

Language Access in Wisconsin

May 2024 | Amanda Martinez



In Wisconsin, language access has become a barrier when providing direct services to families. The United States has a rich linguistic landscape with more than 350 languages spoken nationwide, including spoken languages like Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Arabic, as well as Indigenous languages such as Navajo, Yupik, Dakota, Apache, Keres, Dine, Cherokee, and many others.¹ In Wisconsin, about 125,000 people are multilingual speakers who likely require language access services. If the population were a city it would be third largest in the state.

Despite the linguistic diversity that exists, there is a significant gap and need for language access, particularly in direct services for children and families of color.

Linguistic inclusivity—ensuring that all families have secured opportunities to access and benefit from essential services—should be a priority in both policy and practice for every decision maker in Wisconsin.



Refugees coming in from other states or from different continents...they are struggling, you know, they face a lot of barriers. Financially, linguistically, even socially there are so many challenges people are facing.

- Esther Ama S. Ptak, Community Outreach Coordinator

What is language access?

Language access is the arrangement of services and resources that enable individuals who do not speak English to effectively communicate and access the same services, opportunities, and information as English-speaking individuals. Individuals having access to language services allows them to meaningfully participate in the services and opportunities organizations offer. The denial of access to language not only hinders effective communication, but creates barriers for families securing basic needs and services. The reality of limited language access in our state raises questions about the inclusivity and equity of services provided to diverse communities.

Multilingual Residents who may Require Language Access Services, Wisconsin, 2022

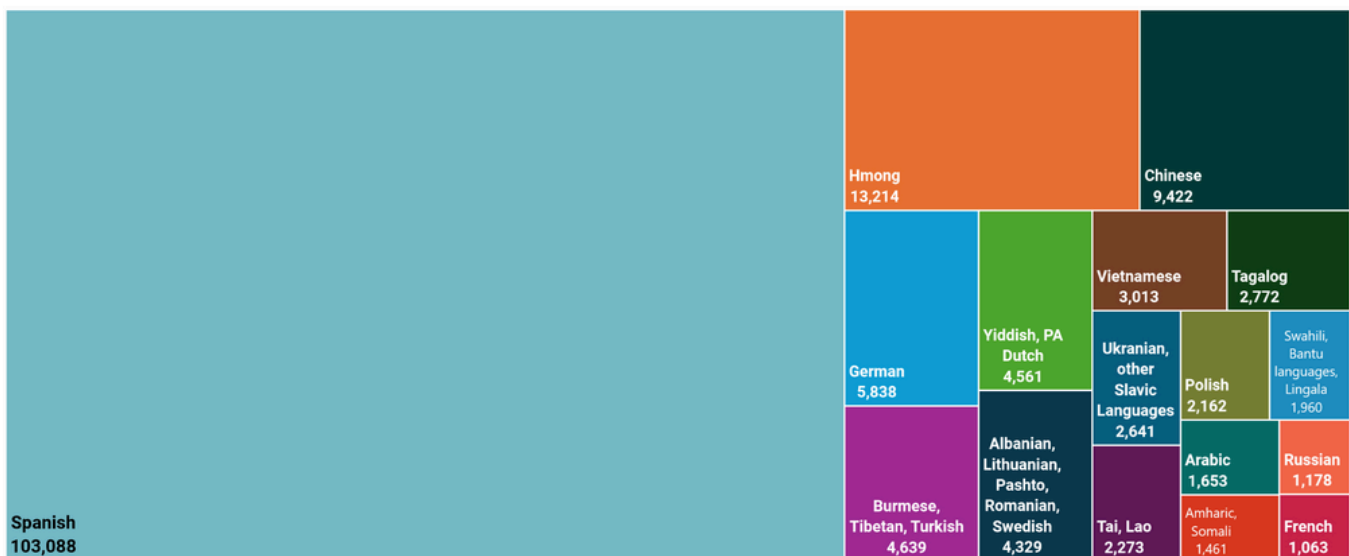


Chart includes all languages with more than 1000 estimated speakers
Source: Migration Policy Institute's Analysis of ACS Survey Data, 2022

295,000 immigrants call Wisconsin home

This means Wisconsin is a state of diverse cultures and languages. The state of Wisconsin serves approximately 55,000 English learner students and over 140 languages are identified as spoken by Wisconsin students, with Spanish and Hmong being the most commonly spoken languages.² Newly arrived immigrant and refugee communities in Wisconsin represent a growing need for language services.

Who must provide language access services?

Language access services are a shared responsibility among various entities, including state agencies, local governments, healthcare providers, educational institutions, and other organizations that receive federal funding. These entities are mandated to provide language access services under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on national origin and requires recipients of federal funds to ensure meaningful access to programs and services for multilingual speakers.³ If an agency does not receive federal funding, it's still important to have a system in place that provides access to services regardless of someone's language.

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There are so many people who come in, mostly people from Africa...they speak French or English as the official language. But from experience, there are some people who come in who speak neither of these international languages and they speak an African language and they have to learn English... they don't even know what to start from.

- Esther Ama S. Ptak, Community Outreach Coordinator

What can you do to advocate for language access?

- Educate yourself about multilingual populations in your service area. You can examine the U.S. Census Data or connect with local community organizations to learn more about languages spoken in your area.
- Develop materials such as "I Speak" cards or posters to help individuals identify their language(s). This simple tool enables your organization to tailor services to meet diverse linguistic needs effectively.
- Implement a comprehensive language access plan within your agency. This plan should outline strategies for providing translation services, interpreter availability, and bilingual staff training to enhance communication with multilingual populations. Here is a [step by step process](#) to develop your first language access plan.
- Advocate for policymakers to implement a statewide language access plan. Wisconsin currently does not have a statewide language access plan, although some counties and state agencies have prepared their own. Contact your legislators and Governor Tony Evers to ask them to support the implementation of a language access plan.

By taking these advocacy steps, you contribute significantly to promoting inclusivity, equity, and effective communication for multilingual populations, ultimately improving access to essential services and fostering stronger community connections.

Contact

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Kids Forward is a statewide antiracist policy center that inspires action and advocates for children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity in Wisconsin. We envision a Wisconsin where every child thrives. Visit kidsforward.org.

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023
2. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2019
3. Office for Civil Rights, 2023