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LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY PREPAREDNESS

Abstract

The highest survival during a disaster is those who understand English and have access to information, transportation, medical services, and communication. Disaster preparedness and emergency response systems are designed for populations that can receive, understand, and respond to mainstream messages. By researching the relationship between the impacts of disasters and the community, it became evident that vulnerable communities are likely to suffer disproportionate consequences in disasters. People with limited English proficiency are considered a member of the vulnerable community. Members of vulnerable communities are likely to suffer disproportionate consequences; as a preventative measure, the needs of all vulnerable communities must be addressed during pre-event planning. During "clear blue skies" or less active days, Emergency Managers must coordinate with members of these communities to address these needs. The key is working cohesively with community members to bridge the communication gap and easily allow resources to flow between government representatives, first responders, and residents. In times of disaster, residents often help one another and those closest to them. Partnering with community groups who work closely with communities members can guide best practices. The Leaders can serve as a trusted voice that can assist with delivering preparedness messages and resources within the community. Emphasizing that preparedness begins at the individual level, FEMA explains the benefits of the *Whole Community Approach* is a shared understanding of risks, needs, capabilities, and increased empowerment of the community's members, therefore improving resiliency nationwide. Partnering with key stakeholders will increase access to and ease disseminating information throughout all phases of the disaster cycle, essential for one's preparedness needs.

Keywords: Vulnerable Community, Preparedness, Limited English Proficiency, Whole Community, Outreach



KORLÁTOZOTT ANGOL NYELVTUDÁSARA VALÓ FELKÉSZÜLÉS A KATASZTRÓFAELHÁRÍTÁS SORÁN

Absztrakt

Egy katasztrófa során azoknak az állampolgároknak nagyobb a túlélési esélye, akik beszélnek angolul, derül ki az USA-ban végzett kutatásból, ahol sokan alapvetően más nyelvet használnak. A katasztrófákra való felkészülés és a beavatkozás rendszere akkor működik hatékonyan, ha a lakosság képes fogadni, megérteni és reagálni az általános üzenetekre. Az eddigi tapasztalatok azt mutatják, hogy USA-ban a korlátozott angol nyelvtudással rendelkező emberek sebezhetősége nagyobb. A probléma megoldásának az egyik kulcsa az, hogy a hatóságok a közösség tagjaival együttműködve áthidalják a kommunikációs szakadékot és lehetővé tegyék az erőforrások könnyebb áramlását. A vezetői kommunikáció szintén segíthet a katasztrófák felkészülésében és az erőforrások továbbításában. A sikeres katasztrófa-elhárítás már az egyén szintjén is megjelenik, amely segíti a kockázatok, a szükségletek és a képességek közös megértését, ezáltal országos szinten javítva az ellenálló képességet. A cikkben a szerzők bemutatják, hogy az együttműködés milyen módon növeli az információkhoz való hozzáférést és könnyíti meg azok terjedését a katasztrófa minden szakaszában, ami nélkülözhetetlen a sikeres felkészüléshez.

Kulcsszavak: sebezhető közösség, felkészültség, korlátozott angol nyelvtudás, teljes közösség, kapcsolatteremtés

1. INTRODUCTION

On Monday, August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a category three hurricane with wind speeds up to 120 MPH. Despite the early warnings, Hurricane Katrina caught all disaster management agencies off guard. National Geographic estimates about 1800 deaths as a result of Hurricane Katrina, though still debated today. Although all residents of the affected areas were impacted, many of Katrina's victims were a part of the vulnerable populations,



including the elderly, disabled, refugees, low income, Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Preparedness is critical for one's chance of survival (Lippmann 2011). One's vulnerability may be amplified by disproportionate access to resources due to how they are distributed and or lack of social equality.

In 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Community Survey, reported 5,305,440 of the 118,825,931 homes in the United States self-identified as members of the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) community. Most emergency public warnings, notifications, and preparedness materials are not designed for communities that do not understand or speak English. "...Disaster warnings are often available only in English, are written readability levels are higher than recommended for populations with a high prevalence of low literacy or are challenging to obtain for people without internet access (Eisenman et al., 2009). Current disaster and emergency response planning do not sufficiently address the needs of the LEP community. Disasters challenge emergency response to reach all citizens, including vulnerable diverse communities, effectively. FDOC104-008-1, released in December 2011, states, "This document presents a foundation for increasing individual preparedness and engaging with members of the community as vital partners in enhancing the resiliency and security of our Nation through a Whole Community approach" (FEMA, 2011). Community planning for emergencies should include vulnerable communities and their representatives; Working together allows for a direct understanding of the expectations and necessities of the population. Through outreach, the lines of communication within communities that were unreachable before will be more open than previously.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The article entitled "Protecting the Most Vulnerable in Emergencies" explains how vulnerable populations may face catastrophic consequences without appropriate planning for the specific needs of those communities. In the context of emergencies, Sharona Hoffman identifies vulnerable populations as "individuals with disabilities, pregnant women, children, elderly persons, prisoners, certain members of ethnic minorities, people with language barriers, and the



impoverished" (Hoffman, 2009). People with limited English proficiency are especially disadvantaged because of their communication barrier and government-issued notifications. Despite efforts to have a translator, sometimes important concepts can get lost in translation (Hoffman, 2009).

"Disaster preparedness for limited English proficient communities: medical interpreters as cultural brokers and gatekeepers" describes a pilot assessment conducted in 2004 on medical interpreters' background and work experiences, focusing on training for disaster/emergencies and education. This article further explains that LEP individuals are less likely to understand directives and warnings. Interviews revealed LEP communities are unprepared for disasters, there is a need for culturally appropriate education, and the desire is there. "I would like to know as much as possible about the disaster and how to prepare, I can prepare for it because if I know that that, I can transfer the knowledge to my community. So, I need more education and exercise practice..." (Shiu-Thornton et al., 2007). Similar to the first article, this one states that existing mandates and current emergency planning do not adequately address the needs of vulnerable populations, especially LEP. Communication planning with LEP individuals should occur regularly at all stages of disaster management (Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). The authors demonstrate the importance of strategic planning and working with key members of the LEP community by explaining that medical interpreters serve as "linguistic linkages" to the community (Shiu-Thornton et al., 2007).

The third article additionally examines the inclusion of vulnerable populations, such as the LEP, in the planning process, explaining the importance of bidirectional communication. Utilizing outreach methods to include these stakeholders into emergency planning will aid in addressing any unmet needs and concerns, simultaneously increasing the level of respect for, trust in, and acceptance of emergency plans within the vulnerable communities (Klaiman et al., 2010). Partnering with community groups who work closely with LEP individuals can garner best practices. These partnerships can serve as a trusted source that can deliver preparedness messaging to the community. Communicating information to the community is fundamental to emergency management. Any community faced with an emergency or disaster will likely house LEP individuals. The articles discussed in this literature review agree that vulnerable populations, specifically the LEP, face devastating consequences in emergent situations, requiring a strategic planning approach.



3. THEORIES

Preparedness initiatives are imperative. One of the main concepts of the Robert T. Stafford Act is to encourage the various States and local municipalities to develop disaster preparedness plans. The 2007 revision included the requirement of FEMA to identify populations that are lacking English proficiency, assuring they are integrated into the distribution of information about disasters. The Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act PKEMARA significantly restructured FEMA and presented it with a full-bodied preparedness mission. The response gaps that Hurricane Katrina exposed in response to the disaster itself ultimately led to the (PKEMARA). Among many things, this act established a Disability Coordinator and a foundation for accommodations for those with disabilities. FEMA's CPG101, Interim Producing Emergency Plans of 2008, further stressed the importance of involving people from the LEP community, individuals with access or functional needs, or the groups that advocate/support these individuals, into the planning process. The National Response Framework (NRF) has identified groups to be integrated into preparedness efforts, such as children, those with access and functional needs, diverse ethnic backgrounds, and LEP.

The federal and state emergency laws that address disaster preparedness for vulnerable populations should provide detailed requirements that will act as a guide for those governmental specialists that Hoffman refers to as vulnerable population's coordinators (VPC's) (Hoffman, 2009). The PKEMRA's list of duties, along with the Department of Justice's guidance, together can serve as a strong foundation for requirements regarding individuals with disabilities. It is recommended that legislatures turn to the existing state emergency laws and suggestions that experts have conveyed regarding other vulnerable populations.

The experts who became known as the "Bellagio Group" created a "Checklist for Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plans." They formulated recommendations to mitigate unfair consequences for the disadvantaged populations in the world in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak. The checklist included three action items for emergency managers: " (1) identify traditionally disadvantaged populations and those likely to be disproportionately



harmed by a pandemic; (2) involve these groups in planning initiatives; and (3) identify and address the needs of vulnerable populations likely to arise from a pandemic" (Hoffman, 2009).

Time and time again, experts have stressed the importance of input from community members that are directly affected. Disruptive Innovation Theory, first introduced by Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen in 1997, explains the phenomenon of transforming an existing market or sector through the introduction of simplicity, convenience, accessibility where complications may be the status quo (Christensen, 1997). Federal and state laws still leave many gaps and unanswered questions. Although the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act (PAHPA) allows for a "Director of At-Risk Individuals" in the Department of Health and Human Services, this position is not required. As previously stated, the PKEMRA mandates that FEMA have a Disability Coordinator; however, it does not address preparedness for any other vulnerable population. Some states require a limited number of preparedness initiatives for the vulnerable population, whereas others disregard the idea of emergency preparedness for the disadvantaged in general (Hoffman, 2009). Despite the various legislation and initiatives, the preparedness approach for vulnerable populations is not uniform, though it seems as though the consequences for their lack of preparedness are. The Disruptive Innovation Theory is rooted in simple applications, not breakthroughs. Experts, such as the Bellagio Group, have stressed the significance of involving the members of the vulnerable communities in the planning efforts and outreach time again, so why don't we go out to them? Vulnerable communities are identifiable by utilizing the Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA) and the NRF outlines; therefore, we have a perfect place to start outreach.

4. METHODS

The research in this study began with focusing on the vulnerable communities, often referred to as the at-risk population. The qualitative nature of the research allowed the researchers to follow its led. According to the New York State English Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT), New York is a linguistically diverse state with over 200 languages spoken by



the students enrolling in school. This exam aims to assess all English Language Learners (ELL) English Language Proficiency from Kindergarten through 12th grade.

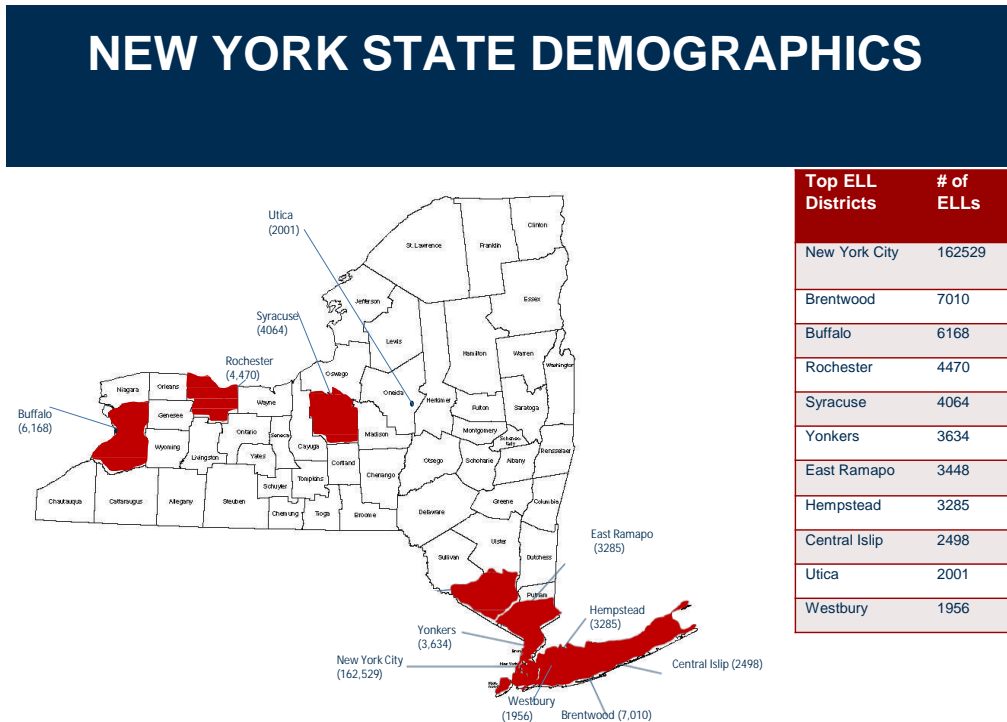


Figure 1- Top 11 ELL Districts of New York.

As seen in Figure 1, for the academic year 2016 – 2017, the top 11 ELL districts within the state collectively have 201,603 ELLs; New York City (162,529), Brentwood (7010), Buffalo (6168), Rochester (4470), Syracuse (4064), Yonkers (3634), East Ramapo (3448), Hempstead (3285), Central Islip (2498), Utica (2001) and Westbury (1956) (New York State Education Department, 2018).

Figure 1 indicates of those 11 districts with the highest number of ELL enrolled, 2 of those locations are within Suffolk County (right next to one another), Brentwood (7010), and Central Islip (2498), making up a total of 10.8% of the county's population. The assessment exposed that 22.7% of Suffolk County's population reported they speak a language other than English in their home. 51.4 % of the population within Central Islip reported speaking another language at home other than English. Meanwhile, 70.8% of Brentwood's population reported speaking another language at home other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).



LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Top 10 ELL/MLL Home Languages 2016-17 SY:

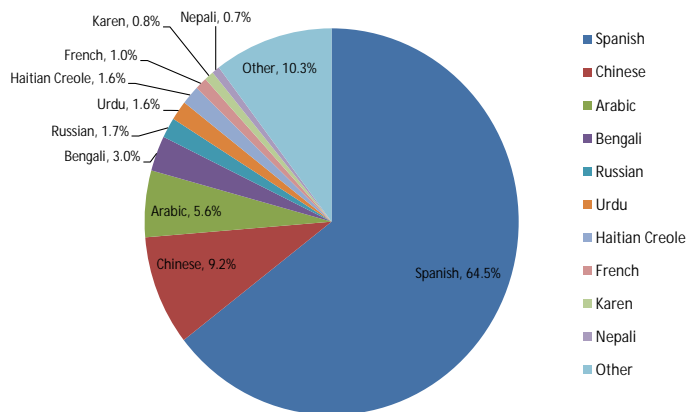


Figure 2 - Top 10 Languages Spoken at Home

Figure 2 indicates the top 10 languages spoken throughout New York State during 2016 - 2017. Weighing in at 64.5%, Figure 2 clearly shows, the highest language reported was Spanish. According to the United States Census Bureau, Suffolk County's total population is 1.49 Million people. As of July 1st, 2018, 19.5% of Suffolk County's population reported as Hispanic or Latino, 8.6% reported Black or African American, and 4.2 % reported Asian descent. 22.7% of the population reported that they sometimes or always spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The national average of non- English language speakers is 21.6%; meanwhile, 312,241 of Suffolk County's citizens are speakers of a non- English language, higher than the national average. As reported in 2015, the most common language spoken among this community was Spanish (12.9%) (New York State Education Department, 2018).

In 2016, 7% of Central Islip's overall population was considered impoverished; 24.9% of the 7% were Hispanic or Latino residents (City-Data (n.d.)). Meanwhile, 16% of the overall population of Brentwood was considered impoverished, of which 20.6% were Hispanic or Latino. Members of these communities likely turn to local faith-based organizations, food



pantries, and nonprofit service providers for support in times of need, therefore making those organizations key partners for outreach efforts.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Local Government Resources

Local outreach began with the Suffolk County Director of Community Affairs, Suffolk County Office of Emergency Management (OEM), and Suffolk County OEM's Language Access Coordinator (LAC)/ Planning Aide. Later provided access to Suffolk County's Language Access Plan, written in compliance with the Suffolk County Executive Order 10-2012 and Presidential Executive Order 12166. Suffolk County Fire Rescue and Emergency Services (FRES) recognizes the importance of effective communication for all community members. "Language barriers can sometimes inhibit or even prohibit individuals with Limited English proficiency from accessing and/or understanding basic rights, obligations, and services from communicating accurately and effectively in difficult situations (Suffolk County FRES, 2013). This department's job is to provide all citizens, LEP individuals included, with the meaningful services and benefits FRES provides. The LAP states that the six most common languages within Suffolk County are Spanish, Mandarin, Chinese, Polish, Italian, Portuguese and Haitian Creole. The LAP outlines the process followed for translating vital documents. The annual review will be conducted to determine new or existing materials needing translation, bearing in mind a range of literacy levels, much to the point of David Eisenman as discussed in the Literature Review.

5.2. Community Outreach

"The challenge for those engaged in emergency management is to understand how to work with the diversity of groups and organizations and the policies and practices that emerge from them in an effort to improve the ability of local residents to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from any type of threat or hazard effectively." (FEMA, 2011). When discussing Disruptive Innovation Theory, Harvard Business Review says "most every innovation



disruptive or not begins life as a small-scale experiment" (Christensen et al., 2015). Through further research, forty-one community resources were identified, including food pantries, faith-based organizations, and nonprofit community-based organizations. Information such as organization name, address, hours of operation, and contact info was compiled in a spreadsheet. Calls were made with any organizations with numbers available were called before fieldwork began to build rapport. The spreadsheet also included notes from the calling phase, including incorrect numbers and which partners I successfully reached. Packets compiled with information from Suffolk County OEM, FEMA, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Again, with the second most Spanish. Native speakers reviewed the entirety of the Spanish packet to assure clarity and easy understanding. The sole purpose of this project was to assure the community had access to materials they needed to be better prepared and know where to access information in the future. While in the community, the intent of this project was made clear. The only ask was that the information would spread to those within their network, and no information was required in return. Over two days, 34 of the 41 locations initially identified were reached, and 158 of the 200 emergency preparedness packets were distributed in English (46) and Spanish (112).

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Definitions

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Glossary, the concept of *Whole Community's* defined as "Preparedness is a shared responsibility; it calls for the involvement of everyone — not just the Government — in preparedness efforts. By working together, everyone can help keep the nation safe from harm and help keep it resilient when struck by hazards, such as natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and pandemics (FEMA, 2011). Members of vulnerable communities are likely to suffer disproportionate consequences; as a preventative measure, the needs of vulnerable populations must be addressed during pre-event planning. The National Response Framework defines *Special Needs populations* as those who "may have additional needs before, during, and after an incident in functional areas, including



but not limited to maintaining independence, communication, transportation, supervision, and medical care" (FEMA, n.d.). Section 2 of Presidential Executive Order 14035 defines *underserved communities* as "... populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, who have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life" (Exec. Order No 14035, 2021). Included in the extensive list of groups that make up the definition of underserved communities is the Limited English Proficiency population. Supported by the data indicating the overlap of the LEP community and poverty levels in Central Islip and Brentwood, "Individuals may belong to more than one underserved community and face intersecting barriers" (Exec. Order No 14035, 2021).

Accessibility is defined as "the design, construction, development, and maintenance of facilities, information and communication technology, programs, and services so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them. Accessibility includes the provision of accommodations and modifications to ensure equal access to employment and participation in activities for people with disabilities, the reduction or elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers to equitable opportunities" (Exec. Order No 14035, 2021). Again, the ability to establish good working relationships with local community leaders is critical since they can reach a network that the Government may not be able to reach. "A Whole Community approach attempts to engage the full capacity of the private and nonprofit sectors, including businesses, faith-based and disability organizations, and the general public, in conjunction with the participation of local, tribal, state, territorial, and federal governmental partners" (FEMA, 2011). Community leaders such as Medical Interpreters are underutilized resources (Shiu-Thornton et al., 2007). Integrating these critical stakeholders into the preparedness efforts will educate those individuals who deserve a seat at the table and are vital assets in increasing accessibility within these communities.

7. COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The outreach conducted in 2019 in Brentwood and Central Islip successfully got preparedness materials in the hands of 34 of the 41 essential community resources identified. Though that



was successful, no follow-up on performance effectiveness was conducted, making this pilot approach's results unavailable. The six strategic themes of the Whole Community Approach are:

1. Understand community complexity.
2. Recognize community capabilities and needs.
3. Foster relationships with community leaders.
4. Build and maintain partnerships.
5. Empower local action.
6. Leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks, and assets.

When planning for community outreach in the future, one may consider both the strategic themes and the below-planning recommendations:

1. Establish the needs of the community
2. Develop a strategic plan
3. Develop a team
4. Train the team
5. Execute the plan
6. Review lessons learned
7. Create an implementation plan

Presidential Executive Order 13985 defines equity defined as "the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment..."(Exec. Order No 13985, 2021). Section 4 explores ways to Identify Methods to Assess Equity meanwhile Section 5 discusses Conducting an Equity Assessment. Presidential Executive Order 13985 was released on January 20th, 2021, and this assessment was to be conducted within 200 days of the order reporting on the following:

- "Potential barriers that underserved communities and individuals may face to enrollment in and access to benefits and services in Federal programs.



- Whether new policies, regulations, or guidance documents may be necessary to advance equity in agency actions and programs;" (Exec. Order No 13985, 2021).

Since this assessment recently concluded, we are curious how the results correlate with this research and the Whole Community Approach.

8. CONCLUSION

In 2011, Former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate said, "Government can and will continue to serve disaster survivors. However, we fully recognize that a government-centric approach to disaster management will not be enough to meet the challenges posed by a catastrophic incident. That is why we must fully engage our entire societal capacity...." (FEMA, 2011). Direct coordination between the Government and the community it serves is essential. Planning for emergencies must include critical stakeholders to allow for bidirectional communication; thus, allowing the direct communication of the community's needs. As indicated based on the research conducted in 2019, Suffolk County, New York, had a high LEP population. Of the 200 languages spoken in New York State, Spanish was the highest in Brentwood and Central Islip. "A safe community promotes social equity during a disaster: all members are prepared and have equal access to information, supplies, and shelter" (Lippmann 2011). Again, during emergencies, vulnerable populations have specific needs that will require attention. Despite the legislation passed, emergency responders, planners, and providers would benefit from additional training in the special consideration of vulnerable populations.

As devastating as Hurricane Katrina was to all of the residents of the affected areas, it indeed exposed gaps within our emergency preparedness for vulnerable populations. Vulnerable populations include the elderly, disabled, refugees, low income, and those with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Individuals with disabilities have drawn some attention in the field of preparedness. Meanwhile, other vulnerable populations are still overlooked and marginalized. There is still much to do to address the needs of the vulnerable populations during emergencies; planning and coordination will help mitigate the extent to which these groups suffer disproportionately.



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