

OVERVIEW

The United States is currently experiencing its highest rate of immigration since the early 1900s. Immigrants are moving, as they have historically, to big cities as well as to suburban and rural communities.

The American Community Survey indicated that in 2005, approximately one in five American households spoke a language other than English at home, and 18.4 million foreign-born immigrants over age five spoke English “less than very well.”

Limited English proficiency, lack of familiarity with U.S. culture, and higher rates of social isolation are some of the factors that lead to increased vulnerability to disasters among immigrant and ethnic minority populations.¹

Immigrants can face a number of obstacles in preparing for and recovering from disasters, including trust as well as language and cultural differences, as summarized below.



A family prepares for a disaster.

Source: Andre Booher for FEMA



Language

- α Immigrants often lack access to information, in their language, on how to be more prepared for disasters.
- α During a disaster, language barriers inhibit communication between immigrants and emergency response personnel.
- α In the aftermath of a disaster, non-English speakers may be precluded from numerous relief and recovery services.



Cultural differences

- α Preparedness information may be ineffectively disseminated, and disaster warnings and emergency instructions may not be acknowledged, due to preference by certain immigrants to use “informal” communication outlets such as family and friends.
- α Extended family households may lack of access to recovery services due to regulations that penalize non-nuclear families.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: PROMISING PRACTICES

- α Some emergency responders may give unequal treatment to immigrants due to racism.



Trust

- α Disaster response may be delayed as some immigrants, distrustful of government, seek to verify information from trusted social and family networks.
- α Immigrants may be reluctant to use government services, such as temporary shelters, due to mistrust of response agencies.
- α Immigration status can create problems, in part because undocumented immigrants are especially fearful of accessing official assistance and relief services.

The effects of cultural differences, language barriers, and trust on emergency management have been felt by disaster victims across the U.S. In one striking example, following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in California, government officials set up temporary tent structures as relief centers. Recent Central American immigrants who had fled “government-backed death squads” in their native countries were unsettled by the imagery of the tents. Associating the relief shelters with war time concentration camps in Central America, about 300 immigrants refused to inhabit the tents.²

In another case, following Hurricane Andrew, few federal disaster relief personnel who were sent to assist with recovery in South Florida spoke Spanish, and none spoke Haitian-Creole. Lack of accommodation for the range of languages spoken by residents created complications for immigrants and minorities in accessing relief services.³

Many organizations including FEMA have learned from such cases, and made changes to accommodate the experiences of immigrants in emergency situations. However, many U.S. institutions and programs still have room to improve in serving their diverse populations.

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Certain populations have special needs during a disaster.

Source: Mark Wolfe for FEMA

REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS

Strategies for reducing vulnerability to disasters among immigrant and ethnic minority communities emphasize building “cultural competency” in emergency management organizations and their personnel. While strategies for overcoming language and cultural barriers are categorized separately below, emergency planners and responders should view the issues as intertwined. Strategies for overcoming both language and cultural barriers can be most effectively designed and implemented with meaningful participation by community members from vulnerable populations. The guidelines below have been synthesized from a variety of studies and literature.



Overcoming language barriers

- α Disseminate preparedness and planning information and guidelines in all languages appropriate for populations in your region. Take care to include *ALL* languages appropriate for the population being served (i.e., not just English and Spanish). Offer required forms for relief services in multiple languages.
- α Train educators to offer disaster preparedness training programs in multiple languages.
- α Foster community-led education programs.
- α Develop communication plans to include rapid provision of translation services in case of emergency. Tap into outlets for community-based information sharing, particularly local ethnic radio stations.



Overcoming cultural barriers

- α Formally integrate local, decentralized organizations into preparedness activities and response plans such as nonprofits or churches.
- α Engage existing social service providers to prepare for and respond in case of disasters, rather than depending solely on specialized emergency personnel.
- α Diversify emergency response workforces at the regional and local levels to reflect the diversity in local populations.
- α Provide cultural sensitivity training for emergency response employees.
- α Develop “cultural competence” in disaster preparedness planning.



Building Trust

- α Support “cultural brokering” by engaging liaisons to help build two way trust, develop educational materials and serve as mediator between populations. See the profiles on cultural brokering and on cultural competence at the end of this promising practice.
- α Engage community members as well as emergency response agencies and organizations in self-assessment and strategic planning processes.
- α Ensure a clear distinction between immigration enforcement and disaster response or aid programs.



PROFILE: DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Program:	National Resource Center on Advancing Emergency Preparedness for Culturally Diverse Communities
Organization:	Drexel University School of Public Health
Keywords:	cultural competence, diversity, emergency preparedness
Source:	www.diversitypreparedness.org
Brief Summary:	The National Resource Center serves as an information clearinghouse on topics linking disaster planning and response with cultural diversity. Their free, searchable Internet database carries up-to-date studies, emerging practices, and other resources on emergency preparedness. Resources can be sorted by category including type and phase of emergency, language, type of institution, and racial or ethnic community.

The National Resource Center is housed at Drexel University's School of Public Health and is a collaboration of the University's Center for Health Equality and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health. The Resource Center has a mission to serve as a clearinghouse and an information exchange portal to facilitate communication, networking, and collaboration to improve preparedness, build resilience, and eliminate disparities for culturally diverse communities across all phases of an emergency.

Their website offers a catalogue of annotated resources, promising programs, and projects that are searchable, cross-referenced, and browsable by a range of topics, languages, and communities. Resources include full text sources for peer reviewed journal articles, training and education materials, evaluation tools, and websites for government, private sector, and community based programs and projects.

The Resource Center also offers an online discussion forum on the topic of preparedness for diverse communities, and will provide an online member directory of professionals working to integrate culturally diverse populations into emergency preparedness planning and activities.



PROFILE: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL BROKERING

Program:	Bridging the Cultural Divide in Healthcare Settings: The Essential Role of Cultural Broker Programs
Organization:	National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University
Keywords:	cultural brokering, cultural sensitivity, workforce diversity, conflict reduction
Source:	National Center for Cultural Competence.
Brief Summary:	This report explains the process of cultural brokering, defined as the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change.

Cultural brokers are individuals who understand the values and social networks of a particular community and who have earned the community's trust. Such brokers advocate on behalf of a particular individual or group and may serve as liaisons between community members and service providers. They may also help produce educational materials and coordinate workforce diversity practices, serve as mediators to establish trust and build relationships, and act as catalysts for change by initiating transformation of the original setting by creating an inclusive and collaborative environment.

The cultural brokerage process is community driven in that it allows members of communities to identify their own needs. It also allows for the delivery of services in a manner appropriate for the community. The report offers guidelines on implementing cultural brokering in the institutional setting of healthcare. The concepts translate well for use in disaster management programs.

In an example cultural brokerage program in Merced County, California, Western physicians visited Hmong Shamans to understand traditional health practices and rituals among the Hmong culture. Shaman then visited hospitals and clinics to learn about Western medicine. The Shaman could act as cultural brokers between the Hmong population and Western medical professionals.



PROFILE: COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES

Program:	Disaster Preparedness Guide: Plan, Prepare, Practice and Protect
Organization:	Miami Center for Public Health Preparedness
Keywords:	family disaster planning, language barriers, printed information
Source:	Miami Center for Public Health Preparedness www.deep.med.miami.edu/x21.xml
Brief Summary:	This guide to disaster preparedness was produced by the Miami Center for Public Health Preparedness in association with the DEEP Center and the University of Miami. The guide includes a family preparedness checklist, communication plan guidelines, disaster supply kit checklist, and other guidelines useful for families.

The Miami Center for Public Health Preparedness (CPHP) at the University of Miami is part of a nationwide network of centers funded by the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focusing on supporting preparedness efforts by state and local health departments. The Miami program focuses on Hispanic and Latino populations in the U.S. and Latin America and provides access to preparedness materials and trainings in both English and Spanish.

CPHP offers the *Disaster Preparedness Guide: Plan, Prepare, Practice and Protect*, a free comprehensive guide for family disaster planning, in both Spanish and English on their website. The guide contains emergency contacts for the Miami and Broward regions and information on what to do in the aftermath of a disaster. The guide includes sections on children, older family members, and pets. It is produced in a non-threatening, user friendly format, is also available in Spanish, and comes with guidelines for trainers who will teach the material.

Since 2006, Miami CPHP has trained over 7,000 Hispanics and Latinos in Florida on family disaster preparedness, emphasizing hurricane preparedness. The trainings and publications are provided in Spanish free of charge; training materials include presentation software program slides (Microsoft PowerPoint), and a trainers' manual, also available for free online.



PROFILE: STRATEGIC PLANNING

Program:	Innovative Health Assessment and Strategic Planning: Addressing Health Disparities in Contra County
Organization:	Contra County Health Services
Keywords:	institutional self-assessment, strategic planning, cultural competency, cultural sensitivity
Source:	National Center for Cultural Competence
Brief Summary:	In 2000, Contra County Health Services undertook a self-assessment and strategic planning process in order to increase the cultural competency of the organization. Their goal was to reduce health disparities between communities in the county. The process and outcomes are described in a case study by the National Center for Cultural Competence.

During the 1990s, Contra County Health Services, the health department of Contra County, California, sought to improve its work reducing county-wide health disparities by increasing the diversity and cultural and linguistic competence of its employees. To do so, the agency undertook a self-assessment and strategic planning process to address issues of diversity within the organization.

The three-pronged program included allocating staff time for self-assessment activities and attending a three day, diversity focused conference; creating an onsite venue to creatively display the results of their self-assessment; and using staff and senior management feedback to create a strategic plan.

Health Services put out an RFP for consultants to help them implement the plan, and hired a private consultant to facilitate the self-assessment and make recommendations. Through interviews and focus groups with employees, the consultant helped Health Services determine the areas where shortcomings in intercultural skills existed. In 2003, senior management approved and released a plan for their organization. The three primary activities to implement their goals included diversity training for staff, increased access to linguistically appropriate services for clients, and activities that would create an institutional environment that values diversity.

The study of Contra County was completed as part of The National Center for Cultural Competence's 2005 Promising Practices series. Although focused on health professionals, the strategies employed translate well for emergency management organizations.



PROFILE: MULTI-LINGUAL OUTREACH

Program:	Minnesota Emergency & Community Health Outreach (ECHO)
Organization:	Association of Minnesota Counties
Keywords:	limited English, outreach
Source:	www.echominnesota.org/index.cfm
Brief Summary:	ECHO is a statewide coalition consisting of public health and emergency management agencies, social service and ethnic community organizations, and nonprofit assistance agencies (Twin Cities American Red Cross Chapter). Its objective is to provide health and safety information in multiple languages, by fax, phone, on television, and on the Internet during non-emergency and emergency times to limited English proficiency (LEP) populations. It also partners with local emergency assistance organizations during emergencies to ensure timely information distribution.

The information that ECHO provides covers both emergency and educational purposes. ECHO broadcasts regular weather, safety, and public health tips and takes on the role of disseminating warning messages in an emergency. By distributing information via multiple mediums, redundancy is built into the communication process to reach out the largest possible number of residents in the Minnesota.

One of the most notable features ECHO provides is its monthly 20-minute television program on a current health and safety issue, broadcast in multiple languages. The program includes a scripted opening and a question and answer session with topic experts or community leaders. All shows also have English captions to help viewers improve English language skills. In a local emergency, ECHO phone, fax, and web services are activated to provide information about the emergency. During a statewide emergency, ECHO will also broadcast ECHO TV to inform residents.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: PROMISING PRACTICES

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Resource Center on Advancing Emergency Preparedness for Culturally Diverse Communities
Includes a wealth of resources on helping vulnerable populations, including immigrants, prepare for
disasters.

http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/Target-Audience/Target-Audience/28/audienceId_15885/

REFERENCES

¹ Wang, T. and Yasui, L. (2008). Integrating immigrant families in emergency response, relief and rebuilding efforts. The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Baltimore, MD.

² Peguero, Anthony A. (2006). Latino disaster vulnerability: The dissemination of hurricane mitigation information among Florida's homeowners. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 28(1), 5-22.

³ *Ibid.*