

Recommendations for Sonoma County Disaster Planning proposed by the Spanish-speaking Community

The firestorms that devastated Sonoma County did not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens, nor between renters and owners. All of us who live in the county were affected by these fires, but we have unequal access to fire relief. The Latino community is still suffering now, weeks after the fires. We have permanently lost employment in businesses and homes that burned down. We have lost our housing and can't afford any of the limited housing available. Now we have debt because we had to ask for loans to cover expenses during and after the fires. We propose these recommendations to ensure more equality in distributing aid to county residents after any future disasters, so our whole community can recover fully.

Latino people represent 24.9% of the residents of Sonoma County¹, yet Spanish-speaking and undocumented people were ignored, endangered, and disrespected during the Sonoma County firestorms in October 2017. Planning for future natural disasters must remedy these exclusions and this treatment, and include suggestions and recommendations from Spanish-speaking people affected by the fires. The following proposals are the result of discussions with community members and are fully supported by the organizations signing this document.

Fire Alert System:

Like other Sonoma County residents, Spanish-speaking people did not receive alerts to evacuate before the fire. Police who alerted people about fire danger did not speak Spanish, leaving Spanish-speaking people confused, afraid, and uninformed. The County's emergency information line was operating only in English.

Recommendations:

- 1) All cellphones will be included in any future alert system, in addition to landlines.
- 2) All alerts will be multi-lingual, including information in both English and Spanish as well as other languages spoken in the county, including indigenous languages like Mixteco, Triqui, Chatino. Fire alerts and information should be separate from routine police information on Nixle.
- 3) Spanish-speaking police officers will be assigned when in-person alerts are necessary, to ensure that Spanish-speaking people have clear information.
- 4) Some kind of universal alert system will be implemented, possibly a siren or other auditory alert. An educational campaign at all schools and worksites will accompany implementation, along with information about the location of all emergency shelters, clearly stating that any person is welcome at the shelters, regardless of immigration status.

5) The County's emergency information line will be accessible in all languages spoken in the County.

At the Local Assistance Centers:

Spanish-speaking people were treated rudely and disrespectfully in many of the County's local assistance centers. Many people expressed that the assistance centers focused on white people and ignored the needs of people of color. Institutional racism was rampant; for example, Spanish-speaking volunteers were actually turned away and discouraged from volunteering their help. Officials selectively searched boxes of donations offered by Latino people, but did not search boxes brought by white people.

The police and military presence made people felt unwelcome and afraid; assurances of safety and non-collaboration with ICE were made only in English. Very few translators were available, and most of the interpreters were volunteers. The County did not provide formal translators who may have been better able to meet peoples' needs for specific technical information. The food that was served at many of the centers was not nutritious, comforting, or culturally appropriate for Spanish-speaking people. Medical personnel were not assigned to assure that medical services were available at each shelter; those assigned did not generally speak Spanish, making medical care unavailable to the Latino community.

Recommendations:

- 1) Official, trained translators will be present at all local assistance centers, paid by the County. They will wear vests or T-shirts and name tags that clearly designate which languages they speak, so they can be easily identified by people needing help.
- 2) As people wait for assistance, someone will specifically welcome them and clearly inform them of their rights: that the County is not collaborating with ICE, that information provided while registering for assistance will not be shared with ICE, that police officers and military personnel are only present to provide assistance.
- 3) No one will ask about immigration status; signs will be posted stating that no one will ask about country of birth.
- 4) Center volunteer coordinators will encourage Spanish-speaking volunteers, ensuring that particular skills, training, and licensing are recognized and valued.
- 5) Food native to Spanish-speaking communities will be included in meals provided at the centers, possibly by utilizing volunteer cooks.
- 6) Assignment of medical personnel and medical translators to assistance centers will be integral to any future disaster plan, preferably including medical personnel who speak Spanish.
- 7) Red Cross personnel were particularly abusive and disrespectful, mistreating Spanish-speaking people. The Red Cross will receive a formal complaint from Sonoma County,

with a recommendation for its staff members to receive additional community-based training.

Media:

Spanish-speaking people had tremendous difficulty in accessing information about the fire. For the first 5 days of the fire, Sheriff Giordano's press conferences were only in English, with some interpretation for deaf people. Spanish-language radio coverage was better, with Éxito and KBBF providing regular fire updates.

Recommendations:

- 1) All official communications from Sonoma County and other local jurisdictions will be made in both Spanish and English, with translation into other languages available. This includes all press conferences as well as any emergency communications or alerts.
- 2) County personnel will make a pro-active effort to involve all media outlets in disseminating information about the disaster, creating and updating an ongoing list of media outlets and contact information in case of disaster.

During the Recovery:

Price-Gouging: People in the Latino community experienced price gouging in many arenas – prices went up not only on hotel rooms, but also on bottled water and smoke protection masks. Extreme increases in rent are widespread now, as are increases in utility expenses and other essential services. Spanish-speaking people have been particularly victimized by price-gouging because of language difficulties.

Unequal Access to Fire Relief: Community members have received little information in Spanish about services and aid available for them, so they have been unable to access much relief and are still suffering from the devastation of the fires. Insurance companies have provided only confusing information, with no Spanish-language counseling or assistance. Some hospitals only provided forms in English, and their receptionists spoke only English, which was a public health and safety risk for our whole community. More forms of aid are required, including financial support for replacing lost identification.

Undocumented families received very little financial support, despite great need – they were seriously affected financially because the fires coincided with the end of the grape harvest and the end of work for the season. Large numbers of undocumented community members lost work during the fires; many lost their jobs permanently. Too many Spanish-speaking community members were not aware of the shelters available and stayed in hotels, depleting their savings. Many others traveled to farther counties to stay with families or friends, taking on additional expenses for food, gas, and other necessities. People also stayed in their cars with extreme cold or camped out at campsites with limited financial resources.

Post-Fire Information meetings: Translation into Spanish has been only intermittently and randomly available. County meetings provided translation for all via headphones, but other fire information meetings provided no translation.

Post-Fire Trainings: Employment-related trainings have been primarily available in English, thus excluding many people unemployed directly because of the fires.

Debris Cleanup Safety: Workers in debris cleanup areas have not been properly outfitted with safety equipment that covers their eyes, nose, and mouth completely. Many companies are providing inadequate equipment that will cover eyes-only or nose/mouth only.

Recommendations:

Price-Gouging: 1) The County should actively solicit and investigate price-gouging complaints from renters and for all consumer services. Existing laws against price-gouging will be aggressively enforced, and tougher legislation will be adopted where legislative or regulative weaknesses exist.

Unequal Access to Fire Relief: 1) Information about services available to Spanish-speaking and undocumented people will be widely available, in all languages spoken in the county. County staff will be proactive in developing effective and broad distribution methods for information about where people can get fire relief and direct aid. Ongoing educational efforts will assure that the community is informed about emergency shelter locations.

2) Eligibility for aid will be determined by county and state residency, without regard to U.S. citizenship. This eligibility standard will be clearly and widely publicized in Spanish and English so Latino people know they can receive assistance, including FEMA assistance available to them through their citizen children.

3) Sonoma County will advocate legislatively for changes to U.S. law to allow disaster aid eligibility to be determined by the citizenship of anyone in the family, including minor children.

4) Guidelines for aid eligibility will be simplified and clarified, and translated into Spanish and languages spoken in the county. Fire relief and assistance counselors will be available at the Local Assistance Centers and in county offices on an ongoing basis. Insurance companies will be legally required to provide translation and language-appropriate services to clarify insurance benefits.

5) County staff will proactively develop a network of agencies where people can access services in Spanish, particularly emphasizing services available to undocumented families. Updated and current information about each agency will be available, including languages spoken, eligibility guidelines, and services provided. Development of this network and improving communications between agencies is urgent; if county staff

cannot fulfill this mandate, community organizations will be contracted to create an effective network.

6) Churches and religious organizations can be more effectively integrated into a county-wide relief effort; county staff should prioritize outreach to these organizations to involve them in a community relief network.

7) A county priority should be to train bi-lingual high school and college students, who were and will be instrumental in providing help at the centers.

Post-Fire Information Meetings: 1) County disaster planning and regulations will require Spanish-language translation for all meetings conducted by companies and professional services organizing fire relief.

Post-Fire Trainings: 1) Any company contracting to provide post-fire debris cleanup or construction services, or receiving permits from the County, must provide skills and safety trainings in Spanish.

Debris Cleanup Safety: 1) All companies contracting to provide post-fire debris cleanup or construction services, or receiving permits from the County, must provide full-face eyes, nose, and mouth protection for all workers. Worksites will be inspected for compliance by county workplace safety enforcement, or state OSHA inspectors.

2) Safety training should be available to all workers in Spanish.

Planning for the Future:

The Spanish-speaking and immigrant community have not been consulted or involved in any meaningful way in planning for future responses to natural disasters. Their needs and concerns will not be addressed by any planning process that does not include them.

Recommendations:

1) Representatives of the immigrant and Spanish-speaking community will be included in planning future disaster response in the County.

2) Community organizations serving Spanish-speaking people will review any draft disaster plans, in order to add suggestions and improve the plan.

Recommendations created and endorsed by:

Immigrant Defense Task Force of North Bay Organizing Project

Comité VIDA

MEChA of Santa Rosa Junior College

Graton Day Labor Center

La Luz Center

Corazón Healdsburg

Unidos sin Fronteras

Undocufund

Movimiento Cultural de la Unión Indígena

Los Cien of Sonoma County

H-PEACE (Health Professionals for Equality and Community Empowerment)

Legal Aid of Sonoma County

North Bay Rapid Response Network

Unitarian Universalist Church

Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

¹ Portrait of Sonoma County, 2014. http://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/05141006/English_Complete_POSC.pdf