GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

Communicating Disaster Preparedness With Linguistically Isolated Populations 2009

Community Health Statistics
Office of Surveillance and Public Health Preparedness
Houston Department of Health and Human Services

Houston, Texas

How to access more ?

The pdf file of the full report on which this guidance document is based can be downloaded from www.houstontx.gov/health.

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Participants of Vietnamese Focus Group Discussion

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(Cantonese speaking Chinese)

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Our Target Audience

This document has been developed primarily for Preparedness Planners, Health Educators, Emergency Response and Community Based Organizations.

Our Goal

The goal of the City of Houston Department of Health and Human Services was to develop realistic recommendations for local emergency response personnel as well as city, county, state, and federal officials, and to improve dissemination of emergency information and equitable delivery of services to cultural communities in the greater Houston area.

About Immigration in Houston

Census numbers for Houston in 2006 reported a changing population and for the first time Houston has a minority-majority demographic composition-- 36.9% Anglo, 16.45 Black, 38.2% Hispanic, and 6.5% Asian. In 2009, the annual report developed by Rice University's Stephen Klineberg and the Center for Houston's Future, described in greater detail the face of immigrants in Houston. More than 40% of all Houston's Latino and Asian immigrants are recent arrivals, having come here since 1995. Portals for US entry are through refugee status (war in their homeland), through eligibility for preferential status (professionals of exceptional ability or those with desirable occupational skills), and through family reunification programs. The family reunification portal is the primary conduit for immigrants from Latino countries into the US and 72% of all Latino immigrants in Harris County come from Mexico. Immigrants entering the country via preferential status have higher levels of educational credentials and professional skills while many immigrants entering as refugees or through family reunification do not have a high school diploma. According to American Community Survey (2006-2008), more than 45 % of the populations (five years and over) speak other than English at home and one quarter (25 %) of the populations speak English less than "very well".

Our Methods

Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews were conducted.

Four focus groups and at least four key informant interviews were conducted in each of four linguistically isolated immigrant populations living in the greater Houston metropolitan area—Latino, Chinese, Vietnamese and Somali. The immigrants and cultures of these groups pose challenges to emergency response personnel in terms of pre-disaster communication and post-disaster response efforts. Our questions focused on general knowledge and understanding of disasters and highlighted experiences during Houston's most recent disaster, Hurricane Ike. We asked how people gathered news and information, how they made preparations for their families, and their experiences and service access needs during the disasters.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT QUESTIONS TO ASK

When working with refugees and mono-lingual, non-English speaking communities, we identified fundamental questions that need to be considered in order to develop outreach and communication plans.

What is the community's experience with disasters in general?

Preparedness for some communities may be conditioned by previous experiences of these groups in their native lands. They may have no point of reference to enable them to judge the importance and impact of many disasters. For example, immigrants from inland countries have no context for understanding a tropical storm. Those from coastal countries are familiar with typhoons, cyclones, and tsunamis and have contextual understanding of the information, especially when populations use descriptive words interchangeably based on their own experience. They may be prepared for an actual storm, such as Hurricane Ike, but were not prepared for the aftermath, e.g. lack of power for extended periods of time, poor-to-no access to public transportation, and the extensive damage caused by high winds. In Asian countries buildings are better constructed to withstand gale force winds and people do not need to go to extremes to protect their property. Those who had been through hurricanes in their native country did not know to prepare their homes in Houston for wind-related damage and were astounded by the extent of structural loss after Hurricane Ike.

"The first thing we were informed and heard was something called hurricane, and the hurricane would land in Houston."
-Somali speaking participant

How long has this community of immigrants been in the city ?

For those with limited English, an important strategy for preparedness is to find an English-speaker whom they can trust and who will share preparedness information.

The length of time a linguistically isolated community has been established within the city has a direct bearing on the efficacy of information integration by that community. Mainstream American news and weather programs were viewed as one of their most credible sources of information. For example, during Hurricane Ike, even though linguistically isolated residents could not understand the messages, they relied heavily upon images during the weather reports to inform them of the storm's progression. Seeing others evacuating, boarding windows, and buying water alerted them to seek additional information from someone who could understand the news commentary. They understood that something important was happening. If families had been in the US long enough to have children in school, they relied on these children to explain media images to them. They then sought out confirmation and additional information from someone with a greater understanding of English. Without an interpreter to explain these images or observations, they were in an informational void. Additionally, Hurricane Ike was not a sudden disaster and afforded time for community readiness and extensive media coverage. Sudden disasters may be more difficult to explain visually to non-English speaking residents. Recent immigrants may not have televisions or radios or access to English-speaking people and their language barriers pose an important challenge to providing information and warning.

"For me, I depend upon my children as a major source of information."
-Cantonese /Chinese Speaking participant

"Even though I don't understand the words and announcements, I can see the pictures… to gauge how severe the situation is."
-Vietnamese speaking participant

What is the community's primary mode of communication?

Many linguistically-isolated groups are primarily oral in their language and traditions, and information is still shared by word-of-mouth. Within all our populations and particularly in times of disaster, word-of-mouth was reported as the way people gained information. The best way to address this mode of communication is to make sure that information is posted in areas that the community frequents (such as community centers, supermarkets, buses, cultural organizations), and that whatever preparedness information posted is written in the language of the people. Community-based organizations serving minority communities know their gate-keepers and primary spokespeople. It is very important for disaster preparedness staff to ignite the existing word of mouth network with accurate information as soon as possible.

"I have no friend here to call, so I only knew about the services 3 months after they had been discontinued…and information on the services was only spread by word of mouth."

-Vietnamese speaking participants

What has been their experience with "government ?

"I believe that the governmental agencies do have the information [about general preparedness] because the make projects for this type of situations, cyclones, floods. But they don't implement them."

-Spanish speaking participant

Often the expectation for the intensity, level of response and assistance is dependent upon history and experience in the native land. In Houston for example, Chinese people who had lived in a very government-controlled country, had great expectations that the government would proactively inform them and be responsible for their care. People from countries with frequent government turnover, such as in Central and South America, had distrust of the government and were more apt to suspect that they had been singled out for less assistance or supplies, or were not receiving all the necessary information. People from countries like Vietnam and Somalia brought memories of social conflict, violence and war and were less dependent upon the government for help, but instead wanted assistance in planning their own responses to future, similar disasters and learning how to prepare.

Do non-English speaking families have adequate resources to prepare for a disaster of any kind ?

Due to language barriers and lower education levels, many people new to the US live in poorer neighborhoods and have menial jobs that place them at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Even before disaster strikes, they have few resources with which to operate their daily lives. When disasters do hit, resource-poor environments need a greater number of services and more assistance funneled into areas that are already burdened by overcrowding and poverty. Focus group participants who had experienced Hurricane Ike, told many stories of waiting in long lines to access services, only to be sent away empty-handed. Those with transportation traveled on to distant locations to seek supplies. For many, there were no resources and services in or near their neighborhoods.

"There was no work, so we didn't have the money to buy supplies, especially for the children who are more vulnerable to these situations."

-Spanish speaking participant

How reliable is the public transportation system?

Many new residents depend upon public transportation during their initial years in Houston and lack of personal transportation poses an additional challenge during times of disaster. Families are often large (10 people in some households) and moving an entire household via public transit is an arduous task in the best of times. Without reliable public transportation and well-publicized evacuation routes, they cannot evacuate, nor can they access supplies or travel to points of distribution. Additional hardships include job threat or loss because they cannot get to work.

What is the understanding of "stocking up on supplies" and how familiar is the community with "American" food?

RECOMMENDATION: In disaster preparedness literature targeting non-English speakers, include a brief narrative about the advantages of stocking canned goods over powdered and dried foods, and how they are used when power and water supplies are .

People from other countries are not necessarily familiar with canned goods and how to prepare food during power outages or when clean water supplies are limited. They customarily use powdered or dehydrated food items that require clean water supply. Many of those from Asia believe that canned goods are not healthy .

"New arrivals need to know how to prepare preserved food so they won't lose children, or their children won't go hungry." -Somali

Detailed report will be available soon on www.houstontx.gov/health/ CHS

WHAT CAN PLANNERS DO TO HELP COMMUNITIES?

Identifying Information Stations

Contact information for the permanent information stations should be promoted in all written literature.

Communities want permanent, pre-designated neighborhood-based stations or information kiosks, staffed by people from the local communities who can communicate in the language of the residents. These sites should be plentiful These sites should be within short distance from residents to reduce overcrowding and competition for resources, information and assistance. As necessary, these could also be activated as cooling stations or recovery centers. Geographical boundaries for defining the information site service area could be pre-determined areas such as zip code zones or election district designations. Once station locations are identified, addresses and contact information for these sites should be used in printed and promotional disaster preparedness literature. Suggestions from the community for information sites included:

- Community centers,
- Churches and mosques,
- Shopping malls and community, and
- Local supermarkets.

"I had no news formally. The government could have posted notices in some places. However, they didn't do so. Maybe they thought that people would watch TV news when they got home from work. However, Vietnamese employees often have to work overtime, and they have no time to watch the news."

-Vietnamese speaking participant

Building Local Capacity

For these information stations to be viable, planners need to take the initiative in identifying stations, helping communities develop their own disaster response plans, training community members and developing translated contact information. Attention and intention to help from city officials increases the sense of inclusiveness for isolated populations and builds relationships that will in turn serve as channels for information dissemination.

Designating a Community Liaison

Each community requested a representative that spoke their language to serve as a community liaison to help community members understand and access available resources. This liaison should be identified with the help of trusted community leaders such as:

- Faith leaders.
- Social service agency directors.
- Leaders of social networks.

COMMUNICATING WITH LINGUISTICALLY ISOLATED POPULATIONS

Each community has distinct preferences for either radio or television, and/or printed materials. Form, content, and channels of information most frequently mentioned across groups are listed below and for the most part, using Hurricane Ike as a reference point. Each of the following is understood to be transmitted and distributed in language and culture appropriate contexts for each targeted group.

Form of Media Message	Content of Media Message	Channels of Distribution
Brochures/ leaflets	Checklists of what to prepare; evacuation routes Education is needed for people with low English proficiency and low literacy, the terminology around emergency conditions needs to be explained in simple terms and in the languages of the linguistically-isolated groups, preferably accompanied by pictures. Participants spoke about not knowing the difference between various categories of storms and how that may impact power and water.	Supermarkets (checkers put leaflets in grocery bags), cultural centers, utility companies (information packets included with monthly statements.
Television	Disaster tracking (e.g. storm), with sub-titles in languages of major linguistically isolated groups	Mainstream broadcast channel news stations, special weather reports, special disaster reports.
Radio	Emergency preparedness instructions, where to go when a disaster hits (evacuation routes/alternative routes); a listing of hotlines	In respective languages.
Posters	Evacuation routes in all of the major languages of immigrant groups Disaster preparedness and response plans for apartment and housing complexes, particularly those used by the area resettlement organizations to place newcomers to the US Testimonials "Let us tell our story…" and stories.	Laundromats, housing complexes (identify housing point person to serve as disaster contact person to organize disaster practice drills).
Media/Video	Testimonials of what happened to others that have gone through past disasters. These are the faces and voices of people who have gone through disaster, in the languages of the immigrant group, and in the cultural context and with sensibility of the sources of confusion of each group in interpreting risk and preparedness messages.	Documentaries, news footage, public service announcements, in-store broadcasting systems, community access channels, presentations for community meeting groups.
Telephone	Accurate disaster-related information; evacuation routes; locations of supplies/distribution sites Place to register contact information to be called in times of disaster (most are unfamiliar with 211)	Hotlines in native language. Phone calls in native language.
"Civil Defense" type alarm system Loudspeaker	Audio alert, similar to tornado warnings that everyone can recognize as a call to take cover/precautions or to seek out information immediately Storm warnings; evacuation instructions; location of points of distribution and other resource key updates	Sounded throughout the community to warn of pending disaster. Through neighborhoods with vehicle loudspeaker.