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Filling the Gaps: Inequitable Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Policies Serving Immigrant and Refugee Communities

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Filling the Gaps: Inequitable Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Policies Serving Immigrant and Refugee Communities

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Introduction

For 8 weeks over the summer of 2016, I had the opportunity to travel to Seattle, Washington and intern at OneAmerica, Washington State's largest immigrant and refugee advocacy organization. As the policy intern, I was charged with researching how natural disasters had been impacting low-English proficient (LEP) immigrants and refugees in rural Eastern and Central Washington. I researched how previous natural disasters had impacted diverse communities across the United States, finding several trends of discrimination against immigrants before natural disasters that led to worse outcomes for their communities, as well as consistent discrimination and human rights abuses during the recovery process. I obtained anecdotes of individuals' experiences with natural disasters through informal phone interviews, all either direct or secondhand accounts. I then wrote a policy recommendation to help guide OneAmerica's advocacy efforts. The following paper outlines the problems that I identified and offers practical suggestions for policy changes that can occur at the local, state and federal levels to build community resilience against natural disasters and help all residents recover.

Qualitative Findings

Various reports have revealed that Spanish-speaking farmworkers in Eastern and Central Washington State suffered disproportionately from wildfires in 2014 and 2015 and that their needs have unjustly been denied sufficient consideration by policymakers. At least 50 migrant workers at King Blossom Orchard in Brewster, for instance, never received evacuation notices from authorities during a massive wildfire in July 2014. They managed to escape before all of their housing was burned down, but only because their employer thought to send someone to

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wake them up.¹ The one Spanish radio station that accesses this area never received the emergency information, and thus was unable to inform its listeners. Workers at other farms were left stranded with no transportation and told to water all the fields while their employer fled. Other workers were seen continuing to work in the field as fires raged on in the distance, without proper masks to protect their health. It is evident that migrant workers did not receive sufficient emergency warnings in an understandable language, nor did they receive necessary transportation assistance.²

Furthermore, they were not adequately assisted during the aftermath of the wildfires, hindering recovery for entire communities. Many immigrants in Washington come from Mexico, Guatemala, and other areas of Latin America; they are both linguistically and geographically challenged, unfamiliar with this territory and its dominant language. Many have also never faced the natural disasters that are common to this region. Indicative of their lack of access to disaster preparedness materials and increased exposure to less-resilient infrastructure, many immigrants died from carbon monoxide poisoning after windstorms in 2006, after bringing generators or barbecue grills into their homes when they lost electricity.³

Translating and effectively disseminating preparedness materials is only one major gap in services, however. Some entities made delayed efforts to translate information into Spanish after the 2015 wildfires; Okanogan County created a Spanish Facebook page and Chelan County began posting in Spanish on their regular page. Although it was not available until the wildfires were well underway, the information was accurately translated and understandable. On the other hand, the Commission on Hispanic Affairs observed that some towns posted evacuation routes in Spanish without putting in a significant effort to ensure that the messages made sense. Likely by using a computer mechanism, some signs posted on telephone poles told people they should actually climb the pole in order to evacuate.

Government agencies and nonprofits have not made a consistent effort to reach LEP residents along every step of the disaster process (before, during, and after). Most of the signs

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¹ O’Cain, Pete. “Inslee: Disaster warning must reach non-English speakers.” *The Wenatchee World*. The Wenatchee World, 1 Mar. 2016. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <https://www.wenatcheeworld.com/news/2016/mar/01/inslee-disaster-warnings-must-reach-non-english-speakers/>

² Gerety, Rowan Moore. “Wildfires Reveal Gaps in Emergency Planning for Thousands of Migrant Workers.” *Northwest Public Radio*. The Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University, 31 Aug. 2015. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2724456/>

³ Gulati, Reena K., Kwan-Gett, Tao, Hampson, Neil B., Baer, Atar, Shusterman, Dennis, Shandro, Jamie R., Duchin, Jeffrey S. “Carbon Monoxide Epidemic Among Immigrant Populations: King County, Washington, 2006.” *American Journal of Public Health* 99.9 (2009): 1687-1692. *PMC*. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2724456/>

directing people to evacuation routes, shelter, food, and other vital services in Okanogan County were only posted in English. Even once LEP individuals found their way to shelters, they were not well received. A Red Cross shelter in Okanogan, for instance, had no Spanish signs advertising outside or directing people to available interpreters and resources inside. Many immigrants chose not to stay at this shelter, staying with family or camping out in tents directly across the street. During the 2014 fires, one Hispanic family with young children was even turned away from a Red Cross shelter, left to survive the cold night without any resources and after walking miles to get there (though the worker who turned them away was later fired). Room One, an organization pivotal to providing disaster case management in the Methow Valley, tried to reach out to the Latino community but was largely unsuccessful. Employees cited a lack of pre-existing ties with the Latino community, potential conflicts of interest between farm employers on their board and farmworkers seeking assistance, and victims' changing temporary phone numbers as the major barriers they faced.

The attitudes and actions of many relief workers reflected a lack of cultural competence and awareness of how to serve these communities. When the National Guard was deployed in Washington as backup for first responders, many immigrants were unable to view them as aid workers, only seeing their uniforms that resemble police and signify government authority. Many of the undocumented immigrants living in these areas have learned to perceive people in government uniforms as threats, and are afraid to turn to the government for disaster assistance. Since the government does not approach them through trusted messengers, immigrants in Washington continue to distrust government workers and fear jeopardizing their immigration status by seeking aid in the aftermath of wildfires.

The Overarching Issues

Research on communities that are made vulnerable by different structural and social determinants shows that those who are oppressed and working to overcome inequities fare worse than privileged communities when disasters strike. In the words of one researcher,

“A community’s ability to survive disaster has become directly linked to the ability of the governmental institution to organize; and in order to organize any community effectively, government has to understand its needs and how to utilize social capital....”⁴

Thus, it is incumbent upon government workers to make deliberate efforts to understand the unique social capital within immigrant communities, which is different from the social

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⁴ Lippmann, Amy L. “Disaster Preparedness in Vulnerable Communities.” *International Law and Policy Review* 1.1 (2011): 69-96. *Nova Science Publishers, Inc.* Web. 20 June 2016.
<http://proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1625569832?accountid=10598>

capital and structures embedded in privileged, white, US-born communities, and to cater to these assets. This researcher has also stated that ethnic, religious, and racial factors combine to be “a powerful conduit to understand preparedness actions in the face of disasters.”⁵ When government workers fail to take these factors into account or view these communities through a holistic, asset-based lens, they forfeit opportunities to utilize existing structures, fail to adequately support all residents, and make the disaster recovery effort harder for themselves.

When natural disasters strike, certain communities are more susceptible to devastating impacts. Language access and financial resources are critical assets in facing natural disasters. Immigrant communities are unable to evacuate if they do not receive emergency updates in their native languages, nor can they obtain relief resources if they cannot understand signs and advertisements. Recovery is particularly challenging when families do not have insurance or much money in savings and exacerbated when their incomes are primarily dependent upon seasonal farm work, which can become nonexistent when farms are ravaged by fires. Our current response systems are designed to aid white, English-speaking communities when disasters strike; they fail to account for the ways in which low-income Latino communities function differently. Law enforcement in Eastern and Central Washington has remained apathetic toward updating its systems to accommodate changing demographics. Some attempts at inclusivity have focused on providing equal resources to all communities (such as a website in Spanish), failing to recognize that different communities cannot utilize the same resources, and producing inequitable results. Ignoring the particular needs of low-income, rural, Latino communities constitutes discrimination against hundreds of thousands of vital members of Washington communities.

Disparities in disaster outcomes for diverse communities are partially because these families lack certain resources and have historically been discriminated against. Low income families and families of color are more likely to live near train tracks, waste disposal facilities, sewage treatment plants, and other less desirable areas than middle class white families, who can afford and are able to move farther away. Similarly, higher-income white families can afford to move to areas less prone to disaster, with dependable first responder systems, clear evacuation routes, structures that meet modern building codes, and funding for emergency services.

Communities in lower-income brackets and communities of color tend to live in the most vulnerable housing and lack adequate resources to take loss-reduction and evacuation measures. Lower-cost homes are typically less disaster-resistant; if they are older, they are likely not built with modern, advanced building codes and if they are mobile, they are unable to withstand

⁵ Ibid.

wildfires or windstorms. Many low-income families are uninsured, and low-income families that rent their homes are reliant on landlords or public housing agencies to enact structural loss prevention measures. Oftentimes, public housing authorities lack the funding to retrofit older properties and landlords neglect long-term property protection, opting to focus on short-term financial incentives.⁶ Therefore, structural and socio-economic determinants play a major role in shaping disaster outcomes for low-income communities of color. These communities are kept out of the safest homes and then not given support to fill the gaps in their financial ability to rebuild their homes when they are destroyed by natural disasters.⁷ In Eastern and Central Washington, these factors have major impacts on many communities of Latino immigrants living in wildfire-prone rural areas.

Our conversations with various policy advisors and key policy architects demonstrated that many individuals involved in forming disaster preparedness initiatives and policy do not perceive the safety of all residents equally. Many expressed a desire, however unacknowledged, to first ensure the safety of white, English-speaking, middle class citizens before focusing on others, effectively implying that immigrants and culturally and linguistically diverse individuals would be considered secondarily. In order for disaster assistance to be truly equitable, we will need a fundamental shift in how policymakers prioritize different groups of people. We will need to challenge the assumption that the neglected folks will stand idly by as they wait for extra resources to trickle down to them. Inclusive policies alone will not lead to equitable outcomes; intentional steps must be taken and adequate resources must be allocated to account for all communities. Choices are made at all levels of government and nonprofit organizations that, despite benign intentions, perpetuate discrimination against low-income communities of color.

In culminating reports from Hurricane Katrina, various disasters across the country (floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, windstorms, wildfires, and others) and evaluating current government programs, policies and efforts for emergency preparedness and disaster assistance, we determined the most urgent issues facing immigrant and refugee communities in the wake of natural disasters. We saw a consistent exclusion of immigrants and refugees from community disaster planning and preparedness training, and a failure to equip them with sufficient emergency warnings, evacuation notices, transportation support, and recovery resources.

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⁶ “Vulnerable Populations.” *Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety*. Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <https://disastersafety.org/ibhs-public-policy/vulnerable-populations/>

⁷ Flanagan, Barry E., Gregory, Edward W., Hallisey, Elaine J., Heitgard, Janet L., Lewis, Brian. “A Social Vulnerability Index for Disaster Management.” *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*. 8.1 (2011): 3. Web. 4 Aug. 2016.

<http://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/svi/A%20Social%20Vulnerability%20Index%20for%20Disaster%20Management.pdf>

The most urgent and inequitable disaster policy issues impacting immigrant and refugee communities that we have identified are:

- Lack of inclusion of all community members in disaster planning
- Linguistic barriers in disaster preparedness and response
 - Lack of readily available translated/understandable preparedness materials
 - Lack of easily accessible translated emergency alerts
 - Lack of translated signage and culturally sensitive bilingual/multilingual service providers
- Lack of cultural competence by service providers
 - Failure to inform immigrants of their right to disaster aid
 - Failure to address fears of deportation/public charge and distrust of government
 - Discrimination and racial profiling leading to exclusion of individuals from shelters/aid and inquiries about immigration status
- Unique barriers facing immigrants
 - Lack of transportation assistance (especially for migrant workers)
 - Unclear process for responding to loss of documents (by USCIS)
 - Failure to acknowledge structural inequities and different social structures in diverse, rural communities
- Lack of coordination between different government agencies and tiers in disaster response

Recommendations at the Local Level

It is imperative that those affected by an issue contribute to its solution. Locally focused efforts must expand throughout Eastern and Central Washington to empower immigrant and refugee communities, train identified community leaders, and effectively disseminate multilingual information to communities that are typically excluded. To begin, localities must conduct community asset mapping projects⁸ to identify their existing social structures and resources. The tools that they identify and map will reveal a foundation with which they must work, as these resources already reach many community members. Various institutions have created detailed guides on community asset mapping⁹ that leaders can follow.

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⁸ “Section 8. Identifying Community Assets and Resources.” *Community Tool Box*. Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/identify-community-assets/main>

⁹ “Section 1: Asset Mapping.” *UCLA Center for Health Policy Research*. Health DATA Program—Data, Advocacy, and Technical Assistance. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/programs/health-data/trainings/Documents/tw_cba20.pdf

Many different community residents will serve as sources of information.¹⁰ This is an essential method to engage with immigrants and refugees early in the planning process, and a productive technique to meaningfully include their assets in community planning.

Communities can create a visual representation or list of resources, such as churches, community-based organizations, schools, hospitals/health centers, multilingual individuals, translation services, legal services and disaster preparedness and response programs that are available locally. Once these resources have been identified, gaps will become more apparent and community leaders will have a clearer structure through which they can disseminate information and develop new programs “building on existing community strengths.”¹¹ Nonprofit organizations can utilize community asset maps to improve their connections with immigrant communities, using the resources as a starting point for building relationships. These projects require few resources to execute, yet are invaluable in determining how to efficiently utilize a community’s existing assets when natural disasters occur.

Nonprofits can also use these maps to convene a network of diverse community leaders. These must be individuals who are familiar with the communities, bilingual or multilingual, and can commit to receiving training and working to spread information. This training can be conducted by local fire departments, emergency managers, sheriff’s departments, or any organization with the capacity to teach fire safety, disaster preparedness and prevention tools, and immigrant-specific response and recovery information (such as the rights of all disaster victims, relief programs for which undocumented folks are eligible, and how to apply for aid).

Trained community leaders should then disseminate low-literacy materials (utilizing images and infographics) and information that has been professionally translated. They should lead hands-on activities that engage people of different education levels, dialects, and literacy levels, to ensure that community members are really learning the information, not just receiving brochures with facts in Spanish. If possible, immigrant community leaders should assist with interpreting, translating and ensuring that signage for relief services is accurately translated in the wake of disasters. These leaders should work with local organizations to create a comprehensive, translated list of resources available to all residents after disasters, such as where to find free shelters and legal services. Community leaders can play an important role in disseminating this list, and other preparedness materials, before disasters strike.

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¹⁰ “Participatory Asset Mapping. A Community Research Lab Toolkit.” *Healthy City*. Advancement Project. April 2012. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://www.communityscience.com/knowledge4equity/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf>

¹¹ “Participatory Asset Mapping.”

Trained leaders should host community forums and meetings, utilizing pre-established meetings whenever possible, potentially at schools or churches, or by partnering with other organizations. In such meetings, they should present the information on disaster prevention, preparedness, and recovery, while also listening to other community members' concerns, clarifying any misconceptions, and gathering information that can be relayed to local law enforcement and county employees. Community leaders will act as liaisons between residents who are less vocal in government and the officials who impact their disaster outcomes, voicing diverse community members' concerns, of which many local policymakers seem to be unaware.

Community leaders should also be vital in conducting specific "Know Your Rights" training to teach immigrants of their entitlement to different forms of government aid. It is imperative that they share that no one can be deemed a public charge for seeking disaster assistance and that receiving government aid will not affect anyone's immigration status. They must inform everyone that they are entitled to unrestricted aid (food, water, medical help, shelter, etc.), and mixed-status households can be eligible for extended state and FEMA assistance through immediate family members who are citizens or lawful permanent residents (LPRs). Though they will have to provide the social security number of the family member through which they are applying for benefits, non-citizen family members do not need to provide any information about their immigration status to government authorities. Communities should also be aware that service providers cannot require proof of status to give out immediate, noncash assistance; most organizations providing immediate relief should not be asking for documents at all. If any providers deny service to disaster victims, whether due to language barriers, belief that they are an undocumented immigrant, or any type of prejudice, they are violating federal law and should be reported. Community leaders should share that immigration courts historically have eased up on requirements for documents immediately following natural disasters, extending deadlines if need be. Further research is needed to determine if United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has a consistent policy on this for all courts.

Community leaders can be instrumental in identifying further gaps in disaster assistance policies and brainstorming culturally sensitive solutions, since they are members of the communities that they serve. They will be well respected and trusted, culturally competent, and particularly understanding of the challenges that immigrants face. It is crucial that they receive compensation for their work and time (including time spent in training), so that people seeking this position do not have to sacrifice time they could spend earning a wage elsewhere. Due to the physical makeup of rural communities, community leaders will face barriers trying to reach the most remote and isolated community members. Their wages will need to account for travel time and expenses to geographically dispersed households. Less physically concentrated communities

remain more dependent than others on trusted community leaders and social networks, since these structures unite them. Despite drawbacks, trained, employed community leaders are the most promising method of educating rural immigrants in Eastern and Central Washington.

Efforts should be made at the local level to improve translation of emergency warnings and evacuation mandates. Local governments should allow residents to enroll in alerts in their native language, utilizing technology such as text, email, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and phone calls to provide translated messages. These messages should be translated by the government (using certified translators to avoid error through computer translators) and funded through their budgets. Ethnic media (radio, television, newspapers, etc.) should play a major role in disseminating information to a wider audience. Emergency plans must ensure that all ethnic media outlets receive accurate and timely information to translate and broadcast.

Efforts to improve language access to immigrant communities throughout Eastern and Central Washington have been hindered by a lack of cultural understanding from policymakers and local officials. Local law enforcement agents told us that there is “someone in everyone’s circle who speaks English,” and expressed concern that providing information in multiple languages “panders” to immigrants and “enables” them to avoid learning English. These agencies must be reminded that English-only access is a choice that effectively puts up to just over half of their residents at risk. They have chosen convenience and budgeting over performing their jobs properly. Furthermore, recent studies demonstrated a clear benefit to bilingualism—speaking multiple languages can improve brain function,¹² may delay the onset of dementia symptoms¹³ and provides immigrants and refugees, who have often been uprooted from their homes and countries, with deep connections to their culture. By translating messages into multiple languages, the government will show its commitment to creating a safe, welcoming environment for immigrants and refugees. This step sets a precedent for other actors to consider how their policies inadvertently discriminate and force immigrants to face harsher challenges.

Localities must also work to design strong emergency and fire plans that include all members (residents, policymakers, law enforcement and government officials) in plan development. Official town and county emergency plans must provide specific provisions for

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¹² Willis, Judy. “Neuroscience and the Bilingual Brain.” *Edutopia*. George Lucas Educational Foundation, 22 Mar. 2012. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/neuroscience-bilingual-brain-judy-willis-md>

¹³ King, Barbara J. “New Study Shows Brain Benefits of Bilingualism.” *NPR*. National Public Radio, 14 Nov. 2013. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2013/11/14/244813470/new-study-shows-brain-benefits-of-bilingualism>

how they will actively protect residents that do not speak English, do not have their own cars, and face other economic and cultural hurdles. Policymakers must make a deliberate effort to reach out to the community members that have been excluded from planning in the past, advertising in multiple languages in common spaces, such as grocery stores, schools, health centers, and Laundromats. These voices must be included at every step of the planning process. Emergency plans should include a description of how and where translators and interpreters will be accessed after disasters, how LEP residents will be sought out for county meetings to review shortcomings in policies after major disasters, and how migrant workers in temporary worker housing will evacuate. State temporary worker housing regulations already mandate that this last example be implemented—these rules must be enforced, and every employer must provide plans to their workers in a language that they understand.

Local law enforcement and service providers must improve cultural competence and cultural sensitivity. They must better understand the populations that they are serving and change their conduct and policies to reflect the needs of these unique populations. They must actively not discriminate or racially profile, nor should they ask for unnecessary proof of identification in a disaster situation. They must define in their policies that they will not comply with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainers and that they will avoid calling ICE for backup or sharing individuals' information with them in the aftermath of disasters. It is critical that all disaster victims feel safe in shelters. Immigration status should not stop anyone from receiving assistance to which they are entitled. Police forces must increase mandatory cultural competence training and should hold open houses and events to interact with residents in a friendly, stress-free environment. They should make a deliberate effort to hire members of these communities; one of the most effective methods to improve trust is to employ police officers that come from diverse backgrounds, have relationships with their community members, and have a sense of their fears and concerns. In addition, police forces should continually solicit and adhere to community feedback, potentially through a regular, multilingual survey. Frequent anonymous and voluntary surveys can be an important tool to equitably gather honest feedback on “experiences and perceptions” of diverse community members.¹⁴ These policy changes will improve social cohesion and build social capital through improved connections with local nonprofits and law enforcement, and will advance disaster preparedness and recovery.

Recommendations at the State Level

It is critical that policies be strengthened at the state level as well. The state must approve a policy mandating that all of its agencies take necessary steps toward providing language access

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¹⁴ “Community Representation.” *Campaign Zero*. We the Protesters. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://www.joincampaignzero.org/representation/>

to diverse populations. Though many agencies currently lack the funds to provide comprehensive access, a clear policy would lead many more agencies toward expanding access (a crucial aspect of disaster recovery). This legislation would ensure that state agencies improve their compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, providing translations into languages spoken by 5% of the population or 1,000 people (whichever is less).¹⁵ The State Emergency Communications Commission (SECC) can better equip local and regional networks to accurately translate emergency messages in a short amount of time, without resorting to insufficient and sometimes inaccurate computer translators. The SECC should widely implement this technology that already exists within their framework to streamline the process of disseminating translated information and avoid duplicating work.

Washington State should pass a law similar to California's AB 2327, ensuring that all government and nonprofit workers providing disaster aid do not request identification or documentation of any sort, unless absolutely necessary for the provision of aid. Laws should also be strengthened throughout the state to ensure that state disaster relief workers do not request ICE agents as backup when their resources are overwhelmed and do not comply with ICE detainers. This includes excluding ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents from shelters and places where aid is distributed, as this will decrease intimidation and encourage immigrants to seek aid. To further build trust between communities and police forces, Washington should update law enforcement eligibility legislation, following the model of Senate Bill 6319¹⁶ proposed in 2015, and allow LPRs to apply for any kind of civil service position (instead of only citizens). This could improve immigrants' trust of law enforcement, since more agents would look like them, speak their native languages, and deeply understand their communities.

State funding should also be provided to strengthen efforts to include immigrants in emergency planning and response. The Military Department should increase its budget for LEP programs, fund community leaders on a statewide level, and create a grant fund for community-based organizations to provide emergency preparedness trainings. These efforts would increase the reach of life-saving information and services to LEP, rural and immigrant communities. The State Emergency Operations Center should improve its communication with local organizations and county governments that reach out for help. Organizations, such as Room One, have made

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¹⁵ "Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964." *The United States Department of Justice*.

¹⁶ Senators Jayapal, Litzow, Billig, Mullet, Hobbs, Fain, Hasegawa, and Habib. "Senate Bill 6319. An act relating to civil service qualifications." *State of Washington 64th Legislature 2016 Regular Session*. 14 Jan. 2016. Web. 4 Aug. 2016. <http://lawfilesexxt.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2015-16/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Bills/6319.pdf>

unsuccessful efforts to approach Latino community members and provide assistance or disaster case management, despite seeking guidance from the state government on this specific area. The state should maintain a list of resources for these organizations to help them better reach communities that they have not yet formed strong relationships with. This will relieve some burden on the State Government, as it is another means to facilitate recovery from the county and local levels, empowering communities to help themselves rebuild.

Recommendations at the Federal Level

Many policy changes could occur at the federal level as well. Some requirements, such as the mandate that all agencies that receive federal funding provide equal access to LEP populations, are already federal law. The federal government must now work to enforce and strengthen these policies in regards to language access. They must work to ensure improved coordination among disaster providers, developing inclusive emergency plans that specifically explain how to best support immigrant and LEP populations. The federal government should also issue a mandate that disaster service providers cannot request documentation or question immigration status. It should mandate that federal agents do not request ICE as backup during disaster recovery. Prosecutorial discretion over when deportations can be halted in the wake of disaster should be exercised more frequently. A policy should clearly define the threshold of how destructive a disaster must be to elicit a halt on deportations, and this threshold should be significantly lower than the standard currently followed.

USCIS should define a clear policy of how to approach citizenship and visa applications submitted with a sponsor that has passed away, school that has shut down, workplace that was destroyed, and other unique disaster-related losses. This policy must ensure that immigrants are not further penalized for suffering a disaster and loss. USCIS should consider digitizing immigration documents and creating a cloud-based storage method for all vital documents, so that immigrants do not have to face undue hardship recovering proof of legal status after losing everything in a disaster. Alternatively, a nonprofit organization could assume this responsibility, and scan and digitize immigration documents so individuals do not have to worry about losing documents in disasters. Similar efforts have been made to secure Vietnam War veterans' documents, due to the need to protect documents that people's day-to-day lives depend on. Finally, increased cultural competence training should be mandated at all levels of the government for all aid workers, and the federal government must continue to build trust with immigrant communities. Improving trust between communities and service providers will improve the disaster recovery process for all.

Conclusion

Washington State is evolving. The population of foreign-born and LEP residents is increasing. The climate is changing, and natural disasters are becoming both more frequent and more intense. As we have seen time and again in the past, current emergency policies are outdated; they ignore and neglect immigrants and refugees—communities that require unique assistance—leading to inequitable, unjust and dangerous outcomes. Federal, state, county and local policymakers must work to actively include LEP, immigrant and refugee communities in planning for, surviving, and recovering from disasters. This is the responsibility of all government workers, service providers, and legislators. If we do not work to actively protect all residents, regardless of immigration status, we are inadvertently choosing to be discriminatory and neglect certain populations, perpetuating our nation's historical tendency to create systemic, structural barriers that keep the most oppressed populations trapped in their statuses. By being exclusionary and shortsighted in planning, we are endangering vast communities and risking health and safety for all people impacted by natural disasters. Every level of government and community organization is equipped to take decisive action now that will improve future disaster outcomes for all. It is imperative that such action is taken before the next major disaster strikes.