Inclusive Emergency Alerts: Recommendations for Language and Disability Access

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Making Mitigation Work Webinar March 12, 2024

Project Report
ENGLISH

Project Report
SPANISH

HB23-1237: Inclusive Language in Emergency Situations

Objectives

1. Assess the state of emergency communications in Colorado and identify gaps in current systems as they relate to access and inclusion;

2. Identify best practices for developing and distributing inclusive emergency alerts;

3. Provide actionable recommendations to improve emergency communications systems that serve everyone, particularly those with limited-English proficiency (LEP) and people with disabilities.

Elizabeth Velasco
Representative, District 57

Perry Will
Senator, District 5

Tony Exum
Senator, District 11

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Motivation

Spanish translations of emergency alerts in Garfield County have room to improve

Aspen Public Radio | By Halle Zander
Published October 25, 2022 at 11:23 PM MDT

HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

'This is an emergency alert,' but for English speakers only

Despite the Bay Area's vast diversity and the frequency of natural disasters, Alameda and Solano counties only send out alerts in English, leaving more than 1 in 10 residents at risk of missing possibly life-saving information.

by **Jasmine Aguilera**
Oct. 25, 2023, 4:59 p.m.

'They were forgotten': For people with disabilities, few good options during disaster

Hurricane Ida's extended power outage exposed cracks in Louisiana's special needs response

BY EMILY WOODRUFF | Staff writer   Sep 20, 2021 Updated Sep 20, 2021   7 min to read
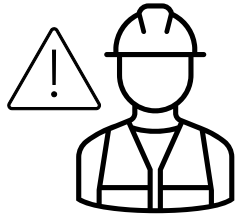
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Colorado is Diverse

- More than **900,000** Coloradans speak a non-English language at home and over **250,000** have Limited English Proficiency.

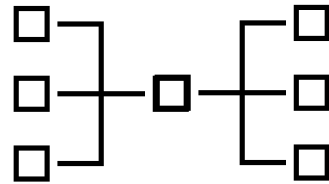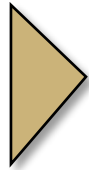- More than **500,000** Coloradans have a visual or an auditory disability.
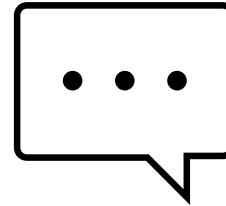
The Alerting Process

Alert Triggered

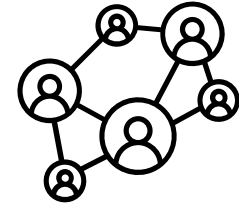A threat causes an **alerting authority** to determine the need to send an alert

Alert System Selected

A range of **alert systems** determine the channels and message types that are used

Message Developed

Authorities craft **the message** to be sent

Message Sent

That message is dispatched to public audiences through various **channels**

In Colorado, each step depends on the jurisdiction

Methods

Review of Literature

62 Documents Reviewed

Statewide Survey

222 Responses From 57 Counties

Partners Meetings

18 Meetings with 36 people

Public Comment Sessions

English | Spanish | ASL

93 attendees and 48 written comments

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Report Findings

1. Colorado has a patchwork of alerting systems.

2. Authorities rely heavily on opt-in systems with low rates of uptake.

3. Resource constraints hinder inclusive alerts.

4. Guidance, funding, and personnel are needed to ensure inclusive alerts.

5. Technical limitations are significant.
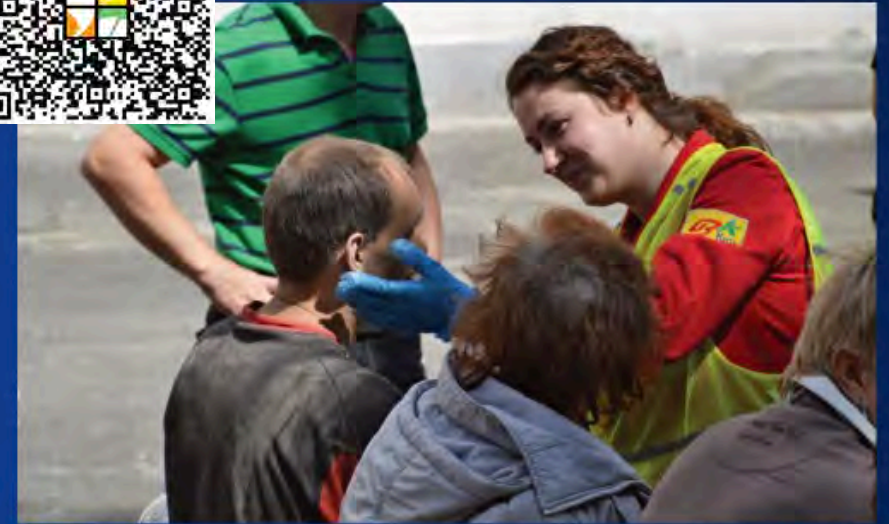
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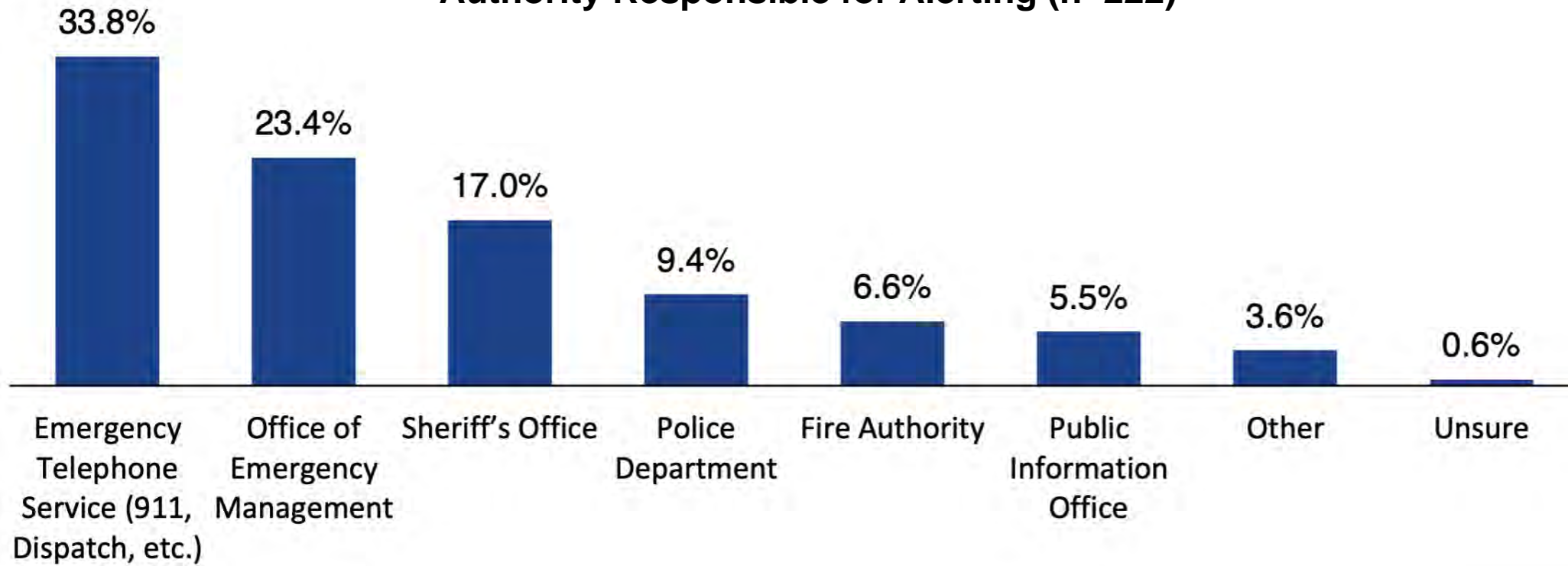
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January 2024

https://hazards.colorado.edu/uploads/freeform/final-report-12-8-24-eng.pdf

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Finding 1: Colorado's alert systems and processes are a patchwork that, while flexible, makes it challenging to provide consistent and accessible emergency alerts. Community resources largely determine the level of access that can be provided. As a result, capabilities vary.

Authority Responsible for Alerting (n=222)

Authority	Percentage
Emergency Telephone Service (911, Dispatch, etc.)	33.8%
Office of Emergency Management	23.4%
Sheriff's Office	17.0%
Police Department	9.4%
Fire Authority	6.6%
Public Information Office	5.5%
Other	3.6%
Unsure	0.6%

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Finding 1 Cont'd: Colorado's alert systems and processes are a patchwork that, while flexible, makes it challenging to provide consistent and accessible emergency alerts. Community resources largely determine the level of access that can be provided. As a result, capabilities vary.
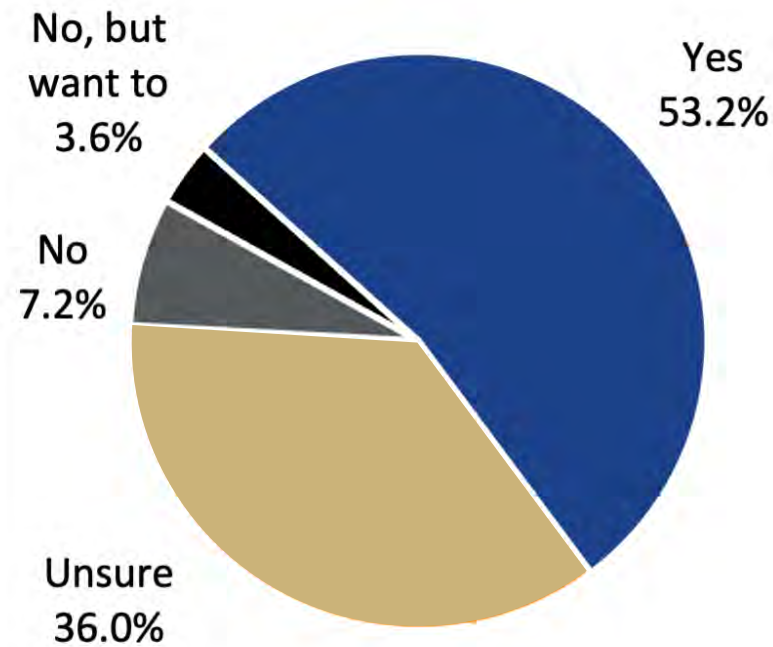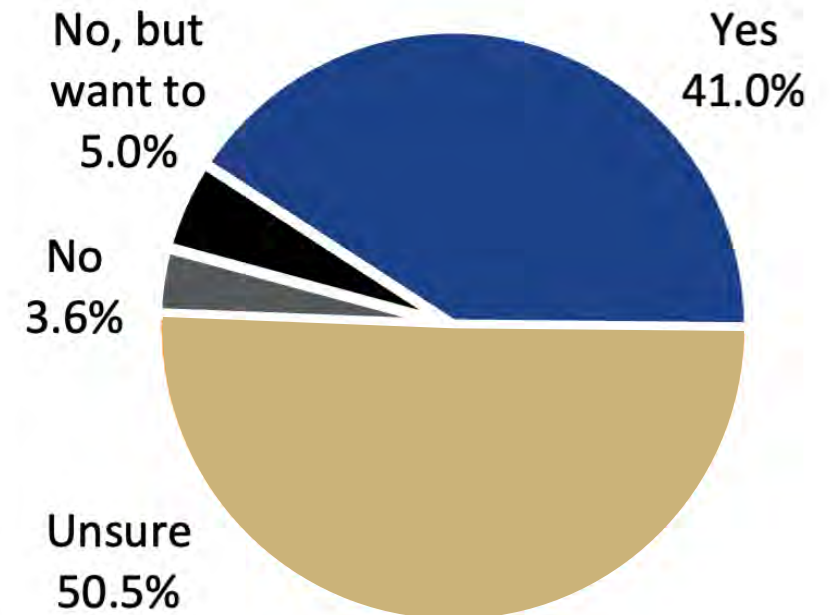
Does your alert system have the capability to send multilingual alerts? (n=222)

No, but want to 3.6%
Yes 53.2%
No 7.2%
Unsure 36.0%

Does your alert system have the capability to send alerts to people with disabilities? (n=222)

No, but want to 5.0%
Yes 41.0%
No 3.6%
Unsure 50.5%

Finding 2: Colorado relies heavily on opt-in emergency alert systems but most localities report opt-in rates below 40%. These systems create barriers for everyone, but especially those who don't speak English or who have disabilities.

Opt-In Rates (n= 86)
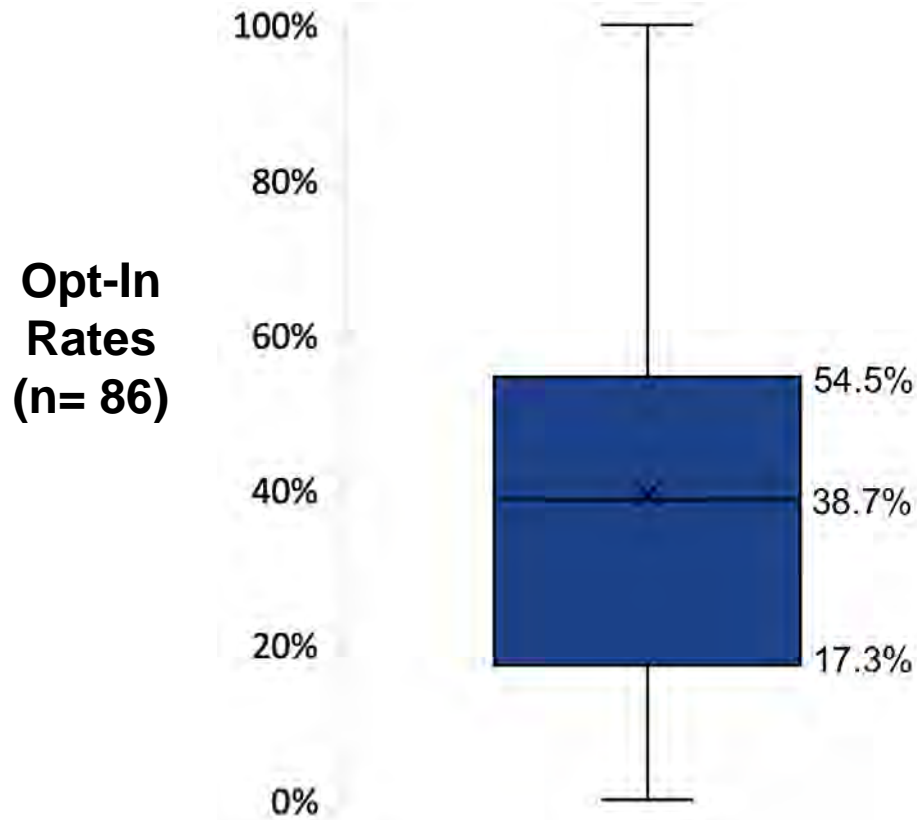
> " The success of these systems in an emergency relies on the community actively signing up for alerts.
>
> -Delta County Survey Respondent "

Finding 3: Given resource constraints, alerting authorities turn to resources that are available to provide alerts in other languages, but they may not align with best practices.
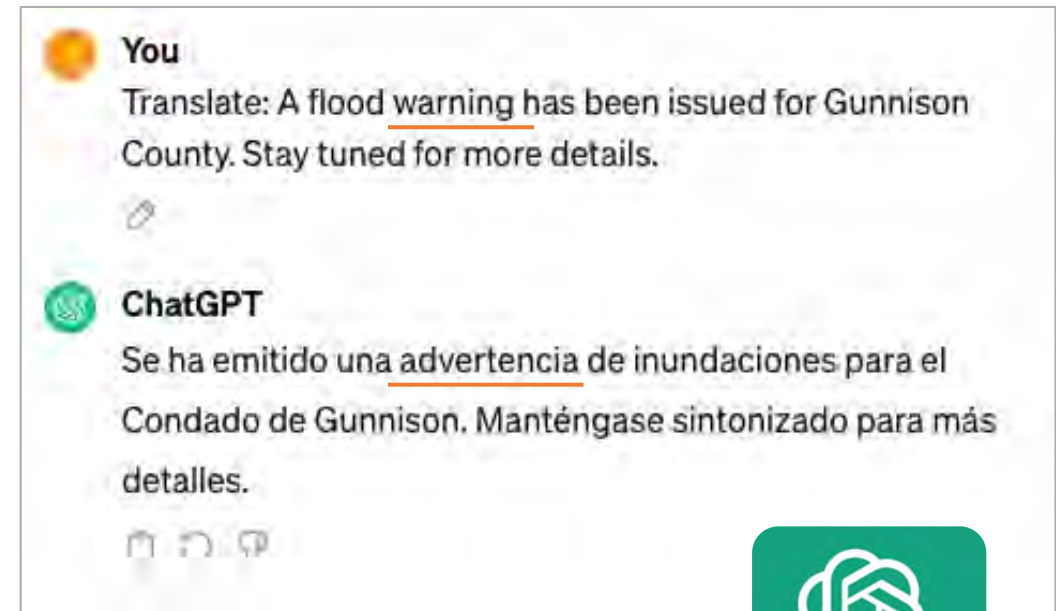
> ...we usually resort to online translation services, but they are rarely correct.
>
> It's a Catch-22 when we are expected to get warnings out as quickly as possible in every language possible but doing so isn't possible in a timely manner.
>
> -San Miguel County Survey Respondent

You
Translate: A flood warning has been issued for Gunnison County. Stay tuned for more details.

ChatGPT
Se ha emitido una advertencia de inundaciones para el Condado de Gunnison. Manténgase sintonizado para más detalles.

Finding 4: Many emergency response personnel are interested in incorporating systems and practices that would make alerts more inclusive, but need more guidance, funding, and personnel to adequately do so

Top Resource Needs Identified (n= 222)
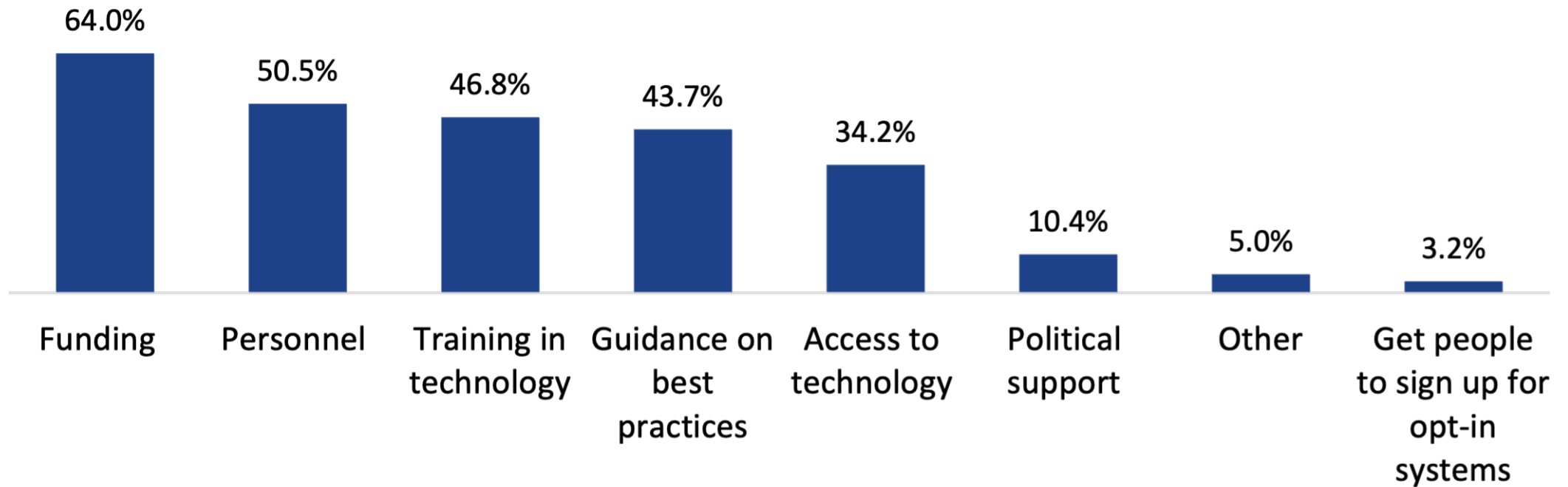
Finding 4, Cont.: Many emergency response personnel are interested in incorporating systems and practices that would make alerts more inclusive, but need more guidance, funding, and personnel to adequately do so

> "
> We simply do not have the resources (both financial and people) to deploy all of these systems.
>
> -Gunnison County Survey Respondent
> "

> "
> Everything has a cost, and we cannot afford to implement [inclusive alerting] to the degree that it needs. Our money goes to keeping the doors open.
>
> -Public Information Officer
> "

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Finding 5: Technical and practical limitations of emergency alerts hinder most people and compound the challenges faced by those with disabilities and populations with LEP.

- Limited language options

- Delays in technology upgrades

- Pushback from private industry

- Enforcement of Federal Communications Commission is lacking

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Findings Summary

The status quo for emergency alerts creates unequal access to lifesaving information for populations with LEP and disabilities.

However, changes can be made to improve these systems to be more inclusive.
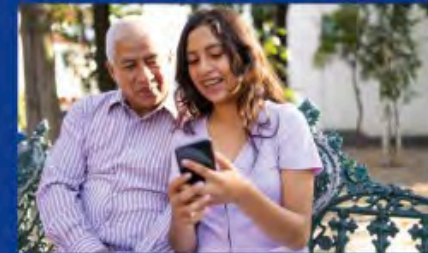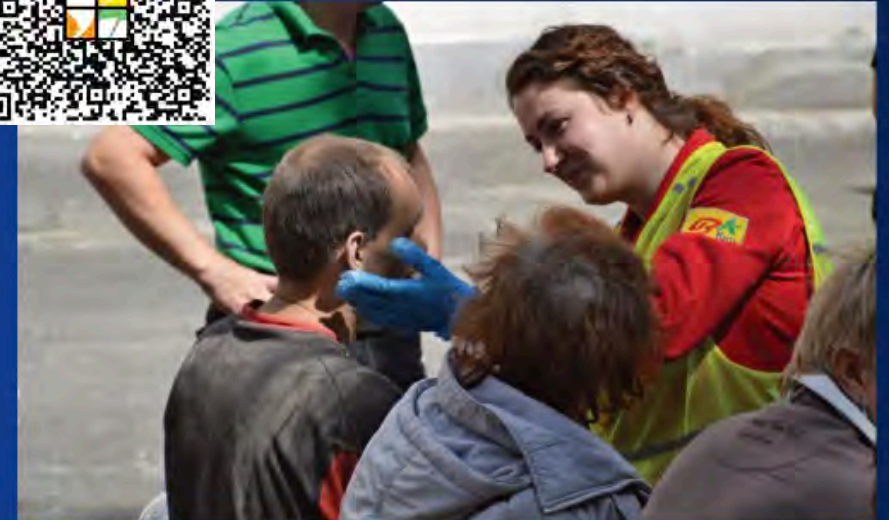
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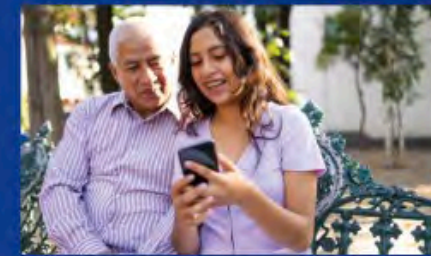
Recommendations

People
- Hire state-level language access personnel
- Develop formal relationships with populations with LEP and disabilities

Practices
- Adopt a centralized alerting system and standardize practices
- Create and distribute language and disability access resources

Funding
- Support research on inclusive practices
- Secure funding to support inclusive alerts

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Recommendations: People

Hire state-level language access personnel

- Can help standardize alerting practices at State level

- Can develop shared guidance

- Can be part of the existing access and functional needs office within Office of Emergency Management

Recommendations: People

Develop formal relationships with LEP populations and those with disabilities

- Communities have the lived experience necessary to provide guidance and need a seat at the table

- Formal agreements with community-based organizations (e.g., MOUs) need to be developed before, during, and after disaster to improve operations

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Recommendations: Practices

Adopt a centralized alerting system and standardize practices

- Reduces local cost burden
  - Rural and urban jurisdictions
- Promotes consistency that builds trust
- Expands resource sharing opportunities
- Other states have found success
  - Oregon and Florida

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Recommendations: Practices

Create and distribute language and disability access resources

- Emergency response officials want guidance

- Regular training on language and disability access will strengthen community connections and response plans

- Shared resources can help standardize access

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Recommendations: Funding

Unfunded mandates are unpopular and unlikely to address key issues.

- Funding is needed to:
  - Support personnel
  - Develop and implement novel practices
  - Close the gap on data needs
- Grant writing assistance may be needed.
- There may be opportunities to reallocate existing funds to advance inclusive alerting.

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Recommendations: Funding

Support research to fill information gaps to support inclusive alerts

- More research and data are needed to offer further evidence-based recommendations.

- <u>We don't know</u>:

  - Community awareness of opt-in systems

  - How people are responding to alerts

  - Best practices for developing working agreements

  - What the specific funding needs are

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Next Steps

We have more to do!

The Natural Hazards Center received a small grant ($10,000) from CU Boulder to move this work forward and are looking into additional funding avenues to expand it.

Other funding opportunities...

- National Science Foundation (Research)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (Practice)

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Next Steps

Get involved!

Opportunity to provide comments on recent multilingual alert templates developed by the Federal Communication Commission!

https://www.fcc.gov/multilingual-wireless-emergency-alerts

Comments Due: April 9

PUBLIC NOTICE

Federal Communications Commission
Street, NE
gton, DC 20554

News Media Information 202 / 418-0500
Internet: http://www.fcc.gov
TTY: 1-888-835-5322

DA 24-137

Released: February 15, 2024

PUBLIC SAFETY AND HOMELAND SECURITY BUREAU SEEKS COMMENT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF MULTILINGUAL WIRELESS EMERGENCY ALERTS

PS Docket Nos. 15-91 and 15-94

Comment Date: (30 days after publication in the Federal Register)
Reply Comment Date: (60 days after publication in the Federal Register)

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https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-24-137A1.pdf

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Throughout this study,
it was clear that emergency
officials, alert providers, and
community representatives
share a united vision
to provide lifesaving
emergency information
to those who need it.

Acknowledgements

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Representative Velasco and Team, Garry Briese (Fire), Jennifer Kirkland (9-1-1), Micki Trost, Mike Willis, Sadie Martinez (OEM), Shirl Garcia, Natural Hazards Center Team, Specifically Lori Peek, Jolie Breeden, Jennifer Tobin, and Jeffrey Gunderson.

Thank you to the Colorado State Legislature for providing funding to do this important work.

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THANK YOU

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