



Recommendations to Support State and Local Public Health Communication Efforts to Communities with Limited English Proficiency During Infectious Disease Outbreaks

These recommendations were designed for state and local public health communicators to build capacity for more effective outreach for Spanish and Chinese speakers with limited English proficiency, or LEP, during infectious disease outbreaks. They were developed through a project conducted by researchers at the Harvard Opinion Research Program at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health from 2021 to 2024 in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [*Identifying Emergency Information Needs and Communication Channels for Reaching At-Risk Populations with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) – Adapting Findings for Local Public Health, Contract #75D30121C11808*].

This project builds on evidence generated from a previous mixed-methods study conducted by HORP researchers focused on the communication needs of the two largest groups of people with LEP in the United States, Spanish speakers and Chinese speakers, during infectious disease outbreaks. That study included over 60 in-depth interviews with staff members at local and state public health departments (LHDs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) across the country, and formed the foundation for this effort to develop systems-level communication recommendations for state and local public health agencies.

The recommendations below are organized in the frame of the lessons learned by communication staff at LHDs about activities that move their communication along a continuum of effectiveness. They are focused on enhancing and institutionalizing the processes and relationships that help create long-term support for effective communication rather than design tips for specific materials, such as color usage, wording, or formatting. Further, they are directed for the benefit of communication staff in LHDs, understanding that complementary recommendations are being made for federal communicators to facilitate the important and challenging work done by LHD staff.

Garner broader LHD support for prioritizing communication efforts for communities with LEP

- *Reach out regularly to LHD leadership on communication efforts.* Engaging leadership can help garner their endorsement for communication efforts as well as expand funding or support for foundational activities that can be overlooked, like spending time in the community to make personal connections. Describing the work that the communication team has done or would like to do with respect to communication for communities with LEP and as well as sharing developed materials – FAQ sheets, videos, presentations can be the first step in this internal advocacy. Even if there is not initial receptivity to prioritizing this work, generating awareness may facilitate opportunities for support in the future.
- *Sensitize program staff to communication teams successes and services.* Colleagues in vertical programs may not be fully aware of the work that communication staff have done or the services your team might be helpful with (e.g., translation support). Taking the time to network with colleagues and showcase your work where possible can not only facilitate the work itself, but also foster broader support across the agency for communication efforts to communities with LEP.

- *Review state and local rules, regulations and laws about language access.* Determining what is required and whether there are funds available to support the efforts is a key first step. This can allow you to showcase requirements when making the case for funds and other support, as well as ensure that the agency is compliant.
- *Review available data about the impact of the public health emergency on communities with LEP – or the broader racial/ethnic groups of which they may be a part.* Having statistics at hand to share with others can be an effective tool for justifying budget spending, advocating for additional support, and generally demonstrating the value of your efforts when the communities you serve are at special risk.
- *Make connections with elected officials who represent communities you aim to serve.* . In addition to providing input about the community (e.g., health issues they currently face; challenges they face in accessing your resources), elected officials may know of other means to draw attention to the work you are doing, or they may advocate directly for additional support inside and outside the agency.
- *Develop internal policies and protocols that codify these actions.* Creating policy about relevant practices, like hiring protocols, establishes more permanent practices that can have longer impact and serves as key references in the next outbreak.

Support effective staffing

- *Hire bilingual and bi-cultural staff from the communities you serve, when feasible.* Staff from the community who are knowledgeable about community need, culture and experience alongside technical communication skills can provide intense benefits to the communication efforts. Creating language requirements for relevant positions may be a way to foster a more diverse staff to start.
- *Support staff who have language skills.* Having staff with language skills can support effective communication by facilitating translation, interpretation, and bilingual event staffing, for example, but these staff must have opportunities to develop and utilize their language skills and receive compensation and recognition for this work. Organizing current staff with language skills via a standing workgroup or committee can be an effective means of providing this support, as can integrating formal requirements for language skills when hiring bilingual staff or as a part of compensation plans for work that utilizes those skills.
- *Bring on community workers.* Community workers may staff phone lines, support vaccination clinics, meet one-on-one with community members, or other essential tasks. While it may not be feasible to employ a largescale community workforce initially, even starting small with a few volunteers from the community can provide your team with not only person-hours, but also important connections to the community for disseminating information and learning about needs and reactions. Training and supporting community workers can help foster their technical skills in communications development, writing, translating and speaking, which provides benefits for the community workers and ultimately enhances the LHD's capacity.
- *Spend time in the community.* Spending time with community members and community leaders can be critical not only to learning about the community but also to demonstrating the commitment to serve. Attending community events and familiarizing yourself with neighborhoods can reap intense rewards in developing effective outreach efforts.
- *Seek out communication training when you can.* Communication staff benefit from both crisis communication training that focuses on organizational response and from emergency risk

communication training that focuses specifically on motivating protective behaviors. Seeking out these foundational skills and keeping up to date can provide needed skills to your team and motivate team members. Finding training that focuses explicitly on communities with LEP is particularly advantageous.

- *Hire a firm specialized in serving communities with LEP.* While this strategy is not feasible for many agencies, it can be an effective strategy for larger agencies or when emergency funds are available. Having a firm with expertise about communities with LEP can help ensure that campaigns are developed with the needs, culture, and experience of relevant communities and thus help enhance connections and trust while avoiding cultural miscues.

Develop and sustain relationships with community-based organizations

- *Cast a wide net of possible community-based organizations (CBOs).* As a first and on-going practice, it may be helpful to actively seek out CBOs working with relevant communities. Learning about their work and their skills or staff can be a useful foundation before there is an emergency.
- *Organize an internal inventory.* Documenting and tracking existing work with individual CBOs, as well as projects with CBOs across other departments within your agency where possible, is worth the effort. Not only does this provide a go-to list for reaching out to CBOs in an emergency, it also helps make clear existing relationships and avoid burdening CBOs with multiple requests from different parts of the agency.
- *Create clear opportunities for participation.* The structure of participation in communication efforts for CBOs may vary from individual feedback on communication strategies or materials, to formalized committees, working groups, or other governance structures. While the type most effective and feasible varies, it can be important to make expectations and operating principles clear as you begin to formalize CBO participation.
- *Demonstrate personal and organizational commitment.* There are multiple ways to demonstrate commitment to the relationship, but, often, first steps include listening to the CBO's agenda and attending their events as a means of 'giving before asking for something'. Moreover, being personally willing to talk and answer questions can mean the difference between whether CBOs wish to partner or not. As the CBO then participates in LHD activities, it becomes important to signal ongoing organizational commitment, with approaches like bringing senior staff to meetings.
- *Work truly collaboratively.* Highlighting the shared goal of serving a particular community, while being flexible about the specific avenues for reaching them, can bring about truly collaborative work with CBOs. Actively inviting their participation and expressing respect for their ideas at the development stage is important. Further, ensuring that projects are led to some degree by the CBOs engenders trust between the CBO and the LHD – and may be especially effective in reaching community members.
- *Provide technical assistance and training.* Discussing their technical needs with CBOs, like grant-writing skills for example, can help make clear where the LHD can provide technical assistance that enhances CBOs' capacity as partners and creates a more valued relationship with the LHD. As an added bonus, offering such training can provide opportunities to learn more about the CBOs' efforts and their communities as LHDs observe or facilitate the sessions.
- *Provide funding and funding opportunities.* It almost goes without saying, but providing funding can allow participants the staff time and resources needed to participate in LHD activities. If

providing funds is not possible, helping the CBO identify alternative sources (or develop grant-writing skills, for example, as mentioned above) can be a secondary approach.

- *Create and sustain reciprocal relationships before the emergency.* Supporting potential CBO partners ahead of an emergency facilitates necessary collaboration in the crisis not only because the LHD is more familiar with the organization, but also because the organization may be more trusting of the LHD and willing to work together during an emergency.

Support relationships with other public health agencies

- *Attend meetings and hold meetings.* Although there are not always meetings focused on communication for LEP communities specifically, attending any meetings with other public health agencies about communication during an emergency can provide information that is the basis for more targeted communication – or can foster the relationships needed to do that. In turn, sharing the information and resources your organization has with others can be welcome or create the environment to grow a stronger relationship.
- *Find a point person.* In an emergency situation, getting clarity on technical details or helping to find available materials is often an urgent task that is greatly facilitated by a personal connection. Making a personal connection at another agency, even before the emergency, and sustaining that personal, individual relationship can be a critical piece of building the larger organizational relationships needed during emergencies.
- *Be willing to make a call.* Other public health agencies are willing to share experience and resources. Even in the absence of a long-term relationship, making a call to ask for advice or materials (e.g., copies of policies or translated materials) can be a straightforward and effective way to get critical support. Reviewing other agencies' websites and major recent efforts can help inform who best to reach out to.
- *Join a national organization.* National organizations that serve and connect LHD staff involved in communication specifically as well as in other areas can be great resources for exchanging information, sharing materials and other resources, and building collaborations. While finding membership fees can be challenging for budgets, the investment can create efficiencies that pay dividends in the longer run.

Create and sustain relationships with government agencies outside public health

- *Find a mechanism to meet regularly.* Because agencies outside public health may not have the same schedule of likely meetings or calendar events, it is especially important to find a way to meet together regularly. It can be as simple as creating a meeting where both agencies share what they are working on with respect to the relevant communities with LEP.
- *Identify a reason for the other government agency to work with the LHD.* Consider what benefits your team might offer – such as clear information early on, a resonant voice with some communities, or sharable materials. In addition, ask the other agency where yours can be most helpful. Meeting that particular need may increase the likelihood of regular meetings and support from the other agency in emergencies. Creating financial bonds – e.g., through writing a grant together – can provide opportunities to strengthen this relationship.

Enhance relationships with local media

- *Identify local media that connects with communities with LEP.* As a first step, doing a more formal scan of available media sources for communities with LEP – including those that are very small, like neighborhood printed newspapers/newsletters or semi-regular radio shows – can help you identify media organizations that you want to reach to. Including notes about audience reach of each organization and what topics they covered in the past can be helpful in refining your media strategy as the emergency unfolds. Ensure the most relevant ones are on your distribution list; even when news is not specifically for that community, sharing information regularly can help ensure you are a reliable source.
- *Find a point of contact.* At many smaller media outlets, the reporter or talk show host is the same person who picks up the phone, so reaching out to make a direct connection with someone who develops the content is possible and recommended. Identifying that person before the emergency so you can connect quickly when needed is a very useful starting point. Being available to answer their questions, in turn, is an important element in creating a trusted relationship.
- *Identify bilingual spokespeople.* Even if it is not possible to maintain a full roster of agency spokespeople for multiple languages, having some staff or community representatives readily available can be helpful in communicating your message effectively and can result in better media coverage.
- *Make it easier for media outlet staff.* Because they are often small, local media outlets may have fewer resources to translate materials or have time to get quotes. Ensuring press releases and other materials you send them are nearly ready for distribution will make it more likely that they use them.
- *Buy paid spots.* Helping to sustain their budgets with media buys is helpful in terms of building a relationship, ensuring dissemination, and sustaining the infrastructure of media outlets, particularly the smaller ones.

Help ensure administrative readiness

- *Considering extending existing contracts.* When looking to get work done in tight timelines, it can be easier to extend or expand contracts rather than create new ones. So, asking existing partners and contractors for a description of the range of services they provide may be useful to understand what resources you may have the easiest access to. The CBO that disseminates materials may also be able to do translation, and the organization that helps build your website may also be able to manage your social media, for example.
- *Utilize emergency powers.* Get clarity on what emergency powers may enable you to do contractually in terms of reduced paperwork for getting services to support communities with LEP.
- *Review shared contracts.* Sometimes there are services available through contracts shared across agencies or organizations. These may include applicable technical supports for communication focused on communities with LEP, like translation services, for example. Program staff may not know about such contracts, so it is worth investigating the possibilities with an administrator in your agency.
- *Reduce contractual burdens for partners.* Working with administrative and finance teams to streamline contractual requirements and to allow for features like pre-paid finance mechanisms, for example, can be of great help in ensuring that smaller organizations serving communities with LEP are able to work with the agency easily in an emergency.