

## Immigrants and LEP

### Who They Are:

Immigrants and LEP individuals bring a diverse array of perspectives to the planning process. Depending on the area, LEP residents may come from mostly the same language background or represent a variety of first languages as well as different countries.

In New Jersey, **12.4% of the population** reports speaking English less than “very well,” and of those, over half speak Spanish at home, a figure that is growing. Other common languages include Chinese dialects, Korean, Portuguese, and Gujarati (India). Many individuals understand more English than they are comfortable speaking, but still prefer to speak in their native language, especially when discussing complex issues.

Because they may have had negative experiences in their home countries that drove them to emigrate, immigrants are underrepresented in the planning process not only due to language barriers, but also mistrust of government, safety concerns, or intimidation.



### Best Practices:

The cultural nuances, communication styles, and engagement preferences of immigrant communities are as diverse as the communities themselves. Outreach should be:

- **Approachable:** Some immigrants fear traditional public meetings or other “official” gatherings because they may lack documentation in the United States, they don’t feel invested, or they are afraid they will not understand what is being discussed. Bringing meetings to the places where these groups already congregate (plazas, stores, school activities, cultural fairs, ESL classes, soccer games, or laundromats) can invite people to participate who would not otherwise.
- **In their language:** Interpreters provide flexibility for handling small numbers of LEP residents in a public meeting; however, outreach is more effective if bilingual staff are available to converse with LEP residents directly in their native language. If enough speakers of one language are expected, events can be held entirely in another language.
- **Shareable:** Creating takeaways that participants can share with family and friends, or that children can share with parents, helps spread the word in communities that rely more on word-of-mouth communication.

- **Relevant to their Family's Needs:** Connecting issues to personal experiences, their children, or a family member makes it more relevant to their daily lives. Even planning for 20 years in the future is tangible if they see that it relates to their children.

- **Visual:** Photos, graphics, and hands-on activities transcend language barriers and make topics more understandable for those who have less background on the topic. Because some immigrants may not have had the opportunity to attend school in their home countries, visual information can also help when translated text is not understood.

- **Focused on Safety:** Some immigrants come from countries where riding transit or walking poses personal security risks. Outreach that focuses on safety may help overcome these barriers.

## Recommended Strategies:

- **Trusted Advocates:** Hire outreach workers for specific demographics who are already respected members of that community. They can serve as liaisons that link the agency to the community by facilitating communication and recruiting participants at agency events.

- **Visit Small Businesses in Person:** Visiting small businesses in person gives hard-working entrepreneurs a chance to engage without leaving their place of business, and can be a tool to form partnerships.

- **"Know Your Rights" Page:** A "Know your rights" page can be dedicated to sharing information with underserved communities regarding resources and procedures in place and their rights to access them. This can help ensure that all residents are able to participate in an agency's programs and decision-making processes, and is especially important in communities with a history of being denied rights.

- **Use Ethnic Media Outlets:** Some immigrant groups and other minority communities get their news primarily through ethnic or foreign language media outlets such as television and radio stations and newspapers offered in a particular language, such as Spanish or Arabic. Agencies should look into advertising their programs, projects, etc. through these means because they may be the only way to reach such audiences.

- **Graphic Novels:** Graphic novels, or comics, are a popular medium with the Latino community to convey ideas. They facilitate word-of-mouth communication as they are easy to share with friends and family.

- **Students Surveying Parents:** Elementary students can be assigned to interview family members about a local issue or transportation project.

- **Partner with ESL Classes:** Going to ESL classes is a great opportunity to reach residents who are reluctant to participate in civic affairs. A brief, easy-to-understand presentation could be made (in coordination with the instructor or school) and it could be integrated into the language training program.

## Languages of LEP residents in New Jersey



57.8% Spanish



4.9% Chinese dialects



3.8% Korean



3.8% Portuguese



2.9% Gujarati

### Example:

TriMet in Portland, Oregon found that creating a graphic novel about how to ride transit was an effective way to share information with the Latino community and increase ridership among Spanish speakers.

The novel, *Viaje Mejor*, reflects a culturally resonant form of communication that is easily shared with family and friends, and is relatable because it follows the personal story of a new Latino immigrant learning to navigate the transit system in Portland.

See it at <http://trimet.org/pdfs/espanol/viaje-mejor.pdf>.