

# Getting the message across

Officials at all levels of government, NGOs and other organisations, cannot assume that the community they serve understands the official language spoken in that country, says **J L Smither**



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**ESSENTIAL ACTIONS OF DISASTER** managers and responders are to prepare the community to be ready to face various threats and to communicate with the public in the event of a disaster. Before, during and after an incident, emergency managers must get messages out to their community regarding preparedness and safety guidelines, sheltering locations, triage instructions or other information. This article focuses on New Zealand, Canada and the US, taking English to be the official language.

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■ **Messages must be comprehensible for community members who do not speak English or who do not have English as their first language.**

This idea applies not only to multi-cultural immigrant communities, but also to people who are deaf and only know a particular dialect of Sign Language.

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management developed an emergency preparedness programme for school children called, *What's the Plan Stan?* The programme includes: Guides and templates for teachers; disaster-related stories, activities and practice scenarios for children; and a CD-ROM and website for additional learning opportunities. *What's the Plan Stan?* introduces students to five young people and a dog (Stan) who prepare for and react to New Zealand's most common threats: Earthquakes; floods; storms; tsunamis; volcanoes; and human-caused disasters.

Because not all school children in New Zealand speak English, the Ministry also offers a translation of the *What's the Plan Stan?* material and website into Te Reo Maori, the native language of New Zealand. This allows children who speak Maori and their families to benefit from the lessons and preparedness advice distributed by the Ministry.

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■ **Messages during – not just prior to – a disaster must also be available in various languages so that citizens know how to react.**

During the SARS outbreak in Toronto, Canada,

officials tried to ensure that public health information reached all populations in a timely fashion. To give citizens and visitors data and information about SARS, the federal agency Health Canada used spokespeople in English and French, Canada's two official languages.

In Toronto, however, provincial and local officials realised that they needed to reach the city's diverse population, which spoke not only English and French, but also Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese.

The Toronto Public Health agency distributed printed materials, launched websites, published advertisements in non-English newspapers, and staffed hotlines in these languages to ensure that all members of the community knew what to do about SARS. Officials also engaged directly with these local communities through seniors' homes, church groups, recreation centres and other community organisations and events to get the message out.

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■ **Shelter officials should consider supplementing messages with more visual methods, such as pictures.**

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, residents who were evacuating included people who spoke languages other than English, but also people who were deaf. Although some shelters made it a standard practice to post all oral announcements in a central location for people to read, not all shelters accommodated evacuees in the same way. At the shelters that only relied upon oral announcements, people who were deaf or hard-of-hearing missed critical information.

Because not all people who are deaf are fluent in written English (as opposed to Sign Language), shelter officials should consider supplementing messages with more visual methods, such as pictures, to relay essential information.

After the storm passed and flood waters were pumped out of certain areas, officials began to allow certain evacuees back into their neighbourhoods. Emergency managers, concerned about public health risks from mould and possible toxic waste, distributed

bulletins to make returning residents aware of proper clean-up procedures. However, these bulletins were printed only in English, which excluded many New Orleans inhabitants who spoke Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese or French Creole. Because managers were not prepared to communicate with all communities before, during and after the disaster, the city risked a serious public health crisis.

As shown by the examples in New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, some emergency managers and responders are already making efforts to include all populations in disaster preparedness, response and recovery activities by making informational material accessible to them.

Officials at all levels of government (and non-governmental organisations that may help in a crisis) cannot assume that the community they serve will be able to understand spoken or even written English. Information in the form of handouts, public service announcements, signs, telephone messages and other material must be available in multiple languages.

Jurisdictions would be well served to have people on call who speak languages other than English (or the jurisdiction's official language) to interact with the various communities. In some cases, even translating written material or oral announcements may not be enough when assisting people with disabilities.

By considering all limitations of the community's population and by meeting its needs with preparedness information, emergency managers can plan for challenges and responses during and after a disaster.

For more information on this topic, please visit *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* at [www.llis.dhs.gov](http://www.llis.dhs.gov).

**Author**

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