

# Disaster Preparedness in Urban Immigrant Communities:

*Lessons Learned from Recent  
Catastrophic Events and Their  
Relevance to Latino and Asian  
Communities in Southern California*



A Tomás Rivera Policy Institute and  
Asian Pacific American Legal Center Report

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## Executive Summary

Southern California is at high risk for a major natural disaster. Yet, few assessments have been made to discover how communities with large populations of Limited English Proficient (LEP) immigrants would fare in such an event. It has also not been established whether LEP immigrants who may be poor and have low levels of education have the information necessary to prepare for and survive a disaster, or whether the social networks, formats, and language in which they can successfully receive and respond to emergency information are in place.

To address these issues, examine past efforts, and build policy recommendations for the future, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC) undertook a joint project that examined several LEP immigrant communities in Southern California. After conducting interviews with emergency service personnel, both in local governments and in nonprofit organizations, and holding focus groups with LEP community members in their native languages, we are able to provide the following findings about this important issue.

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**Southern California is at high risk for a major natural disaster.**

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Both county and city government agencies and nonprofit relief organizations, for the most part, are not providing culturally sensitive disaster preparedness education in languages that reflect the demographics of the populations being served.**

While some organizations provide printed disaster preparedness materials in languages other than English, most materials are not fully available in languages that reflect the needs of the population. Disaster preparedness trainings and workshops for community members are available primarily in English. Service providers interviewed are concerned about this gap in services and cite lack of connections to the community and funding as barriers to improvement.

- 2. Currently, there are no tools in place to provide immediate translation of all emergency information in a rapid manner to LEP populations in Southern California.**

Coordination among county and city disaster service agencies has improved greatly in recent years, setting into place area-wide communication plans in the event of a wide-spread disaster such as an earthquake or terrorist attack. Yet, plans to communicate in various languages to the diverse population in Southern California have not been established. Currently, plans to communicate with LEP communities consist of press releases in English being sent to ethnic media outlets with the reliance on these media to provide translation of this critical information.

- 3. First responders rely on bilingual family members, often children, to provide translation for officers, deputies, fire personnel, etc.**

While nearly all first responders have access to some form of translation service, whether it be by telephone or through a network of county or city staff, this form of communication is often not utilized for immediate communication. Nonprofit relief organizations also are short on bilingual staff and volunteers to provide communication during a disaster and report having to rely on bilingual family members or community members for translation services.

4. *Latino, Chinese, and Vietnamese focus group participants named their respective native language radio stations as the first place they turn to for emergency information, highlighting the importance of these ethnic media outlets as a tool for communication.*

The use of ethnic radio stations was especially noted as the most efficient and rapid method of communicating to their communities. Through our interviews, it was not clear that county-level and city-level first responders had established connections to the local ethnic media which serve the various LEP communities in their jurisdictions.

5. *All first response personnel interviewed stated that immigration status is not considered when providing disaster services, but none of the agencies interviewed had in place mechanisms by which to reassure the public that immigration status is not asked during disaster response.*

Community members in all four focus groups agreed that all immigrants, both legal and undocumented, would have access to disaster services, citing that the safety of all residents would be the primary concern. But all agreed that populations that are undocumented would be fearful of coming forward for assistance.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Disaster service personnel and government officials should have a key role in improving dissemination of disaster preparedness education and addressing the service response needs of LEP immigrants. The following recommendations are offered to better serve these populations:

1. Local disaster service providers and public information officers should evaluate the language needs of preparedness education materials in their service areas.
2. Local providers should ensure simulation exercises incorporate the language needs of LEP community members. This includes an assessment of available language resources and their anticipated utilization during the course of a disaster, as well as awareness of de-coupling immigration enforcement from humanitarian aid.
3. State governments should establish working groups with service personnel, nonprofit organizations serving ethnic communities, and ethnic media on how to better promote preparedness materials.
4. Federal and state governments should create a baseline of minimal secondary language resources for diverse jurisdictions.
5. Immigration enforcement should be bifurcated from humanitarian aid.

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**“Sometimes, in the middle of a disaster, even for single family fires, we have to rely on the family members, sometimes the children of the victims. We would rather obviously have workers who speak Spanish that could work directly with the clients.**

***Response Director of a nonprofit disaster services provider***



## Methodology

Qualitative research techniques provided an in-depth exploration of disaster preparedness in large, low-income LEP communities. Stakeholder interviews and focus groups were conducted in four Southern California cities within two counties with high immigrant Latino, Chinese, and Vietnamese populations that could pose cultural and language challenges to county or city emergency response personnel. The populations in the selected cities had foreign-born rates ranging from 43 to 53 percent and LEP rates ranging from 38 to 52 percent. In addition, we conducted a literature review as well as interviews with response service personnel and community organizations<sup>2</sup> involved in the 1994 Northridge earthquake and Hurricane Katrina.

**TABLE 1. Southern California Demographics**

Race and Ethnicity	Population	Foreign Born	Limited English Proficient
Latino	41%	46%	45%
White	40%	9%	4%
Asian	12%	64%	40%
African American	8%	6%	3%
American Indian	2%	15%	16%
Pacific Islander	1%	22%	15%
Total	100%	30%	23%

Source: Population, U.S. Census 2003; Foreign Born and LEP, U.S. Census 2000

Note: Figures are for the inclusive population (single race and multirace combined) and are not exclusive of Latino, except for White, which is single race, non Latino. Population figures are not mutually exclusive, therefore column may not sum to the total. Southern California is defined as a seven county area including Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, and Ventura Counties.

**Minority communities have higher levels of vulnerability (unmitigated by disaster policies) due to their variation in culture, language, immigrant backgrounds, and community isolation.**

Data collection consisted of four phases:

### Literature review

TRPI and APALC researchers extensively reviewed literature related to disaster preparedness and response in immigrant and LEP communities. Since there have not been many studies on this topic, we expanded the search to include service to communities of color and evidence of disparity in treatment. A review of case studies written on governmental and major nonprofit service delivery to immigrant foreign-born populations after Hurricane Katrina and the 1994 Northridge earthquake was conducted to explore lessons learned about the effectiveness of responding to immigrant communities. The literature indicates that minority communities have higher levels of vulnerability (unmitigated by disaster policies) due to their variation in culture, language, immigrant backgrounds, and community isolation.

### Case studies

To document the most pressing challenges faced in providing services to immigrant communities, interviews to produce case studies were conducted with agencies that assisted in areas with large immigrant and LEP populations in quake-affected areas of Northridge and hurricane disaster areas of Louisiana.<sup>3</sup> Researchers contacted emergency service providers involved in the Northridge earthquake, identified potential subjects, and interviewed three emergency responders involved in the disaster. In addition, 12 interviews were conducted with disaster service providers and community organizations in New Orleans metropolitan areas highly impacted by Hurricane Katrina and having large immigrant, LEP, Asian, or Latino populations. Interviewees were chosen based on several criteria: 1) they had resided and worked in the Greater New

<sup>2</sup> Organization and agency refer to governmental, private, or nonprofit groups. The terms are used interchangeably in this report.

<sup>3</sup> New Orleans was selected from the four potential sites in the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina impacted a greater number of Asian Americans and Latino Americans in this city than in any other metropolitan area in the Gulf Coast. The other three sites included Biloxi, MS; Houston, TX; and Bayou la Batre, AL.

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**“Within the Los Angeles area, we have communities that are enclaves, where you basically can work, live, and go to school in that community and never necessarily leave that community and not have to use English.”**

***Staff Analyst at a county-level public health agency***

Orleans area prior to Hurricane Katrina; 2) they had in-depth knowledge regarding community disaster relief networks and/or emergency management and response; and 3) their service and target populations consisted of high numbers of LEP individuals and families. Eligible emergency personnel were asked about services available before and after the Northridge earthquake or Hurricane Katrina. They also were asked about the lessons gained from their experiences.

## Interviews

In the selected cities in Southern California, officials from city and county departments and agencies involved in emergency response and disaster preparedness were interviewed to identify and map the existing emergency response network of government, nonprofit, and private resources, including mainstream and/or ethnic media. Additionally, we analyzed their current measures to reach non-English speaking community residents who reside in the ethnic areas. Researchers conducted 34 interviews with personnel representing 25 city-level and county-level disaster service providers, non-profit organizations, and ethnic organizations that serve Latino and Asian populations in the selected areas. Potential participants were identified by contacting traditional city and county government and nonprofit disaster service providers and attending disaster-preparedness workshops, networking conferences, and other local disaster-related events.

## Focus groups

TRPI and APALC project staff conducted four focus groups in the selected California cities with community members—one Chinese, one Vietnamese, and two Latino. The goals were to: 1) determine the extent of knowledge of official emergency response services and resources; 2) identify any barriers (i.e. language and/or immigrant status), real or perceived, that community members face in obtaining appropriate resources and/or information; and 3) identify ongoing information dissemination networks that exist and are used by community members in the targeted ethnic communities. Surname lists were used to identify and screen participants for the Latino focus groups. Participants in the Asian groups were recruited via a variety of methods including community organizations, personal contacts, flyers, emails, and announcements on ethnic radio stations. All participants in the Chinese, Vietnamese, and one of the Latino groups were foreign-born and relatively recent immigrants. In the second Latino group, all were born in the United States. Overall, 81 percent of participants spoke English less than “very well.” Sessions were conducted in the respective languages.

## Lessons Learned from Past Disasters

Lessons drawn from our literature review and case studies illustrate the importance of addressing cultural, linguistic, and trust issues in terms of preparedness. In general and at all levels, government and private agencies need to better coordinate and enlist translations of vital documents, mobilize interpreters in communities that need them, and consider cultural and linguistic needs when creating emergency preparedness plans in order to “respond effectively to the next disaster or public health threat” (Muniz, 2006). These issues were raised consistently across the literature and in case studies. Specific lessons include:

### Improve language assistance

Interviewees for the case studies consistently noted language barriers must be recognized and addressed. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, preparedness activities to educate LEP populations in New Orleans were minimal or nonexistent (Vielman, 2005; NILC, 2005). Post-Katrina, most organizations interviewed have committed to providing more information in different languages.

During the hurricane, there was not enough time for disaster-response services to be tailored to communities (Le, 2006; Choi, 2005). The Asian American Justice Center recommends “improving infrastructure for language and cultural services across federal, state and local governments” with emergency radio lines in major languages, multi-lingual call centers, expanding the bilingual workforce, and developing language and cultural advisory boards (Choi, 2005).

Disaster service personnel interviewed for the case studies stated equipment such as computerized translation devices went for weeks without power during Katrina, further demonstrating the need to hire bilingual staff. After the Northridge earthquake, one nonprofit disaster service provider developed a book with appropriate phrases in different languages. Due to cost, the book was not adopted by other chapters.

### Develop relationships with key organizations

Following the 1994 Northridge earthquake, a formal collaboration was formed to improve networking of disaster service providers in one Southern California county. Members include government agencies, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations working together to conduct public education efforts and distribute materials.

Hurricane Katrina presented an opportunity for new networks of communities and coalitions of organizations to work together to serve LEP individuals. Prior to Katrina, partnerships with ethnic organizations trusted by immigrant populations were not well-used as vessels for communicating disaster preparedness in New Orleans. Post-Katrina organizations have acknowledged the need to work with a variety of community leaders in order to gain approval and entry to deliver messages. One interviewee said, “It’s very encouraging to see collective effort to take care of the community—not only Hispanic but also Vietnamese. Everyone is pitching in to make sure that information (is) there.”

One nonprofit emergency provider had a LEP strategy which involved working with the city and faith-based institutions in order to target minorities and special needs populations. Within the Latino community, such collaborations have resulted in the distribution of education materials by ethnic organizations heavily involved in the community and the development of forums to present preparedness information. It also helped establish a network of organizations advocating for and providing services to the Latino community. The provider has worked with this network of organizations to plan how to deal with LEP people and make them feel comfortable in the event of an emergency.

**“It wasn’t until they trusted that you weren’t going to harm them that they came out.”**

*Interviewee from service organization in New Orleans*

## Hire community liaisons

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**“An individual wants to be able to relate to someone if they have a problem.”**

*New Orleans interviewee*

It is integral to community safety and confidence that community liaisons who understand the cultures and languages of LEP groups are engaged. One interviewee in New Orleans stated, “An individual wants to be able to relate to someone if they have a problem.” They also said they desired information from a source higher than the media.

However, the priest of a Catholic parish, an interviewee, and a leader of the East New Orleans community all said that before and during Hurricane Katrina, police, fire department, and other parish officials never reached out to the community culturally or developed any language capacity to provide assistance to the community. The interviewee said outreach to ethnic communities began after Hurricane Katrina, including the hiring of a bilingual Vietnamese American woman in a local council member’s office and establishing new relationships with the fire chief and city government. Also after the disaster, one nonprofit emergency provider hired a bilingual Vietnamese American case management specialist who acted as a liaison to the community. Some parishes<sup>4</sup> have community liaisons that bridge city governments and the public. In addition, they can help convey information about an impending storm to the public.

## Involve ethnic and community organizations in disaster planning

Community groups played a crucial role during the Northridge and Katrina relief (Bolin, 1998; Tang, 2006; Choi, 2005; Muniz, 2006; Bernstein, 2005; AAJC, 2007). Most LEP populations discovered ad hoc ways to be prepared and link with community groups and networks during the storm. For example, one interviewee noted his organization bridged distribution centers for the general public with trusted agencies, such as churches, in order to serve the Latino community and make them feel safe. He said, “It wasn’t until they trusted that you weren’t going to harm them that they came out.” Some were afraid to leave their surroundings for food and inoculations. As a result, the organization arranged for food and medical assistance to come into the communities during the disaster.

One interviewee explained that experiences from Hurricane Katrina illustrated strategies to evacuate and return to the city needed improvement. After the disaster, a practice drill involving the Vietnamese-American community was conducted. A Latino community organization attended and offered recommendations to incorporate their needs in an evacuation drill. Registration of individuals as they boarded buses to shelters in Louisiana and Mississippi was raised as a way to help keep families together. Registration also would allow organizations to follow up to see that needs are met in shelters.

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<sup>4</sup> In New Orleans, a parish is the equivalent of counties in Southern California.

## Assessing Disaster-Related Services in Southern California

Interviews were conducted with emergency providers and community organizations serving the four Southern California cities studied in this report. Respondents were asked to identify disaster-related services rendered or that would be rendered; gaps or potential gaps; and their recommendations for improving services. This section organizes the data respective to the initial stages of a disaster event: preparedness, warning communication, and response (Fothergill, 1996). It concludes with a discussion on challenges and suggestions for service improvement.

### Disaster preparedness education services

For the purposes of this report, disaster-preparedness education is defined as printed materials produced to educate the public, in-person trainings or workshops held by disaster preparedness educators for the public, and educational campaigns produced for the media such as television, radio, print, and the Internet. In one county, about half the agencies interviewed produced original materials and the other half made use of others' materials. In another county, two agencies produced its own materials and the rest utilized others' materials. All but three of the agencies conducted full disaster-preparedness training programs for their constituents or informational workshops for the public. All had some relationship with the media, either involving dissemination of disaster-preparedness information or with information about other aspects of their organizations' work.

#### Printed materials

Among the agencies that produce printed materials, six had materials fully available in Spanish and three had materials fully available in six Asian languages. Two additional agencies had some materials translated and printed in Spanish. One of the main providers of printed disaster-preparedness materials for one county has only half of their materials translated into Spanish and none in any Asian languages. Their extensive campaign includes a series of bulletins, special publications, monthly focus sheets, magnets, and brochures. Most of these materials are available on their web site in English and about half are available in Spanish.

Of those with printed materials, another county agency has materials fully translated in multiple languages. This year it embarked on an emergency-preparedness campaign with printed materials and public service announcements available in 12 languages, including English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Khmer, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Armenian, Russian, Arabic, and Farsi. The organization also hired marketing companies to reach out to Asian and Latino populations and has more than 150 staff trained to conduct educational presentations. They adjust campaign messaging to the needs of racial and ethnic groups within the county to appeal to cultural sensitivities.

At the local level, one city police department adapted a countywide disaster education campaign for the public as well as subgroups including the elderly, people with disabilities, and children. The campaign has a Spanish version with free translated brochures and a Web site. It tailors to the Latino community with photos of Latinos in materials. A second city provides disaster preparedness information in Spanish, consisting mainly of articles in the city newsletter. The third city's police department translated materials into multiple languages, but its fire department does not have a public education component for ethnic communities. The fourth city's police and fire departments do not produce any disaster-preparedness materials in languages other than English.

Among nonprofit agencies, one provider produced a brochure magnet in conjunction with a county campaign in English and Spanish, but not in any Asian languages. Another provider on a Web site offered materials in Spanish and seven Asian languages (Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese), but one of its local chapters had materials readily available only in Spanish.

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**“We don’t mirror the population in terms of our numbers... we have the people that speak those same languages, but not in appropriate numbers for our population.”**

***Preparedness Education Director for nonprofit organization***

## Outreach efforts

“We don’t care whose name is on it. If it’s quality information, we’ll disseminate it. It could be (the) gas company, Red Cross, Homeland Security; if there’s literature that should be distributed; we’ll get it out there and take it to our community fairs.”

—Community Liaison, Police Department

All of the agencies make materials available at workshops, community fairs and festivals, and at their locations. Such outreach efforts are crucial in getting the information into the hands of community members. One county service provider trained more than 150 staff to conduct outreach for a disaster-preparedness campaign. Another county service provider with a smaller staff has one public information officer for all outreach and publicity. Materials are distributed to government agencies and organizations.

Groups, such as nonprofits that provide little or no disaster related services, also assist in disseminating educational materials by hosting disaster-preparedness workshops or distributing materials to constituents.

## Training of community residents

There are several types of training efforts conducted to prepare the public for a disaster, such as fire department-sponsored disaster-preparedness courses, one- or two-day workshops for public education, or the training of volunteers and community organizations.

Developed in 1985 by the Los Angeles City Fire Department, Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) has been adopted and expanded nationwide. CERT is offered by local fire departments in three of the studied cities and educates community members on disaster preparedness as well as training them in basic disaster-response skills, such as light search and rescue medical operations. Members can apply their training to assisting their community, particularly after a disaster when first responders are not readily available. Among the three cities with a CERT program, trainings are conducted in Spanish in ethnic neighborhoods to cater to the Latino population in one city. However, the other two cities offer the training predominantly in English due to limited staff and funding. The lack of CERT training in languages other than English is significant since both other service providers expressed a reliance on CERT for preparedness education.

A faith-based organization interviewed conducts community outreach and education in Asian languages. Another nonprofit holds disaster-preparedness workshops and community trainings as part of its area’s disaster service provider network, but it does not make translators available.

One local chapter of a nonprofit service provider hired a bilingual community liaison of Vietnamese descent to reach out to the Vietnamese community and inform them of topics such as how to prepare for a disaster, what to do during a disaster, and CPR training. Information and trainings are presented in Vietnamese and in ethnic neighborhoods for LEP populations. Initially the liaison worked with 12 volunteers of Vietnamese descent. However, only 6 or 7 were able to communicate in Vietnamese. Now there are 40 to 45 volunteers who are bilingual. A similar position was recently created to serve Latinos.

Another chapter of the same organization currently conducts some disaster-preparation education efforts in Spanish and Chinese, but not to the extent that it is representative of the needs of its community. The preparedness education director of the chapter said:

“We don’t mirror the population in terms of our numbers...we have the people that speak those same languages, but not in appropriate numbers for our population.”

Their capacity to educate in multiple languages is improving, though, with a recent grant to translate educational materials into six languages (Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Korean, and Japanese) and recruit 124 bilingual trainers to conduct preparedness education. The goal of the project is to train more than 20,000 community members in various languages.

**“We also find that many folks trot along their kids that do speak English. We have a lot of things aimed at kids.”**  
**Assistant Administrator for a county Office of Emergency Management**

Another training method is the train-the-trainer model, where agencies train community organizations and promotoras<sup>5</sup> to educate their local communities. In one county, community organizations have welcomed the training, but have fallen short with educating the community they serve. One community organization had participated in the program, but admits disseminating limited information to the community. The main reason being the difficulty community groups face sustaining a disaster-education program without enough staff or funding. Disaster preparedness has a low priority compared with other services that take priority.

### **Ethnic media relations**

One important method of disaster-preparedness education is through media outlets such as television, radio, print, and the Internet. Disseminating information through the media is an effective way to reach a broad swath of public with minimal resources and funds. Among LEP immigrant populations, the ethnic media is a valuable tool. Ethnic media play an important role in providing LEP populations with invaluable information about local issues in their native languages. There are 32 Spanish radio stations and six Vietnamese, Chinese and other Asian language stations in Southern California.

Thirteen agency representatives stated they had relationships with the Spanish-speaking media and seven agencies with the Asian language media. One county service provider had the most extensive relationship with ethnic media, ensuring coverage with marketing firms hired to pursue dissemination of information in both language groups. Another county service provider also has established relationships with media in both language groups, but without dedicated resources to ensure broad coverage of their educational campaign.

Other agencies have public information officers that send information to ethnic media of both language groups. The local police department in one city had regular interaction with the Spanish speaking press. In another city, police and fire department staff were not aware of their agencies using the ethnic media.

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**“Even if mom, dad, and grand mom are monolingual Spanish, the boys and girls could translate.”**

*Assistant Director of Community Service of church*

### **Warning communication services**

Warning communication is defined as communication with the public immediately before and during a disaster. Examples of warning communication in Southern California include orders to evacuate due to wildfires, messages regarding disaster services immediately following an earthquake, or directions to the public during civil unrest. Among the agencies interviewed, warning communication is predominantly the responsibility of law enforcement agencies. Disaster service providers use several methods to communicate with the public. These emergency communication methods include use of the Emergency Alert System, press releases to the media, public announcements via police vehicles, bull horns, flyers, and recorded messages.

### **The Emergency Alert System and other media use**

One of the most broadly known methods of emergency communication is the Emergency Alert System (EAS), a message produced by government agencies and broadcast on television and radio stations, overriding current programming. In addition to EAS messages, follow-up information can be provided to media via press releases and disseminated to the public via standard newscasts and publications. If a catastrophic disaster occurs in more than one jurisdiction, all affected agencies report to the Emergency Operation Center (EOC). The EOC coordinates information and releases a single message about what to do, resources available, and where to find assistance. Lead agencies in charge of the EOC in selected areas report having an extensive ethnic media contact list, which would receive press releases. The EOC of one county does not translate press releases and would rely on the ethnic media outlets to translate the material.

For emergencies within city boundaries, study cities report different levels of multilingual capacity. City service providers in one city with a large Latino population report full capacity to provide emergency information in Spanish. They report having frequent interaction with the Spanish-speaking media, Spanish-speaking public information officers, and strong Spanish capacity among police officers. Interviewees in another city with a large Chinese population, on the other hand, did not report strong relationships with the Chinese press nor having a significant Chinese-speaking capacity among staff.

<sup>5</sup> A promotora is an outreach worker in the Latino community who is responsible for raising awareness of health and educational issues.



multilingual assistance is in the field when responding to the public during a disaster. The Sheriff's Department in the other county has staff fluent in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, and Thai. It has access to a Mutual Aid program with bilingual speakers, bilingual phone lines, and an AT&T connection with over 1200 languages.

At the local city level, the police department in two cities has staff fluent in the four major languages of their cities—Korean, Vietnamese, English, and Spanish. The fire department in one of these cities has only two full-time Vietnamese-speaking, several Spanish-speaking fire fighters, and a dispatch center that can speak 10 different languages. The police department in the third city appears to be well staffed with officers bilingual in Spanish, while the police in the fourth city appear to be not well staffed in officers bilingual in Spanish or Chinese. Some of these agencies state that they are part of area-wide mutual aid agreements that network area service providers. Through these mutual aid agreements, they would be able to put a call out for assistance in a language that they needed and staff from other cities would be able to come to their assistance.

The police department and the fire department in the selected cities state that they subscribe to a system that provides translation service over the phone to their staff in the field that is available 24 hours a day. The representative from the one fire department said that they also have laminated cards that have key words in different languages, but that he doubted that the fire specialists use them.

The faith-based and nonprofit agencies that provide immediate assistance have varying levels of language capacities. The response director for one nonprofit service provider said that while they do have some multilingual volunteers, they do have a need for more volunteers that are multilingual. He said that they especially have a need among volunteers in leadership positions.

### **Identification and legal status**

While first responders reported that immigration status had no impact on receiving disaster response services, relief agencies that provide assistance such as shelter were unclear whether identification or resident status would be required to receive services.

“During the time of disaster, I can only...hope that we would take care of public safety first and worry about the other barriers later...If people are afraid to come get the help they need, then we are defying our purpose and our role of taking a public safety job.”

**Many cited language barriers as a major challenge in disaster-preparedness education.**

## **Challenges**

“I'm sure there are barriers, but do we know them?...Vaguely.”  
—*Director of a nonprofit emergency response organization*

### **Language barriers in preparedness education**

Many cited language barriers as a major challenge in disaster-preparedness education. Most agencies expressed the desire to increase their capacity to conduct trainings or workshops in multiple languages. A police officer in one city was unable to communicate outside of English in several community trainings and felt uncertain whether to use a whiteboard, a child as a translator, or a stranger to translate. Lack of translated literature also is an issue. The Sheriff's Department in one county expressed a desire to increase the number of languages for their publications. Many cited a lack of funding for translations, even when using community partners.

### **Translation services for disaster response**

There is a critical need for translations to provide critical information to communities before and during disasters. All first responders interviewed expressed a desire and willingness to increase services in other languages. One interviewee stressed the importance of bilingual staff rather than translation services:

“Really bilingual workers and staff is our choice because clearly using translators is much slower—this would be our aim.”



## Suggestions for service improvement

To address these challenges, we provide the following suggestions:

### Disaster-preparedness education

- Increase relationships with ethnic community organizations, ethnic community leaders, and ethnic media outlets to help develop culturally competent campaigns and plan appropriate methods of dissemination to communities.
- Increase the availability and frequency of informational materials, trainings, workshops, and outreach in multiple languages.
- Increase public service announcements and print information in the ethnic media.
- Mainstream disaster agencies should hire bilingual liaisons that also serve as volunteer recruitment agents and as bilingual volunteers in times of disaster.

### Warning communication services

- Identify areas of the county that need emergency messages in multiple languages and establish systems to provide them.
- Increase community education and media campaigns about warning communication systems, such as mailing fliers, expanding programs such as CERT, and broadcasting more testing and public service announcements.
- Incorporate in emergency planning methods how to communicate with the LEP population, including a list of professionally trained translators and an assessment of best methods of communication, and develop relationships with community leaders.
- Prepare standard emergency messages likely to be sent via EAS and prepare translations of these messages in the various languages.
- Plan how to link ethnic media to media networks during times of disaster and incorporate ethnic media in a plan to distribute emergency information in multiple languages.

### Disaster response services

- Account for the language needs of the community as well as language capabilities of first responders; conduct survey of first responders and community members to determine how rapidly language assistance is available and where capacity lacks.
- Assess the impact on emergency services of family members, particularly children, who conduct translations.
- Include simulation of responding to LEP communities in first responder trainings and exercises; involve CBOs serving LEP populations in trainings and exercises to gather feedback.
- Mainstream agencies must sustain outreach to ethnic communities beyond the immediate aftermath of disaster by continuing to build partnerships and evaluating, testing, and refining plans for disaster services. This can include employing the best methods to gain the trust of ethnic communities, overcoming cultural barriers, and deepening civic involvement of newer residents.
- Local homeland security departments also charged with preparedness and response functions must separate their immigration enforcement duties from the community response and outreach duties, especially in times of disaster, when assisting their communities could be compromised by a close relationship with immigration authorities.

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**“The idea of sharing best practices is the best route to go. But since this concept [targeting and planning for these groups] is so new...nothing has come down the pipe that says we’ve been successful with targeting Vietnamese...or Hispanic populations. If one of those does come down the pipe, then we’ll absolutely partner with them...”**

*County service provider*



## Personal preparedness

### *Inadequate disaster-response knowledge*

Respondents in all four groups offered conflicting actions to take after a disaster such as an earthquake, including crawling under tables or desks, avoiding windows, avoiding wires and cables, seeking shelter in the bathroom or walk-in closet, running outside, or going out into the driveway. Apartment dwellers were especially confused and lacked knowledge about the appropriate actions to take regarding the gas line to their residence. Members of the Latino groups reported that they would not be able to meet their basic needs because they were ill-prepared and uninformed. One said:

“Well, I think that in a major disaster—that I hope God does not make it happen—that people would stay with nothing, without a house or anything, and that we would be millions of people, what would happen to us? What are we going to do? Where are we going to live?”

Latino members also said that they have heard conflicting instructions about what actions to take during an earthquake. One respondent commented:

“I heard that you aren’t supposed to [get under the table] either. And in the schools, since I used to help out a lot, they would do drills and all of the kids would go under the tables, and now I have heard that you aren’t supposed to do that, so now I’m not going to that either.”

### *Disaster preparedness kit*

Participants in all groups readily listed basic emergency kit supplies such as non-perishable or dry foods, water, medication, flashlight, radio, personal documents and deeds, clothes, and blankets. All participants discussed the need to be self-reliant for a few days after a disaster since rescue services may not arrive immediately. One Latino participant stated:

“It is important that in a case like a major disaster, one is going to have to fend for themselves because the police and the firefighters are not going to be able to help everyone. I think that one needs to have the resources to be able to sustain themselves while the authorities get help and all that because something of that magnitude...they may not be able to help.”

Yet only two of the 24 participants in the two Latino focus groups had an emergency kit at home, though all agreed it is very important to have one. Half of Chinese participants said they had some form of an emergency kit, and 8 out of 11 Vietnamese participants (73 percent) said they had a kit. It is not clear how well stocked the emergency kits were. Several Latino participants commented that they had various supplies available at home such as cans of food, medicine, flashlight, radio, emergency blanket, and camping supplies.

### *Family disaster plan*

Most participants were unfamiliar with having a family disaster plan or a communication plan including an out-of-state contact. Some members of the Latino groups discussed possible meeting places such as a park and outside contacts, but it was not clear whether all family members knew the plan and contact numbers.

Three of the eleven Vietnamese participants said they had a family disaster communication plan. A Chinese member stated he believed that disasters happened at night when family members are together, so there was not a need for a family communication plan. Only a few participants in the Chinese and Vietnamese groups had a pre-arranged meeting place such as a relative’s home. When discussing possible meeting places, Chinese participants identified locations such as church or an open nearby place or park. If both land lines and cell phones proved unavailable, both Chinese and Vietnamese participants were at a loss as to family communication.

**“We have to be shown and told what to do because we may have our own idea what to do, but it may not be right.”**

*Latino focus group participant*



Most expressed a lack of awareness or concern for potential disasters in Southern California, citing lack of exposure. A Latino participant noted:

“We need to get educated in [preparedness]. Personally, I don’t have anything in my house, not even an emergency kit or anything because...it hasn’t happened to us...”

## Exposure to disaster-preparedness education

### Media outlets

Both Vietnamese and Chinese groups said they have heard information about disaster preparedness from respective ethnic media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television. Participants said both radio and newspapers have reported disasters in Vietnam and worldwide. They had also heard about preparing for a disaster via radio, newspaper, and Web sites. The Chinese group said Chinese radio stations air reminders about earthquake preparedness. Chinese newspapers also provide public warnings such as high temperatures and limiting the use of water. Group participants also said they received information from English public television stations, Chinese Yellow Pages and its Web site, which provides links to government agencies.

The foreign-born Latino group listed various Spanish language media as sharing information such as preparing emergency kits and what actions to take during a disaster. Although Latinos said that they would rely on Spanish language media to receive information about disaster preparedness, they said that commercials they had seen on the television were not very informative and did not provide adequate information; that they needed someone to show them exactly what to do. One male respondent indicated:

“We have to be shown and told what to do because we may have our own idea what to do, but it may not be right.”

### Schools and other sources

All four groups had received disaster-preparedness information that children had brought home from school. Latino participants said materials included informational pamphlets occasionally accompanied by items for emergency kits, such as emergency blankets. Chinese participants noted this as effective:

“The school has been educating the children, and they come home and then tell us. This is effective.”

“Give it to schools, and let the children bring it home. Nowadays, the parents are really paying a lot of attention to the children. Whatever the children say is the word of law to parents. Anything coming from the school, you have to support it.”

Chinese participants also noted receiving information from utility companies, churches, and bilingual city hall flyers. One Chinese participant said the fire department showed an English video at her church about preparedness. The Vietnamese group said a nonprofit disaster service organization provided preparedness workshops in Vietnamese at a local community center.

### Education in countries of origin

Only members of the Chinese group discussed exposure to disaster-preparedness education overseas, both in mainland China and in Taiwan. One Chinese participant said she had heard about disaster preparedness related to the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake, and another had received information in mainland China through a program called “Planning Together.” Taiwanese participants said earthquakes were frequent in Taiwan, and information was in newspapers, periodicals, and school curricula.

**“If I can’t understand the English, then I wait ‘til the next day to hear it from the Chinese radio station. I’ll be like, ‘Oh, that’s what it was talking about,’ the next day.”**

**Chinese focus group participant**

## Suggestions for improving preparedness education

### Pamphlet

All groups recommended giving community members attractively designed pamphlets with vivid, easily understandable illustrations to encourage saving or sharing. A Vietnamese participant emphasized:

“A handbook or brochure because you want to read it and save it so you can absorb and learn about it. ...It should be bilingual so that when I finish reading it, I would give it to my friends and other relatives.”

Chinese participants suggested printing easy-to-understand pictographic icons, and also recommended providing a magnet with information or a small card with a color code to explain emergency alert levels.

### Media outlets

Both the Chinese and the Vietnamese groups placed great emphasis on the use of respective ethnic media outlets to provide disaster-preparedness education. Both groups felt that particularly newspapers and radio were used extensively by their communities and would be the most cost-effective and wide-reaching communication tool. The Vietnamese group emphasized that radio programs were probably the most far-reaching since the radio can be listened to all day, including while driving or even while at work:

“I have such a busy life and, like everybody else, if they can have...such a program on the radio, then it would be helpful.”

The Vietnamese newspaper Web site was suggested as a good place to provide information. The Chinese group recommended sending materials with home-delivered newspapers.

Latino participants in general said that there needs to be more publicity and more information made available to their communities. Suggestions included placing commercials during novelas (Spanish soap opera television shows) to reach women. Another suggestion was placing clips before movies at the movie theater or during commercials breaks of televised soccer games.

### Local government education

Both Latino and Asian participants recommended that cities provide disaster-preparedness education in local newsletters or newspapers mailed to residences. The native-born Latino group and the Chinese group said their cities already mail a bilingual newspaper or newsletter to residents regularly, and that disaster information could easily be a regular feature.

The Vietnamese and native-born Latino group recommended that the city hold functions to educate the community, but the Chinese group did not think this would be an effective way to reach the community, even bilingually. They thought not many would attend and that sending materials home via city circulars would be more effective:

“I think on the newsletters sent out by the City Hall, they should have advertisement every time. It should be in (multiple) languages to remind us: Are you prepared? Reminding us we should prepare for a disaster. Not just one piece of paper to stick, no matter how pretty it may be.”

### Locations for education

Participants in all four focus groups recommended city halls, schools, community organizations, senior centers, and churches as places to make disaster-preparedness education available to their communities. Latino participants also suggested parks, soccer games, and swap meets. Asian participants additionally listed ethnic festivals, health fairs, community groups (e.g., the Chinese University Alumni Association), medical offices, and ethnic grocery stores. Chinese participants also suggested organizing groups from churches to take steps such as purchasing materials for emergency kits.

**“A handbook or brochure because you want read it and save it so you can absorb and learn about it. ...It should be bilingual so that when I finished reading it, I would give it to my friends and other relatives.”**

**Vietnamese focus group participant**

Foreign-born Latino participants emphasized that mandating disaster-preparedness education would be the only way to ensure informed residents. Recommendations include obligating employers, apartment managers, or schools to provide such information. Participants also recommended that politicians develop initiatives to mandate disaster training before parents enroll children in school.

### Community organizations

The foreign-born Latino group identified churches as places where the community receives helpful information on a variety of topics ranging from immigration to housing. Community organizations such as Hermandad Mexicana, MALDEF, LULAC, and the Mexican Consulate also were mentioned as possibly helping educate the Latino community. Participants were less comfortable receiving services from Latino organizations, which some had found not as helpful. One respondent stated:

“But even [Latino organizations] don’t help. My brother was trying to become a citizen and they told him, ‘You need to become a member. You need to pay \$150.00.’ It is supposed [to be] that this organization is to help you. I told them, ‘Why is it that he has to pay \$150.00?’ And they said, ‘It’s \$90 for the application and they will fill out the application for you.’ And I asked, ‘The \$150 is for what?’ They told me, ‘If he is not a member of this organization, then we cannot help him.’ So which organization can we go to ask for help?”

The foreign-born Latino group recommended that Latino community organizations take a larger role in disaster preparedness. One member stated:

“I think that our Latino organizations need to take a big role...at least Latinos need to take initiative and give it importance. Or at least they need to educate us in that field.”

### Language needs

Both Asian groups overwhelmingly stressed the need for materials, workshops, trainings, or town hall meetings in their languages. One participant commented that if children were present in the home, English would be adequate. Others said they would discard written information not provided in a bilingual form, and that they would not attend a meeting or event if spoken information was not in their language.

### Knowledge of warning communications

When asked how emergency information should be communicated to their communities, all four focus groups pointed to the radio as the first source, and the Chinese, Vietnamese, and foreign-born Latino groups named radio stations in their native languages as their main source of information. The foreign-born Latino group also mentioned television and apartment managers. The Asian language groups both mentioned patrol cars disseminating information in English via loudspeakers, but also noted it would not be bilingual. Cell phones and text messages were suggested in both Asian groups to receive emergency communications. Other methods discussed by the Asian groups included flyers, Internet, emails, and reverse 911 calls.

In the event of a disaster, the Chinese and Vietnamese groups said it is essential to provide emergency information in their languages because of the risk of misunderstanding critical instructions. Both groups also emphasized the use of ethnic radio broadcasts as the most effective media for communicating rapidly to their communities. A Chinese participant said:

“When we watch English news, it’s not because our English is good to understand the whole program. It’s because there is a big fire, you need to follow where the fires are going, how many people have been evacuated, how many firefighters were sent to the site...However, If there is really an urgent situation happening, then the Chinese broadcast comes to the first place because you might misunderstand the directions. Say the government wants you to go east, but you run west instead.”

**When asked how emergency information should be communicated to their communities, all four focus groups pointed to the radio as the first source...**



group preferred the fire department or a nonprofit disaster service organization to police. The native-born Latino group complained that the police department is slow to respond; that the fire department responds more quickly. Foreign-born Latinos' comments included:

“People don't trust the police; they trust the fire department more.”

“The police doesn't help you.”

“I don't know why [the police] call themselves the protectors.”

One Vietnamese participant said she would trust police during a disaster, but several other Vietnamese participants discussed a general fear of police, which seemed to be rooted in having had interactions that resulted in consequences such as fines or tickets. Responses included:

“I'm kind of afraid to stay in touch with the police.”

“I heard that police officers, they only come to your house for a bad problem, right?”

“Whenever a police shows up at your house, there will be a problem. That's why I'm afraid. Just like the police officers in Viet Nam.”

### ***Discrimination, racism, and cultural differences***

Both Latino groups raised the issue of discrimination and racism by police. The foreign-born group noted unfair treatment based on race. It was felt that police do not serve blacks and Latinos in the same way that they serve white residents. One foreign-born member said she called the police about a dispute with an apartment manager and did not receive any help, which she felt discriminatory because the manager was “from here” and she was not. A native-born member said:

“Spanish people are very humble. They get treated like crap everywhere, and they don't say nothing, they don't complain. So when the police do come out to try to help them, they just give them a slap in the face.”

A foreign-born member said:

“There is a lot of racism here [toward] the Latinos. They don't want us here.”

The Vietnamese group discussed the impact of cultural differences and the potential for bias among service providers, such as prejudicial beliefs about a community, residents of other national origins, or religious differences. It was mentioned that Vietnamese might have “a different way of doing things,” and these cultural differences could affect services. Other participants said they did not see a potential for cultural differences interfering with disaster-response services and that safety and life-saving would be the priority. They had confidence that first responders would not be affected by cultural differences. One Vietnamese group member raised the issue of disaster-response agencies unable to identify all the groups in need, that some may be helped twice while others may not receive assistance.

### ***Immigrants and access to services***

Both the Chinese and Vietnamese groups agreed all immigrants would have access to emergency services. They found the issue of safety most important, that first responders would not be biased based on immigration status. Still, they thought undocumented immigrants might not seek services for fear of deportation. A Chinese participant noted:

“But there are some people who have not become legal yet. They would avoid contact with authorities, because they might be afraid that once asked about their status, then they would expose their illegal status.”

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**The native-born Latino group complained that the police department is slow to respond; that the fire department responds more quickly.**

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**One Latino focus group participant said police called immigration to take people away, and this is why people call the paramedics instead of the police, or stay quiet and “help yourself however you can.”**

Both Latino groups said Latinos fearing deportation would not seek help from police. The native-born group discussed how the police have given this impression by setting up checkpoints to check identification of drivers in cars and impounding cars if no identification could be provided. Another participant said she knew of a student who was deported. A foreign-born member said that a niece was deported when they picked up an impounded car.

The 2007 San Diego fires were raised by both Latino groups as an example of the police involving immigration enforcement when serving a community in disaster. The foreign-born group said the police were discriminatory, that those without documentation were not helped. One member said police called immigration to take people away, and this is why people call the paramedics instead of the police, or stay quiet and “help yourself however you can.” It was discussed that there was confusion in San Diego about those who needed help and those who may have been trying to take advantage of assistance such as food and clothing, but the ultimate sentiment was that such incidents prompt a lack of trust for the police department among community members.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Due to worldwide media coverage, the frequency of disasters occurring in urban communities is now apparent. The Southern California region, one of the hemisphere's largest urban areas, is subject to the same probabilities of such an event taking place. While traditional English language materials are available throughout the area, there is an apparent lack of such materials available in minority language communities.

Disaster service personnel in both government agencies and nonprofit organizations have a key role in improving disaster preparedness among LEP communities through dissemination of educational materials and encouraging community participation in trainings and workshops. First responders and immediate relief groups shoulder the responsibility of addressing the disaster response needs of immigrants and LEP populations in their service areas. The following recommendations are offered to better serve these populations:

**1. Disaster service personnel, both in government agencies and in nonprofit organizations, should evaluate the language needs of the population in their service areas.**

Disaster preparedness educators and response personnel need to be aware of the demographics of the population being served, identifying special needs such as LEP rates and numbers in the population by language spoken. Studies have shown that cultural differences between native and immigrant populations can also become a barrier when rendering disaster related services. Becoming familiar with potential cultural barriers between service providers and the community to be served can help to increase effectiveness in education and response.

**2. Local providers should ensure simulation exercises cover topics such as language resources available and their anticipated utilization during the course of a disaster.**

Given the high rates of LEP individuals in Southern California, first responders and relief organizations need to be appraised of the language capacities of their staff and volunteers. Additionally, since many service providers do not have sufficient language capacities among their personnel, plans for providing translation support in the field need to be evaluated for effectiveness during critical response activities.

**3. Working groups should be established to connect government agencies with the ethnic communities they serve.**

State and local governments should establish working groups with service personnel, nonprofit organizations serving ethnic communities, and ethnic media on how to better promote preparedness education and improve response among immigrant and LEP populations. These networks can also help in sharing best practices in serving these special needs communities.

**4. Federal and state governments should create a baseline of minimal secondary language resources for diverse jurisdictions.**

To ensure that large concentrations of LEP populations are not being left out of disaster preparedness education and disaster response planning, language requirements should be established for areas that meet population thresholds.

**5. It should be made clear to first responders, the immigrant community, and to the public in general that disaster relief is not conditional on immigration status.**

While all first responders interviewed report that immigration status is not a consideration when rendering disaster services, many among the immigrant community are still fearful that their status will come into question.

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**“Vietnamese people have different ways of doing things. Other people prefer different things. You know, in a certain order, they would prefer it the other way around, so that’s why the cultural differences would come into being.”**

**Vietnamese focus group Participant**

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*Lessons Learned from Recent  
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to Latino and Asian Communities  
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