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Communicating with California's Spanish-Speaking Populations During Emergencies

Federico A. Subervi-Vélez, Maria Denney, Anthony Ozuna,
and Clara Quintero, with Juan-Vicente Palerm

Spanish-language broadcast media are major institutions that can play an important role in improving relations between the California government and the state's growing Spanish-speaking populations. This study, which began in August 1989, focused primarily on emergencies and emergency communications. The three major goals were to: (1) establish an informational system of Spanish-language media in California; (2) assess the status of existing linkages between the state and the Spanish-language media for dealing with emergencies; and (3) recommend ways to improve the state's ability to use Latino-oriented media to communicate with Latinos regarding policy concerns.

These goals were met in the following ways. First, we produced a *Handbook of California's Spanish- Language Broadcast Media* and a supplemental *Handbook of Community-Based Organizations Serving Latinos in Selected Sites in California*.¹ If used frequently and affirmatively, these resources could help improve communication between California's government and the state's Latino populations.

Second, we assessed the linkages between the state and the Spanish-language broadcast media for dealing with emergencies by surveying Spanish-language radio and television stations and interviewing emergency services officials. Among these were representatives of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services and their counterparts at the local, county, and regional levels, as well as city and county fire officials and American Red Cross officers. The importance of community-based organizations was one of the issues discussed.

¹ These are being published separately and provided to selected state offices, and to others by request.

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CASE STUDY: THE LOMA PRIETA EARTHQUAKE

Shortly after we began gathering data in October 1989 — coincidentally, an hour after interviewing the principal communication and operations directors of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services in Sacramento — northern California suffered its worst disaster in recent history: the Loma Prieta earthquake. Because of the magnitude and consequences of the earthquake, which struck an area inhabited by multiethnic populations and served by numerous Spanish-language media, we promptly began to study how these broadcast media were used to disseminate crucial emergency information immediately after the temblor and during the recovery stages. We also examined how the Spanish-speaking communities of Watsonville and San Francisco were served by pertinent emergency-relief agencies and community-based organizations during and after the disaster.

The product of that effort — “A Case Study of Emergency Communications Related to the October 17, 1989, Loma Prieta Earthquake” (Appendix 1 in the full report) — was very revealing for understanding the problems faced by Latino communities. It is hoped that our findings will guide in the development and implementation of policies to improve not only the state's ability to communicate with its Latino populations, particularly its Spanish-speaking segments, but with its other non-English-speaking populations as well.

Most of the Spanish-language media were unable to continue operations during and immediately following the earthquake. As a result, the state and the media were unable to effectively communicate with each other and serve the Spanish-speaking populations during the first crucial hours of that emergency. Other non-English-speaking populations in the area were also left incommunicado during the immediate aftermath of the temblor.

Following are the study's major findings:

- Although Spanish-language broadcast media

exist throughout the state, the majority of the stations lack the backup generators to enable them to continue on the air when there is a power failure.

There are inadequate linkages between these media and the various offices of emergency services, fire departments, and the Red Cross for emergency communication or preparedness.

The structure of the Emergency Broadcast System is flawed, especially for communicating with broadcast media.

The emergency outreach capacities of the Red Cross and the various government agencies responsible for disaster mitigation vary significantly. None of these agencies is uninterested in or unaware of the particular needs of and problems faced by California's Spanish-speaking populations, but few have bilingual and bicultural staff who are specifically trained to communicate with Latinos. The agencies are even less prepared to communicate with Asians. There are also shortages of written and audiovisual materials, as well as multicultural programs for emergency mitigation, preparedness, and recovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Emergency Broadcast System and the English-Language Media

- English-language broadcast media, particularly stations with the most powerful transmitters, should provide non-English-language information related to disasters and, whenever possible, refer Spanish-speaking audiences to television channels and/or radio stations that are on the air with Spanish-language information. Radio and television stations should also have prerecorded safety messages in Spanish and other relevant languages.

- A stronger emphasis should be placed on alternative emergency support infrastructures or networks. In addition to the current Emergency



Broadcast System (EBS) other systems should be considered, such as the Emergency Digital Information System (EDIS), which was recently developed by the Office of Emergency Services.

- For areas with Spanish-language broadcast media, the feasibility of establishing an emergency communication system in Spanish to operate in conjunction with or parallel to the English one should be studied.

For the Spanish-Language Broadcast Media

- All media, but especially the non-English-language broadcast stations, should be strongly encouraged (or preferably required) to have backup generators in working order at both their studios and transmission towers. At least one ethnic station with large coverage capacity in each geographic area and/or OES mutual aid region should be required to have the generators.

- Each station should train additional personnel to operate its equipment, and for providing it with accurate and reliable information for transmitting during emergency situations.

- News and information about emergency preparedness should be featured more frequently at the Spanish-language stations. These stations should also increase their contacts with representatives of the various emergency-related state and private agencies.

- When the new EDIS is fully operational and implemented across the state, Spanish-language stations must also participate, at least at a regional level.

For Offices of Emergency Services and Other State Agencies

- The state should employ staff experienced and proficient in emergency communication and outreach with ethnic-minority populations and mass media.

- Agencies should continue to work to produce

and distribute emergency preparedness and recovery information, in both print and audiovisual form, in multiple languages. These materials should be both general and specific to areas to be used, and agencies should assess their quality and utility for ethnic communities.

- Emergency preparedness and response efforts directed to non-English-speaking residents should distinctly address the security concerns of both temporary workers and immigrants who are undocumented or whose status is transitional. Such outreach efforts are especially important for the most isolated rural communities, and should be made in cooperation with community-based organizations.

- Coordinated emergency communication preparedness and recovery plans should be developed with the Spanish-language radio and television stations whose signals are received from Mexico.

- The presence and importance of Spanish-language and other ethnic media in crisis communications should be incorporated in governmental training programs and all emergency planning.

- As the EDIS is implemented across the state, a feasibility study should begin immediately to incorporate Spanish and other languages into the system.

- Funding must be provided to develop and implement these recommendations.

For the American Red Cross and Community Organizations

- In lieu of government leadership, the Red Cross could take initiatives to establish links between pertinent state agencies and community-based resources that can assist in providing emergency services to non-English-speaking populations. Special provisions should be made for rural communities that have fewer organizations and services.

- Community organizations should work to establish a network of resources to assist local broadcast media in the event of a disaster.



- Spanish-speaking citizens should be encouraged to become involved at the volunteer and professional level with the local chapters of the American Red Cross and with other public and private organizations that may provide emergency services to their communities.

Additional Recommendations

- City and county emergency service agencies should identify and map their areas' ethnic and cultural populations (including the elderly, hearing impaired, and handicapped) with knowledge of the particular needs of those populations, especially as pertaining to language characteristics.

- City and county emergency service agencies should consider establishing designated emergency assistance/recovery centers within the local ethnic enclaves prior to disasters. Such centers should be fully staffed with personnel who can assist the non-English-speaking communities in the appropriate languages.

- Emergency service agencies at the county and city level should be required to have up-to-date language banks of the languages spoken by identifiable sectors of their ethnic populations, as well as trained and informed bilingual personnel.

- The government offices responsible for emergency preparations and disaster recovery should strengthen their networking with the community-based organizations and the mass media of all types and languages. Public relations officers and/or directors of the different institutions should establish and maintain professional ties on a regular, ongoing basis prior to actual emergencies.

It is hoped that the results of this project will guide in the development and implementation of

policies to improve the state's ability to reach out to and communicate with its Latino populations, particularly its Spanish-speaking segments, as well as its other non-English-speaking populations.

Federico A. Subervi-Vélez and Juan-Vicente Palerm were co-principal investigators on this project. When the study commenced, Prof. Subervi-Vélez was a visiting assistant researcher at the Center for Chicano Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara. He is now an associate professor at the Department of Radio-Television-Film, University of Texas at Austin. Juan-Vicente Palerm is a professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Chicano Studies. Maria Denney completed a BA at UC Santa Barbara, and is presently a health care worker at the Westside Neighborhood Medical Clinic in Santa Barbara. Anthony Ozuna completed a BA and MA in political science at Santa Barbara, and is presently a member of the editorial staff of the literary magazine Yazyk in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Clara Quintero is completing a BA at UC Santa Barbara.

Research for the full report was funded by the Policy Research Program of the California Policy Seminar. The complete report, which includes the case study of emergency communications related to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, is available at no charge to state government offices and for \$12 to others, payable (to UC Regents) upon ordering. The *Handbook of California's Spanish-Language Broadcast Media* and *Handbook of Community-Based Organizations Serving Latinos in Selected Sites in California* can be ordered for \$5 each. Please address inquiries to the California Policy Seminar, 2020 Milvia Street, #412, Berkeley, CA 94704, or telephone (510) 642-5514.

