

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LANGUAGE ACCESS STUDY

Prepared by:
Napa Valley COAD



STUDY BACKGROUND

Napa Valley Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD) and the County of Napa Office of Emergency Services embarked on a joint Language Access study in spring of 2021 to improve language access in emergency communications. A language access plan details the means by which individuals with limited English proficiency reasonably access the same resources and information as English speakers. Close to 35% of Napa County residents are Latino, and 31% speak Spanish in the home. A joint steering committee was formed to guide the work comprised of COAD's Public Information & Outreach Subcommittee and the County's Office of Emergency Services and Public Information Officer. The shared objective was to better understand language access needs and develop communications strategies that maximize the reach and effectiveness of messaging during all phases of disaster – before, during and after.

STUDY COMPONENTS

Three data collection sources were identified to assess needs, develop effective language access strategies and practices, and establish a baseline and feedback loop for measuring progress. Areas of inquiry included accuracy, timeliness, and trust in the information received.

- ① **Empathic Interviews** – Using a human-centered design approach, empathic interviews were conducted to learn directly from community members, in their own words, about their experiences with access to information before, during, and after emergencies. Within Napa County, this approach was successfully used in public-private partnerships to improve the 2020 census participation.
- ② **Community Survey** – Using input from other data sources, a community survey was crafted to gain firsthand, more objective data from individuals around their experiences receiving and processing emergency information to assist in developing more effective strategies for access and address barriers.
- ③ **Community-based Organizations & County Staff Interviews** – Hearing the perspectives of the individuals who are receiving and then sharing emergency information provided the opportunity to gain insights into the challenges experienced in providing emergency communications and recommendations for improving language access.

KEY FINDINGS

Study results were consistent across the three data sources regarding successes to date and areas for improvement. Since the 2017 wildfires, significant improvements have been made; most respondents (70%) feel they are getting the information they need to stay safe. Improvement areas need to focus on addressing the reach and effectiveness of emergency communications, and documenting policies, practices, and strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations focus on improving the reach and effectiveness of emergency communications for individuals with LEP:

- **Foster broader community engagement, resilience, and self-reliance before a disaster.** People are much more likely to connect to official sources if already engaged.
- **Help policy and decision makers** better understand the experiences and barriers of individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) to promote support for improved strategies and practices.
- **Document an emergency language access plan** so that processes and practices are systematized, consistent, and not lost due to staff turnover.
- **Create linguistically appropriate and culturally responsive translations.** Consider the needs of individuals who have low literacy in their native language. Increase translation capacity and monitor threshold languages.
- **Ensure consistency in communication** processes and emergency terms, and increase familiarity around emergency communications with partners, message amplifiers, trusted messengers, and the broader community.
- **Diversify communication methods** and sources to meet a wide range of communication needs and preferences, including more strategic use of radio and video in all phases of disaster. These strategies can also help address the digital divide.
- **Integrate a wide range of trusted messengers** into the emergency communications stream, including **school districts**.