

ASTSWMO 2023 Removal and Emergency Response Workshop

June 13-14, 2023, Hilton Double Tree, Crystal City, VA

Breaking Down the Language Barriers to Bring About Responsive Emergency Response and Removal Actions¹

Imagine a world in which a language barrier results in a complete loss of understanding and miscommunication between the human race.

Imagine a situation where our ability to understand a foreign language and communicate effectively dictates a life-or-death outcome.

Picture this:

English: 911. What's your emergency?

Spanish: Venga rapido! Auxilio! Ayudeme! Por favor! Nuestra casa se esta quemando y mi hija esta atrapada en el ático de nuestro hogar! El humo no me deja rescatarla y solo puedo oír sus gritos!

English: Do you speak English?

Spanish: Ingles? No! Mi hija está atrapada! Por favor, ayúdenla! Yo vivo en la calle Principal número 123. Por favor! Vengan a salvarla!

English: I am not getting an address. Are you using a cell phone? What is your address? Humm.. Addresso? I need addresso!

Spanish: Que es addresso? No entiendo! Ayudeme!

English: I don't understand. Speak English. Is there someone there who speaks English. Can someone help me here? Does anyone near you speak English? I don't understand what you're saying!

Spanish: Auxilio! Solo oigo los gritos de mi hija y el humo está saliendo por todos lados! Venga pronto, por favor!

English: I'm sorry. No Spanish. Only English. I'm sorry! I don't know what to do! Please call back when someone speaks English.

Thankfully, as federal or state emergency responders or on-scene coordinators of removal actions, we typically do not serve as first responders, responsible for the initial line of defense in a chaotic scenario like this one. Our role is to wait until the situation is stabilized before our short- or longer-term involvement begins.

¹ Reference: <https://www.lep.gov/video/breaking-down-barriers-translating-limited-english-proficiency-policy-practice>

But what this scenario intends to show is the life-threatening challenges that many emergency dispatchers and first response teams struggle with, compounded by a significant language divide, while attempting to service non-English language speakers, many residing in environmental justice communities.

This week ASTSWMO and its partners, bring you a workshop like no other; designed to open your eyes to the many challenges that first responders and on-scene coordinators alike could experience while engaging with non-English or limited-English language speaking members of the public.

This week, you will learn about real cases showcasing proactive environmental justice considerations during removal actions, the use of EJ tools to assist ER responders, lessons learned from the Flint, Michigan drinking water crisis, and many more stories that aim to position us as better first responders and on-scene coordinators working in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural world.

Whether it's learning at least a few words or sentences deemed essential to initiate meaningful dialogue, using signs or non-verbal language or queues to gain trust, or availing ourselves to interpreters through the use of a language bank or language applications, we are called to bridge the language gap in this new age of emergency response delivery.

According to the American Census Service, 21.5% of our population speaks a language other than English, with the Hispanic population as the largest minority group in the United States. Approximately more than 43 languages other than English have been documented as spoken in the United States of America as of 2020.

This is what language isolation feels like.

It's uncomfortable.

It's frightening.

It's a lonely place to be.

Today and tomorrow, we will be sharing case studies and "lessons learned" that aim to empower and inspire us in our journey to become the very best responders and on-scene coordinators we can possibly be.

Open your mind to the possibility of a "new response world" where, with the help of language translation and other tools, we can aspire to better serve and more fully protect those who depend on us.

Imagine a world in which a language barrier no longer exists, and we can finally claim *environmental justice for all*.

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