

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

Language Equity

This month's health page focuses on a critical health equity challenge: Making sure that science and healthcare include people who don't speak or understand English well.

As we continue our "Take Charge of Your Health" theme on social determinants of health, we're reflecting on a major healthcare barrier for people who don't

speak or understand English well: Language equity.

How is language equity relevant to the work of the Urban League?

Equity and inclusion are what we stand for at the Urban League. Pittsburgh has a growing number of people who are non-English speaking, including many diverse members of our community who are of African



CARLOS T. CARTER

ancestry.

Pittsburgh is now the home to immigrants from many parts of the world and it's our obligation to ensure they not only feel welcome, but also included and cherished. To that end, the Urban League is working with multiple community partners to strengthen our efforts at reaching out to and engaging and communicating with our non-English speaking neighbors.

How do you see language equity connected to improving the health of our community?

First and foremost, each of us can value diversity and enrich our lives by learning about our neighbors' ancestry, languages, and cultures.

Second, I think it's critical for all of us to be more mindful about whether our organizations are doing everything we can to welcome people whose first language is not English. When we improve our communication and relationships, we build a stronger and healthier city.

Carlos T. Carter is President and CEO of Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

Language equity improves health equity.

Including non-English speakers in research makes healthcare — and science — more just.

Language equity in medical research means that research and research institutions actively create systems, so that people who do not speak, understand, read, or write in English can participate fully in what's being studied.

A recent study from the University of Pittsburgh shows the disparity between non-English speaking children and their representation in medical research. Dr. Maya I. Ragavan from UPMC Children's Hospital, is hopeful the findings will serve as a call to action for researchers, funding groups, and medical journals who can work together to end this disparity.

In the study, Dr. Ragavan, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Pitt, and her colleagues, found that out of about 5,000 child health articles over the past 10 years, only 9% included non-English speaking participants.

What's more, among the 9% of the articles that did include non-English speaking participants, less than one-third of them specified exactly how they communicated with the participants. This shows that simply including non-English speakers itself is not enough without systems that allow for spoken, signed, and written communication in the research participant's language.

Disparities in research participation are similar to what we see in the healthcare system. Take telehealth for example. Re-

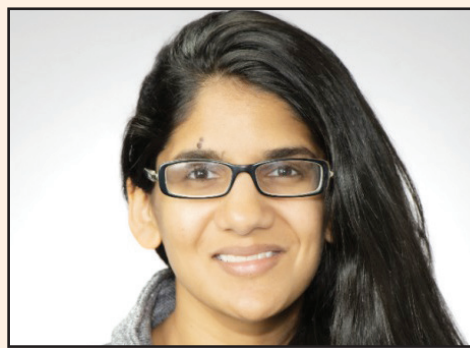
search shows that non-English speakers are less likely to use telehealth in part due to language inequities. (SOURCE: JAMA Network).

While telehealth uses the latest technology to bring healthcare into people's homes, language services may not be part of it. That exclusion continues to carry on the cycle of inequality, especially for people in underserved communities.

Barriers like this can lead to lags in preventative care and services. For children, it can result in fewer visits to doctors, which can cause chronic health conditions like asthma to remain undetected and/or untreated. It can prevent children from receiving vaccines, which leaves them vulnerable to life-threatening diseases that are easily preventable.

"Leaving out non-English speakers from health research means that health disparities continue for people who already face discrimination," says Dr. Ragavan. "If we include individuals from all language backgrounds in our medical research, we're enhancing the quality and fairness of what we find, improving health outcomes, and affirming the beauty and richness of multilingual communities."

Pittsburgh is a linguistically diverse city, which brings richness and joy to our area. The city is home to several community-based organizations that serve immigrant and refugee families. All these groups work tirelessly to make sure everyone has access to services in their languages.



DR. MAYA I. RAGAVAN

Some examples of these organizations include the Congolese Union of Pittsburgh (CUP), the Pittsburgh chapter of APALA, Casa San Jose, the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh, the Somali Bantu Community Association of Pittsburgh, Hello Neighbor, Organization of Chinese Americans, ARYSE, Jewish Family and Community Services, the Latino Community Center, and many others.

To promote language equity, Dr. Ragavan believes non-English speakers must be part of the planning stages of the research process and not an afterthought. For example, instead of simply including a few non-English speakers in a study, researchers must think long and carefully about how that should happen.

Medical research has an impact on everyone's health outcomes, not just the people

participating. The idea behind medical research is to examine data from a smaller group of people who represent the larger population.

When research is done mindfully and inclusively, it leads to new understanding and better treatments for disease, improves access to healthcare, and begins the process of atoning for harms and repairing trust.

What can we do to promote fairness and equal treatment for people of all language backgrounds? We can raise awareness to the importance of language diversity. For example, if we see a service is only available in English, we can ask why and call attention to the need for multilingual and culturally affirming services.

We can also encourage inclusivity by organizing and attending events that celebrate multilingualism and reaching out to people who speak other languages with warmth and appreciation for their culture heritage.

Dr. Ragavan notes, "While this study is about research inclusivity, language equity is much broader and really means reimagining how all systems — healthcare, schools, legal, government — affirm and uplift linguistically diverse communities."

Dr. Ragavan extends an invitation to attend Pitt's virtual Linguistic Justice Conference on April 14. The event features speakers, skills-building workshops, information from community partners, brief research presentations and more. Learn more and register for free online.

Congolese Union of Pittsburgh welcomes and supports all immigrants

One of the oldest African communities to call Pittsburgh home hails from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Today, approximately 40 years after the first Congolese immigrant arrived, there's a thriving group of approximately 400 members who make up the Congolese Union of Pittsburgh (CUP).

According to **Benoit Kihumbu**, the organization's president, many Congolese originally came to Pittsburgh as students and, after earning their degrees, decided to stay. "We feel a special bond with the city," he says. "It's becoming a melting pot like New York City. We want to help people see the beauty and value of different cultures and embrace them."

CUP's mission is to build and maintain a supportive community — not only for its Congolese members, but also for people of all background, beliefs and means. "We want everyone to thrive without discrimination," explains Benoit.

That support includes improving access to specialized social services for its members and people from other countries, including offering English as a second language (ESL) classes.



BENOIT KIHUMBU

Benoit notes, "After going door to door in Crafton Heights, where most of the Congolese refugees are resettled, we learned that many people had a language barrier that was causing them to lose jobs due to a lack of understanding and speaking English."

That discovery prompted Benoit and other CUP leaders to reach out to Literacy



Pittsburgh to work together to provide ESL classes, which are held twice a week in the basement of 950 Woodlow Street in Crafton Heights. The classes are open to all immigrants and people in need. "Currently, we're teaching English to Congolese people, as well as people from Iran and Afghanistan,"

Benoit notes.

In January, CUP held its annual youth event that showcases Congolese culture and promotes Congolese businesses in Pittsburgh. "Congolese Diversity and Cultural Day, offers authentic food and traditional dress, dancing, music, and drummers," explains Benoit. "We also invite speakers who provide a brief history of the Congo, as well as how many of us migrated to Pittsburgh."

In the summer, CUP also hosts a Congolese Diversity and Cultural Day outside in a park setting. "We invite everyone to come celebrate and learn about our culture and enjoy food, games, music and drum playing," says Benoit.

The 2022 summer celebration included a proclamation from the Mayor of Pittsburgh recognizing the Congolese community as Pittsburgh's largest group of refugees. "It recognizes, celebrates, and thanks the people of Congolese descent for making Pittsburgh a stronger and more diverse city," says Benoit. "We're proud to add to Pittsburgh's vibrant culture."

To learn more about CUP, visit the organization's Facebook page.

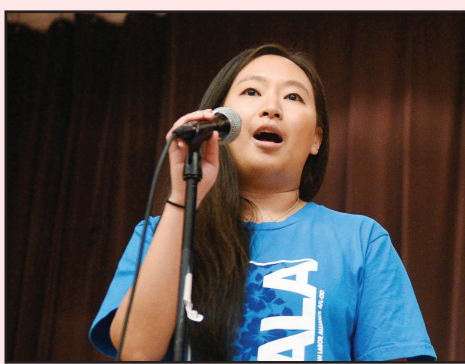
APALA encourages Pittsburghers to take a global view and stand together for workers' rights

Since 1992, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), has worked to advance worker, immigrant, and civil rights for Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) people. The organization also serves as a bridge between the broader labor movement and the AAPI community.

The Pittsburgh chapter of APALA is active in the city defending and advocating for the civil and human rights of APPIs, immigrants and people of color.

According to Sabrina Liu, spokesperson and volunteer at Pittsburgh APALA, the organization holds free workshops in English, Mandarin and Spanish to help educate Asian and Latino restaurant workers about their legal rights.

"Employers often take advantage of immigrants who may be undocumented and who do not speak or understand English



SABRINA LIU

well," Sabrina explains. "We want to provide these workers with resources about

their rights and what they can do if they're being exploited by owners or confronted by police or government immigration agencies."

Sabrina notes that APALA Pittsburgh stands with all workers and supports their right to form unions, including coffee shop, tech, library and museum workers, as well as graduate students.

"We support what all people want — and deserve," she says. "Basic human rights, including healthcare, education, a good place to live, and meaningful work that pays a living wage and doesn't take advantage of people."

APALA Pittsburgh also stresses the important role of voting. The organization distributes information in English, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Korean, and other languages that encourage those who are eligi-

ble to vote to understand and participate in the voting process.

Sabrina encourages all Pittsburghers to think globally when they encounter other languages and accents in their neighborhoods, churches, workplaces, and when they're socializing.

"Regardless of what we do for a living, we live in an interconnected global world. Understanding that and valuing and including people who speak a different language will help you be more successful."

Learn how you can stand in support with APALA Pittsburgh, including adding language and outreach capacity for Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans. Visit the organization's Facebook page and Instagram. You can also log on to the national APALA site and download a labor toolkit on Anti-Asian Racism.