

AB 615 (TORRICO): HELP ALL CALIFORNIANS IN A DISASTER

Earthquakes. Floods. Wildfires. California has long been prone to disasters, and emergency preparedness planning at the state and local levels is critical for ensuring our state is equipped to recover from any disaster situation. As home to over 6 million limited English proficient (LEP) individuals, however, California also poses unique challenges for disaster responders. Forty percent of Asian American and Latino communities are LEP, and certain ethnic groups including Central Americans and Southeast Asians have even higher rates of limited English proficiency. The state's emergency preparedness planning must account for the needs of our state's significant LEP population.

In any emergency situation, communication with the public is critical for conveying important instructions and procedures, thereby saving lives and minimizing injuries and damage.

Unfortunately, real-life examples illustrate the lack of emergency communication in languages other than English, and the devastating impact it has on LEP communities.

- During the Hurricane Katrina disaster, evacuation notices were not provided in languages other than English, even in cities with sizeable immigrant and refugee populations. Congressional testimony highlighted the story of a Vietnamese man in Mississippi, who spent five days in a wrecked fishing boat before being saved, and told rescuers he did not understand the evacuation orders issued prior to Hurricane Katrina.
- More locally, the City of Richmond in California instituted a multi-lingual warning system after many limited English speaking residents were not warned of a neighboring refinery accident and fire. The accident sent a plume of black smoke and hundreds of residents to hospitals with respiratory problems.

Before another major disaster strikes California, the Little Hoover Commission has highlighted that our state and local agencies must be prepared to accommodate communication for large numbers of LEP individuals. AB 615 (Torrigo) would ensure our emergency preparedness planning responds to the need:

- Representatives of LEP communities would be appointed to serve on the Standardized Emergency Management System committees. Existing statute already requires representatives of disability communities who also experience unique emergency preparedness needs.
- The Office of Emergency Services would disseminate existing disaster preparedness information in a variety of languages, and hold 3 regional forums to train community-based and ethnic media organizations regarding how they can assist in emergency preparedness planning, response, and recovery.
- The Office of Emergency Services would develop a guidance for local entities, which would include information to assist them, including available translated materials, methods for partnering with ethnic media and community-based organizations, and approaches for improving communication with LEP populations during emergencies.
- The Office of Emergency Services would also create a registry of bilingual state employees who could be called upon for assistance during an emergency, and would incorporate the needs of LEP populations in trainings and exercises.