivered in the languages they understand best.

"For every new initiative, the city or the state announces ... whether it's rent assistance or just any new policy encouraging folks to stay home, that information is not necessarily getting deep into immigrant and refugee and limited English proficient communities," said Grace Pai, director of organizing at Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago.

While many government websites include generic Google translation tools, virtually all of the televised briefings about COVID-19, and all the forms for public benefits and relief funds, have been in English.

However, at least one million Illinois residents say they speak English "less than very well," according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.



Pai added that when it comes to matters of public health, language services are even more critical.

“It's extremely important that when someone, who is limited English proficient, needs to seek health care that they're able to do so in a way that just offers them dignity in that experience ... so that they can clearly communicate their symptoms and what they're going through,” Pai said.

Many immigrant communities are seeing high rates of job loss and small business closings during the pandemic, Pai said. Due to language barriers, however, accessing public benefits and relief funds has been difficult for many immigrants, she added. The task of communicating and translating has been taken up by ethnic social service agencies.

Fasika Alem, a programs director at the United African Organization, said language access has long been a hurdle for many African immigrants in Chicago.

“Trying to make sure that we cover enough of those ... widely spoken [African] languages has always been a challenge,” Alem said. “Specifically with the COVID-19 situation, African languages are often not represented in resources that local or state governments give.”

She added that French, a language spoken by many West Africans, is not even among the languages represented on city and state agency websites.

Alem said many African business owners have been confused about how to apply for relief funds.

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“Even though they understand that there are resources available, they're not sure



relief program is, and I'm sure there are people that have no idea what resources are out there.”

For clients of the Indo-American Center on Chicago's North Side, the office's move to “work from home” has meant less access to the services the group provides, especially since many of the group's older clients are not technologically savvy and prefer to use walk-in services.

“If our doors were open right now, we would have dozens of clients in the doors,” said Angie Lobo, the center's executive director. “We're definitely getting a lot of requests for unemployment. That has [quadrupled as] a lot of the folks that we work with are in the gig economy.”

For years, the lack of language access services from government agencies has forced local ethnic social service groups to pick up the slack, said Pai of Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago.

Pai's group is part of the Illinois Language Justice Coalition, along with the Jane Addams Senior Caucus and a few other groups. The coalition is working to establish a state task force on language access, and to pass a comprehensive bill to ensure that all state agencies have plans — and money — to address the issue.

The group is also calling for the City of Chicago to strengthen its language access ordinance and to provide more resources to help those with limited English proficiency.

“We're seeing the effects of our history around language access,” Pai said. “The stakes are really high when you're talking about a pandemic.”

*Esther Yoon-Ji Kang is a reporter for WBEZ's Race, Class and Communities desk. Follow her on Twitter [@estheryjkanq](https://twitter.com/estheryjkanq).*



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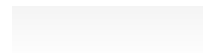
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