

The time public housing residents changed the housing authority's language access policies



Asian-language speaking tenants in Queensbridge organize to advocate for greater language access for public housing tenants across New York City.

There are approximately 20,000 Asian residents in New York City's public housing system. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), before tenants organized, had only two Chinese language interpreters on staff to serve thousands of people.

In 2014, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities worked with residents of Queensbridge public housing to [document](#) the lack of language access within the system. CAAAV conducted "know your rights" workshops and supported residents to advocate for greater language access. Now, NYCHA offers Cantonese and Mandarin through their Central Call Center and has translated many documents into Chinese.

But this win is not enough.

CAAAY is building a strong Asian Tenants Union through an organizing model that prioritizes language justice, political education, and tenant-led demands and strategy across Queensbridge and other public housing in Western Queens.



Describing current efforts, Melanie Wang, CAAAV Lead Chinatown Tenant Union Organizer, says "We organize with Asian populations in three different language demographics: Korean, Chinese, Bengali. Three organizers with each demographic hold meetings on a monthly basis. Once every quarter they have a meeting with leaders from all three language groups, which requires a lot of prep and translation.

Other Wins & Lessons Learned

Training Bilingual Volunteers for Door Knocking

Melanie says, “When we send people out on doors, I don’t generally use scripts. The primary issue is language. We generally do door knocking with volunteers and [one staff member]. Volunteers are younger folks, often American born who might have a degree of comfort in Chinese. Sometimes they are fluent. Especially folks who were raised here, reading a script in English doesn’t really work in terms of them being able to say it in Chinese. Reading scripts in Chinese doesn’t really work for them either. So I try to train new volunteers orally. If they read a thing in English and try to say it in Chinese it takes out their ability. When you’re door knocking you have to have a certain



level of intuitive attention to where someone is at. Folks need to be able to talk about the organization and the issues that are happening. But if they’re too focused on saying something in a certain style and trying to translate it in their head, then they lose the ability to speak to someone at the door...

“[When we door knock w]e go in pairs. I always pair somebody new with someone experienced. The first time they go with them, they have to watch. We do role plays before they go out. They figure out what to talk about after they have had a couple of conversations.”

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Working with Non-Literate Populations

Melanie says, “Some of our membership aren’t literate in English or any other language. Despite that lack of literacy, they’ve developed a lot of visual reading skills and a strong ability to rely on other skills to figure out what is going on. I try to do activities that are heavy on visuals. If we rely on activities, I try to do things with different colors. If we’re

doing something with a handout, we have people read it out loud. We don't do things that involve members writing things down and in my experience that doesn't go well when we do it.

"Sometimes we do meeting evaluation or other kinds of evaluations with check boxes. A lot of tools like that. A good example is in 2016, before and after the election we did a basic civic engagement mapping of local elected officials and had a discussion of city, state, federal government, and the executive and legislative branch -- to get to know the candidates and the electeds and what each level of government has power over. What the difference between representatives, assembly people, Mayor, and the governor. We did that with pictures of elected officials and visual images of them."

"CAA AV Organizing Asian Communities works to build grassroots community power across diverse poor and working class Asian immigrant and refugee communities in New York City."



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