

Language Issues and Barriers

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Language is the primary vehicle for communicating information that allows individuals to make informed decisions across all phases of a disaster. The effectiveness of educational disaster preparedness materials, emergency response training curricula, emergency warnings, and post-disaster recovery services, are all contingent upon information being conveyed in a linguistically appropriate format. For this reason, individuals with limited-English proficiency (LEP) in United States (U.S.) face a number of barriers to receiving timely, accurate, and useful disaster information, contributing in many cases, to disproportionately adverse disaster outcomes. The 1989 Loma Prieta and 1995 Northridge earthquakes, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, the 2007 Southern California wildfires, as well countless other natural and man-made disasters have evidenced perennial language related issues that pose challenges to LEP communities before, during, and after a disaster.

According to the 2007 American Community Survey, there are an estimated 24 million Americans who speak English “less than very well” and can be classified as LEP. This figure does not include the approximate 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., many of whom are LEP. The linguistic isolation of LEP communities is often compounded by a number of factors associated with newly arrived immigrants, such as cultural isolation and low socioeconomic status, which further contribute to the disaster vulnerability of these communities.

Prior to an event, LEP communities are often ill prepared for disasters in part as a result of minimal exposure to language appropriate disaster education materials and training opportunities. Furthermore, language barriers often inhibit LEP communities from receiving pre-disaster warnings and evacuation orders that allow them to take protective action. LEP communities are also beset by a number of challenges across the phases of response and recovery, as they face communication barriers with first-responders and are often unaware of, or unable to obtain, post-disaster recovery aid as a result of information being disseminated in English alone.

The critical need to provide linguistically appropriate services to diverse segments of the population have been formally recognized by government agencies who have produced guidelines and benchmarks, such as the National Standards for Culturally And Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in the U.S. and the Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society in Australia. Yet limited organizational capacity and deep-seated cultural issues have limited the extent to which such strategies have been embraced in practice at the local level. Community-based strategies to define, locate, and partner with linguistically diverse populations have proved to be most successful in ameliorating language barriers and disparities in disaster outcomes.

Preparedness

Community and individual preparedness is a critical first step in mitigating the effects of disasters and enhancing community resilience. Federal, state, and local authorities have invested substantial resources into training/education and preparedness campaigns to foster behaviors, such as stockpiling resources and creating a disaster response plan. Yet as a result of linguistic barriers, LEP communities are often unable to fully benefit from such initiatives as they are often only provided in English, thus creating a situation where LEP communities are less prepared for disasters than their English speaking counterparts.

A 2008 review of emergency preparedness efforts for culturally diverse communities in California found that only 14% of the organizations profiled provided training and education opportunities in languages other than English, while just over 40% provided translated materials on their website and 70% provided links to translated materials. The internet holds great potential to reach large segments of the population with preparedness information, but the benefits of web-based materials may be limited for low-income immigrants who are LEP and without internet access. While providing disaster preparedness materials in multiple languages is a pragmatic strategy and necessary step towards addressing language barriers, such translations are only valuable if they are also culturally competent. Language is a complex system of symbols and meanings which are embedded within a cultural framework. Thus, verbatim translations which are not grounded in a cultural context may be misleading, counter-productive, and may foster feelings of distrust of planning and response officials among LEP communities.

Working with linguistically diverse community partners, such as community-based (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs), to develop and evaluate translated disaster preparedness materials has emerged as a promising practice for ensuring that resources are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Emergency Community Health Outreach (ECHO) Minnesota is a model initiative that has embraced such a strategy to reach LEP communities with culturally and linguistically appropriate disaster information. ECHO has partnered with public broadcasting stations and Spanish speaking, Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao, Hmong, and Somali communities to provide public service announcements and produce translated materials on emergency preparedness in the native languages of LEP communities in the region.

Warning

Language barriers have the potential to drastically reduce the efficacy of disaster warnings immediately prior to an event. Messages containing evacuation orders or

other time-sensitive information concerning a threat are liable be ineffective in reaching LEP populations if they are only broadcasted in English.

Disaster warnings, even if linguistically appropriate, hold little value if they fail to reach the LEP communities that are linguistically isolated. Disseminating disaster information through multiple media outlets such as ethnic television, radio stations, or translated text messages are promising strategies for reaching LEP communities. However, numerous accounts have documented that pre-disaster warnings are often broadcasted through ethnic media outlets well after they are through mainstream channels of communication. In a case study of the Loma Prieta earthquake, Subervi and colleagues found that Spanish-language television and radio possessed inadequate infrastructure and had weak connections with emergency response services to broadcast information to Spanish-speaking audiences immediately following the earthquake.

Response

The effective delivery of emergency medical and mental health services immediately following an event is critical to reducing mortality, morbidity, and other long-term sequella associated with disasters. Communication barriers between first responders—such as police, fire fighters, emergency medical technicians, and counselors—and LEP individuals has been shown to be a persistent barrier to service delivery, adversely affecting the timeliness and quality of emergency response services. The limited language capabilities of emergency telephone service operators also serves as an impediment to matching emergency response services with the needs of LEP disaster victims.

Lack of linguistic diversity in the emergency response workforce has emerged as a major barrier to meeting the post-disaster needs of LEP communities. Muniz describes the significant shortage of Spanish-speaking first responders to adequately meet the needs of Hispanic and Latino communities following Hurricane Katrina, despite the recent proliferation of those communities in the Gulf Coast region. The results of Fire 20/20, a 2006 survey of fire departments in three U.S. cities, found that one-third to one-half of respondents reported experiencing communication barriers when responding to LEP persons in an emergency and that these language barriers adversely effected the timeliness and quality of services.

The benefits of licensed medical interpreters in clinical and hospital settings is well documented. While medical interpreters possess skills necessary to bridge communication gaps between LEP individuals and first-responders following a disaster, the fiscal constraints of emergency response agencies often limit the extent to which this strategy has been embraced. Bi-lingual staff and volunteers can also transcend communication barriers and may serve as low-cost alternatives to medical interpreters.

However, the relative homogeneity of the volunteer population has posed a challenge. Lack of diversity in the volunteer workforce has prompted some chapters of the American Red Cross to launch targeted recruitment efforts to increase cultural and linguistic diversity.

Relief & Recovery

Language barriers inhibit disaster victims from being aware of recovery assistance and pose difficulties to completing paperwork and navigating administrative structures in order to receive aid. Language access issues pose challenges to LEP individuals receiving disaster assistance to which they are entitled if information on grants and aid is disseminated only in English. Following Hurricane Katrina, many LEP immigrants were denied aid as they did not speak English. This issue was compounded by fear of immigration officials and a lack of linguistically appropriate information on eligibility for disaster assistance.

A number of U.S. laws, such as Title VI of the 1963 Civil Rights Act and Presidential Executive Order 13166, require federally supported entities to take steps to provide LEP individuals with linguistically appropriate services. However the extent to which these provisions have been enforced and are adhered to have come into question. Additionally, provisions within the U.S. Stafford Act require information on disaster services to be made available in the primary language of any non-English speaking group that comprises five percent or more of the affected population. Yet linguistically diverse regions may be comprised of various LEP sub-groups, none of which alone meet the five percent requirement.

Federal efforts to amend individual-level communication barriers between LEP individuals and disaster relief agencies are often stymied by organizational and cultural barriers that limit the availability of bi-lingual personnel and culturally competent translated materials. CBOs, FBOs, and non-government organizations have emerged as the entities best equipped to provide disaster relief to LEP communities. These organizations are often familiar with the cultural intricacies of such communities and are fluent in both English and the native language of LEP disaster victims. Following hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Boat People SOS, a national CBO serving Vietnamese Americans, received federal support and was instrumental in assisting limited and non-English speaking Vietnamese immigrants access disaster recovery services.

Many of the language issues which reduce the quality of and utilization of disaster relief services among LEP communities in the U.S. are similar to those that inhibit effective service delivery abroad, where international relief workers often fail to speak the native language of the affected population. International response to large-scale disasters or complex emergencies often entail an influx of aid workers that are unfamiliar with local languages. Due to insufficient time to train relief workers prior to their deployment,

translators are often used to facilitate communication. A 2001 organizational review of 53 non-government organizations found that interpreters were used as opposed to language training at a ratio of about 3:1. Bolton and Weiss outline a number of the challenges that inhibit effective translation and cross-cultural communication between relief workers and disaster victims. Such challenges include words that have no literal translation, such as some diseases, the translator's background and level of expertise. As in the U.S., language issues surrounding international relief workers are best resolved when service providers are familiar with the cultural and linguistic intricacies of the affected population and forge community partnerships.

Sources:

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