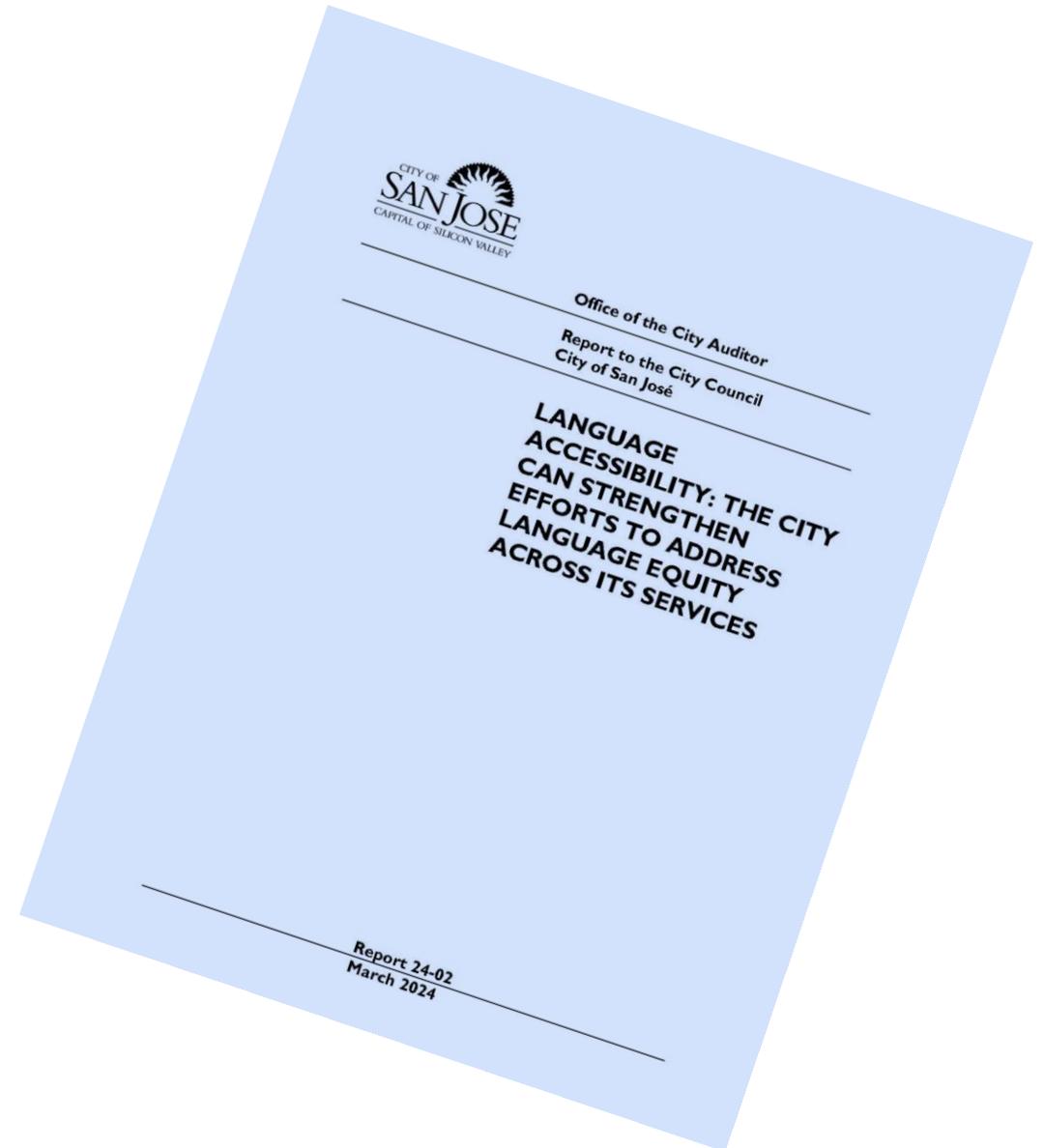




Language Accessibility: The City Can Strengthen Efforts to Address Language Equity Across Its Services

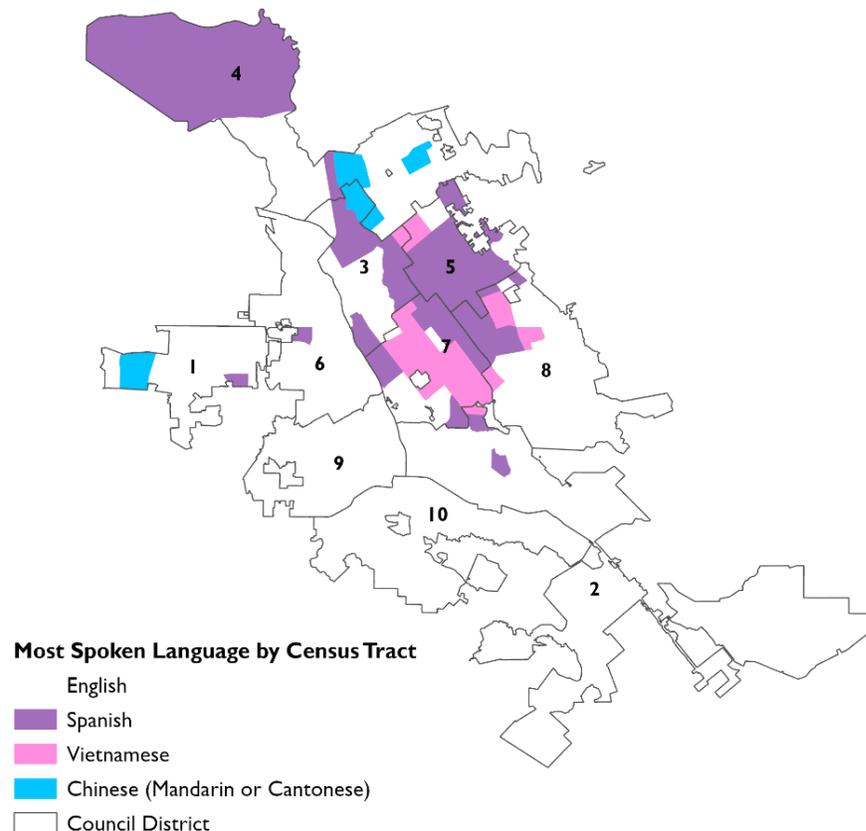
A Report from the City Auditor
Issued March 2024
<http://www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor>



Background

- More than 57% of residents in San José report speaking a language other than English at home.
- The City’s Language Equity Policy and Guidelines expects departments to take reasonable steps to provide equitable access to language assistance services.
 - The City currently has contracts with 11 vendors who provide language services.
 - As of June 2023, there were nearly 900 certified bilingual staff in the City.
- The City has initiatives to improve customer service and training to manage communication barriers.

Most Common Languages in the City by Census Tract



Source: Auditor created based on data from the City’s GIS language map.

Note: Other languages may be commonly spoken in each area.

Finding I: Departments Have Made Some Progress on Addressing Language Accessibility, But Additional Work Remains.

- Based on a review of five City services, we found all had made some progress in implementing aspects of the Language Equity Policy and Guidelines.
- Reviewed services varied in the extent to which they addressed the policy's requirements and best practices.
- Common areas of improvement included addressing language access at common points of customer contact, such as phone trees, translations of vital documents, and signage.



Finding I: Departments Have Made Some Progress on Addressing Language Accessibility, But Additional Work Remains.

- Departments have not generally assigned Language Access Coordinators, which is a best practice recommended in the policy.
- The Administration can provide additional guidance or resources for departments to support language access efforts.
- Currently, there are no performance metrics or systems to gauge progress on language accessibility and promote improvement over time.

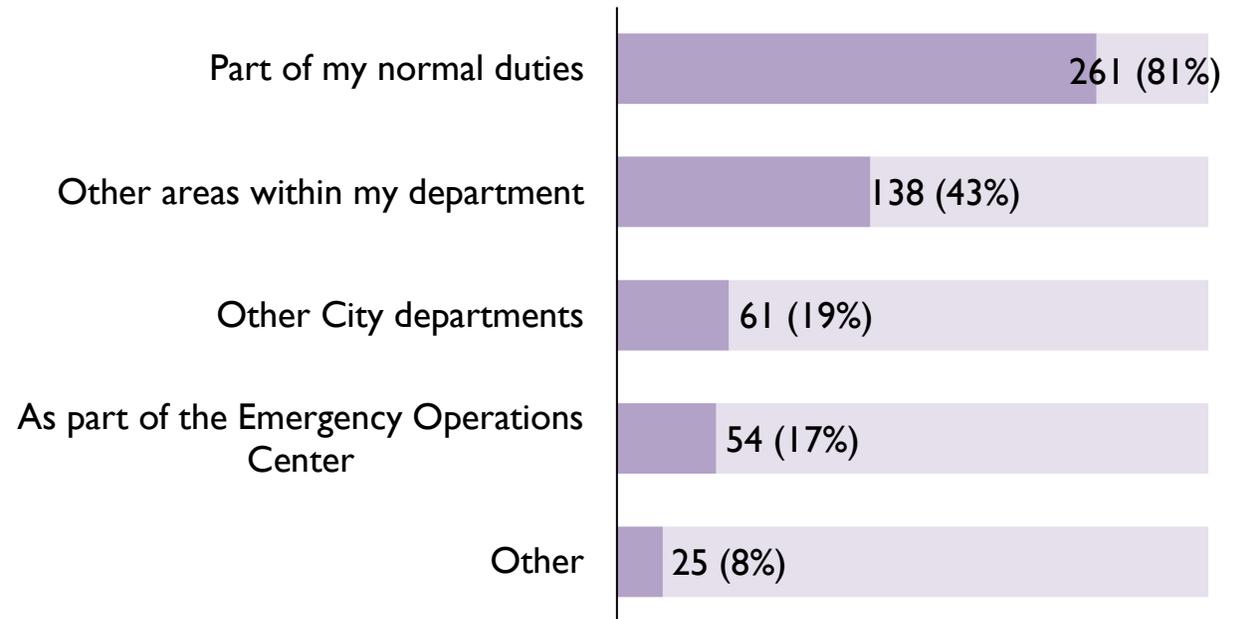
Recommendations: The Administration should:

- Monitor language accessibility of common points of customer contact across departments
- Require customer facing departments designate Language Access Coordinators and develop Language Access Plans
- Develop additional resources to support department efforts around language accessibility
- Create performance metrics and a system to review progress

Finding 2: Bilingual Staff Are a Resource to the City, Though Clarity on Their Role is Needed.

- Certified bilingual staff use their bilingual skills to provide direct services to residents, businesses, and visitors.
- Certified bilingual staff assist in other areas within their department and assist other City departments.
- Bilingual staff expressed generally positive views of their role in providing services to the community.

Bilingual Staff Assist Individuals in Several City Areas



Source: Auditor analysis of responses to the question “Select the areas of the City in which you provide your bilingual services [select all that apply]”

Finding 2: Bilingual Staff Are a Resource to the City, Though Clarity on Their Role is Needed.

- Bilingual staff have noted that their regular duties are impacted by their bilingual workload.
- Additionally, some staff may be asked to act as interpreters, which they may not be qualified or trained to do.
- The City has made improvements to the bilingual certification process, though there may potentially be certification records not on file for some certified bilingual staff.

Recommendations: The Administration should:

- Clarify the expectations and role of bilingual staff, including those that do not receive bilingual pay
- Reconcile bilingual certification records for staff who receive bilingual pay as necessary

Conclusion

This report has 12 recommendations to improve language equity across the City's services.

We would like to thank the City Manager's Office of Communications, the City Attorney's Office, certified bilingual staff who participated in our survey and focus groups, and all City departments who assisted in the audit.

The audit report is available at www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor

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