

## More than a third of Texans speak a language other than English. That means key coronavirus updates aren't accessible to them.

Because of language barriers, Texas risks leaving some of the state's marginalized communities even more vulnerable to contracting the virus while making it more difficult to access resources needed to get through the pandemic.

BY STACY FERNÁNDEZ    JUNE 2, 2020 5 AM



A Central Health mailer with COVID-19 information in Spanish was mailed to Austin residents. Eddie Gaspar/The Texas Tribune

Days after Hidalgo County's stay-at-home orders went into effect in late March, some of the area's mostly Latino residents learned about the new rules not from the government officials charged with their protection, but from

police officers at checkpoints writing them citations for unknowingly violating the rules. While action around the COVID-19 pandemic was rapidly changing, news wasn't reaching people in their native languages in real time.

Hidalgo County, where some of the checkpoints were set up, is 92% Latino. Carlos Sanchez, a county spokesperson, said police officers didn't immediately issue tickets. The first week of the executive order, officers were in "education mode," explaining to some residents who were hearing for the first time how the county and state were adapting to the pandemic.

More than a third of Texans speak a language other than English at home, according to census data. Spanish is largely the most spoken language, with Vietnamese, Chinese languages and Tagalog — spoken in the Philippines — holding the other top spots. But news broadcasts and articles, changing government mandates and the latest health safety guidance are mostly being communicated in English.

Local and state leaders need to make greater strides to get critical, life-saving information out to the masses in as many languages as possible, nonprofit leaders and state residents said.

Black and Latino Texans are already at higher risk of contracting the virus and being affected by its devastating economic fallout than white Texans. The disproportionate effect stems from racial disparities like lack of testing sites in the neighborhoods of people of color, overrepresentation both among essential workers and the unemployed, and a need to use public transportation. Because of language barriers, Texas risks leaving some of the state's marginalized communities even more vulnerable to contracting the virus while making it more difficult to access resources needed to get through the pandemic.

"It's sort of a domino effect where if people don't understand the messaging correctly, they're not going to do and implement the prevention and control measures in a way that's really necessary to break the chain of transmission," said Diana Cervantes, director of the epidemiology program at the University of North Texas Health Science Center.

Urgent updates about coronavirus hot spots and changes to government restrictions are mostly being communicated statewide directly from Gov. Greg Abbott, whose office has made little effort to ensure information is available to residents who don't speak English. While Abbott's weekly conferences feature a sign language interpreter, the governor's office does not offer translated

versions of his conferences or news releases. The governor's website features a button for Spanish translation that, when clicked, leaves much of the text untranslated.

As the governor began to gradually reopen businesses across the state in May, details of the reopening guidelines appeared on the governor's website in Spanish, but as of Friday, many of the latest rule changes for businesses reopening were still only available in English.

When the governor announced salons could reopen, Alma Nava, a hairstylist in Montgomery County, got a flyer from the governor detailing the reopening guidelines salons and stylists should follow — but it was only in English. Nava had to copy and paste the words into Google Translate to understand what the flyer meant.

Nava said the lack of effort to communicate to people in other languages is an unwelcoming signal.

"With this type of government, there's one thing that's very clear: They don't want us in this country," Nava said.

When asked about the governor's outreach to Texans who speak languages other than English, spokesperson John Wittman pointed to the two sets of reopening guidelines and health guidance from the Texas Department of State Health Services that are available in Spanish.

### **City efforts**

Hidalgo County, where there were police checkpoints for violating stay-at-home orders, translates information about the pandemic into Spanish on its website and occasionally on Facebook, but that's not enough for rural Texans who lack reliable internet access, said John-Michael Torres, a spokesperson for La Union Del Pueblo, a civil rights nonprofit based in the Rio Grande Valley.

Officials need to reach people where they are, Torres said, which means sending information by mail, calling constituents, posting flyers in essential businesses, using social media and partnering with community organizations.

"It's really concerning that the county, instead of really coordinating an informational campaign to get to all of our community, they're essentially relying on police officers to do education in traffic stops," Torres said.

Of Texas' 10 most populous cities, eight have official websites that give users the option to translate the page to at least one other language besides English. Most of these cities depend on an automated and not fully accurate Google Translate plug-in.

Language advocates say Facebook is where officials should heavily push out translated information since that's where most of their communities look for updates. As of Friday, five of the top 10 cities — Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Fort Worth and El Paso — had posted information in Spanish on their Facebook pages in the previous two weeks. Of those, only three — San Antonio, Austin and El Paso — have Spanish translations consistently.

Notably, of those cities, Laredo doesn't translate its website or Facebook posts despite 90% of its residents speaking languages other than English at home.

Laredo officials don't translate their website because it's a "very bilingual city," said Rafael Benavides, a city spokesperson. The city hosts Facebook Live events with experts three times a week for constituent questions, Benavides said, and answers are typically repeated back in English and Spanish.

In Austin, city officials regularly post updates and infographics on Facebook and Twitter in Spanish, Vietnamese and Chinese. A third of people in the capital city speak languages other than English at home, according to census data.

Recently, the capital city partnered with a local food bank to tuck paper flyers with testing information in multiple languages into people's food packages. The city mailed the same translated information to households in the Austin Independent School District, said Cara Welch, a city of Austin spokesperson.

"We thought, 'Where do people still have to go, and how can we get that information right in front of them?'" Welch said.

Despite the outreach, a representative from one of Austin's smaller language communities said officials aren't doing enough to reach them.

Paw Khu serves as an unofficial liaison between the Burmese community and Austin health officials. Officials send Khu information to share.

"They think if they send it to me, the whole Burmese community knows. That's

not true. They should do something instead of sending it to me. They should do some outreach, a little bit more," said Khu, a mother of three.

Unlike Texas' Spanish speakers, who can depend on a handful of local Spanish-language TV news and radio stations, Burmese speakers have fewer options. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Khu has gotten her news and guidelines from a hodgepodge of phone calls with friends, translated information from Burmese nonprofits across the country, Facebook and Thai news channels. Although she doesn't speak Thai, Khu said many Burmese people can understand it.

Austin does send out some translated information in Burmese, but it lacks consistency, Khu said.

Outside of Austin, other big cities are also taking a combined approach to reaching constituents whose primary language isn't English.

Reaching people who lack access to internet or other technology, or who aren't tech savvy, has been a focal point in San Antonio's outreach strategy, said Laura Mayes, a city spokesperson. Local health officials who worked with the Latino community long before the pandemic have been calling and visiting businesses and apartment complexes in person to check in and answer questions in Spanish.

The city also hosts televised segments featuring COVID-19 updates with the local Telemundo and Univision stations, popular Spanish-language TV news outlets.

In Houston, the most populous city in Texas, media partners have been a "vital resource," Cory Stottlemyer, a spokesperson for Houston's Office of Emergency Management, said in an email. On the city's roster of media partners are Univision and Radio Saigon, which serves Vietnamese residents.

The city's communication on Facebook is infrequently translated, but Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo consistently does her press conferences on the new coronavirus in English and Spanish — a practice she adopted before the pandemic.

But Hidalgo is an outlier.

## **Turning to the community**

Despite efforts from city and public health officials, people who don't speak English are largely seeking information in their native languages and turning to trusted nonprofit organizations and community members that are active in their communities.

Maria Ramirez has the news playing in the living room most of the day in her Houston home.

Off the top of her head, she lists the channel numbers of the four news channels she watches the most: "Channel 71, 47, 45 and 13." CNN en Español is a favorite.