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Influx of West Africans in the Bronx Spurs Demand for Interpreters

Listening to a French translation at the African Community Town Hall this month. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Conversations were still bubbling when Afua Atta-Mensah took the microphone and welcomed everybody to the African Community Town Hall, held in the basement of the Bronx Museum of the Arts this month.

“Ete sen?” Ms. Atta-Mesah, the program moderator, shouted in one of Ghana’s primary language groups, Twi. The crowd of 300 cheered. She had simply asked, “What’s up?”

According to a new report released last month by the United States Census Bureau, more than 192 languages are spoken in the New York metropolitan area, making the city the most linguistically diverse in the country. The rise in African languages significantly contributes to this panoply, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the Bronx. According to the Census Bureau, more than 16 African languages are spoken in the Bronx, a number that is quite likely far lower than what is actually spoken in homes in the borough, linguists say. In West Africa alone there are more than 800 languages.

But no matter whether Wolof, Diula, Efik or Gur are spoken here, the impact is clear. The proliferation of West Africans in the northern reaches of New York has prompted a growing need for African language interpreters.

Manaf Mohammed, 5, was examined at St. Barnabas Hospital. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

“People are arriving with language barriers, and as they come and have children in schools, we still have language barriers everywhere,” said Akinde Kodjo, a community organizer for the advocacy group African Communities Together. She helped start an interpreter program in February 2014, and over the summer, eight members trained to be interpreters in a city-sponsored program, NY Certified.

While many immigrants from West Africa speak enough English or French to navigate daily life, their comprehension may be inadequate to handle the complexities of immigration paperwork, the courts, housing applications or educational offerings.

“There are so many people in need of the services by the city, but they don’t have the knowledge of how to access them,” Alane Bibang, a 32-year-old interpreter from Gabon who volunteers for African Communities Together, said.

He said he was gratified to help a man from Burkina Faso who reported being abused by his employers. Because they both spoke French, Mr. Bibang said the client was more forthcoming when they met with lawyers.

Perhaps it was excitement over finding speakers of the same language that fueled the background chatter at the town hall on Nov. 12. Only a dozen or so people listened to French translation on headsets. The event, which was organized by the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, provided information about access to city services.

Wasila Ibrahim, 10, whose family is from Ghana. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

“I can say things better in Hausa than in English,” said Rabiatu Yakubu, 59, from Ghana, who approached an informational table for African Communities Together. There she found Sadatu Mamah-Trawill, 39, a part-time organizer and a familiar face.

They had first met two days earlier at the African Immigrant Heritage Breakfast sponsored by Scott M. Stringer, the city’s comptroller, at the New Settlement Community Center in the Bronx. At the town hall, Ms. Yakubu learned her husband was distantly related to Ms. Mamah-Trawill’s father; the families came from the same neighborhood in Accra, the capital.

“She’s my daughter,” Ms. Yakubu said joyfully, adding, “I was telling her about what I need, housing. I’m begging her to help get me an apartment.”

The issues important to the African population in the Bronx are similar to those in other emerging communities: housing and jobs. The number of West African immigrants in the borough (some migrating from higher-priced Harlem) rose to 45,723 residents in 2014 from 28,154 in 2007, according to census data compiled by Queens College.

“It’s forcing the body politic to deal with the African leadership,” said Ms. Afua Atta-Mensah, the town hall moderator, who is the director of litigation for the Urban Justice Center, a legal advocacy group, and a board member of African Communities Together.

At St. Barnabas Hospital, interpreters on phones help patients communicate. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

By law, any institution that receives federal funding is required to provide interpreter services, said Nisha Agarwal, the city’s commissioner for immigrant affairs. Beyond the basics, though, Ms. Agarwal said the city is examining how “we can be more helpful in facilitating integration.” St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx is racing to keep up with the demographics by holding diversity days, so that doctors can better understand cultural norms that may affect health, and help immigrants feel comfortable.

Like most hospitals in the city, St. Barnabas uses a language bank to access live interpreters of more than 2,000 languages at all hours. Bright blue phones with two handsets are in examining rooms, one for the doctor and one for the patient to talk with an interpreter who is at a call center. But sometimes, there is more than a language gap. Last year, a baby boy from Kenya came to the emergency room with lead poisoning. After a month of treatment, he did not get better, Lynette Alvarado, the director of language culture for the hospital, said.

She contacted the Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families, and found out the source of the problem had come from Africa. The kitchen utensils brought to the United States by the boy’s parents were decorated with lead paint.

Because the African community is relatively new to the Bronx, doctors at the hospital are learning the continent’s languages and cultures as they go.

“To me what I find incredible is how narrow the geographic space is where the languages can change,” said Dr. Eric Applebaum, the associate medical director of the ambulatory care unit at

the hospital. “You go to a map and say, ‘You’re from here, you’re from there, you guys look like you’re five minutes from each other.’ It would be like me and a Jersey and Philadelphia guy saying, ‘Sorry we just don’t speak the same language.’ ”

Correction: November 27, 2015

An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the city’s commissioner for immigrant affairs on second reference. Her name is Nisha Agarwal, not Agrawal.

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