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## **National Preparedness Month - September 2007**

### **SAFETY: A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE**

#### Emergency Preparedness for Non-English-Speaking Communities

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Non-English speakers are those who speak a language other than English at home. This group fits into our National Preparedness interests because the ability to communicate with government agencies, service providers, schools, businesses, and emergency personnel often hinges upon the ability to speak English. According to the census report, in 2000, approximately 47 million people in the U.S. spoke a language other than English at home. There were also 4.4 million “linguistically isolated households,” meaning that no person over 14 years of age speaks English very well in these households. The states with the largest population of non-English-speaking people are California, New York, and Florida.

#### **A Dramatic Exercise**

Established in 1972, Community Health Center, Inc. (CHC) is one of the oldest and largest community “federally qualified health centers” in the United States, providing health care to over 70,000 people annually through its offices in Connecticut. In April of 2005, CHC tested the ability of its staff to care for non-English-speaking patients during a large-scale disaster preparedness drill, which was coordinated by U.S. Department of Homeland Security to simulate a terrorist attack. The event featured a mock chemical attack triggered by a bomb hidden in a vehicle in Fort Trumbull State Park, while similar “attacks” occurred in New Jersey, Canada, and the United Kingdom. CHC participated in the drill because it is a major provider of primary health care to much of Connecticut’s non-English-speaking population.

The focus of the exercise for CHC was on the care of non-English speakers during a crisis. CHC hired 15 actors to play the roles of English-speaking and non-English-speaking patients visiting one of the company’s health centers during the mock terrorist attack. Among the languages spoken by the actors

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during the exercise were Spanish, French, and Chinese. One of the reasons that CHC fared well during this dramatic drill was their experience dealing with non-English speakers. Many members of the CHC staff are bi-lingual. According to Mark Masselli, CHC's president and CEO, "Patients who spoke 80 different languages used our services last year. Either through our staff or our language line service, we spoke to those patients in their native tongue. That's why we want to ensure that in any public health crisis, we are prepared to help and that we are included in the broader community response."

### **Ideas from "Down Under"**

Like America, Australia is a "melting pot" country with many non-English-speaking residents. Recently, Emergency Management Australia (EMA) conducted a national workshop entitled "Emergency Management for Australia's Non-English-Speaking Communities." One of the main points to emerge from this seminar was the importance of an active Emergency Management presence within generally non-English-speaking communities. This willingness to interact with non-English-speaking peoples establishes credibility within their communities. This, in turn, enhances the ability to communicate information and to elicit and understand a response. The EMA recommends that Emergency Management personnel "get to know" their communities by visiting schools, hospitals, and local ethnic clubs. Attend social functions and listen to what people are saying about the area. Once you have demonstrated your willingness to listen, you will often find that people are more receptive to what you have to say. Once that connection has been made, there are some practical ways that Emergency Managers can involve the community in Emergency Preparedness. These include community education on hazards and risk, community participation in risk management, and education on the role and purpose of emergency services. Communication can take many forms; information can be disseminated by means of ethnic radio, local newspapers, bulletins, local religious groups or clubs, hospitals, and community centers.

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## Resource 26 – Household and Family Preparedness:

### **Disaster Services: Foreign Language Materials**

[http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0\\_504\\_00.html](http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0_504_00.html)

The American Red Cross posts a webpage of disaster preparedness materials that are available in over twelve different foreign languages, including Spanish, Chinese, French, Russian, Japanese, and Korean.

TOMORROW: Responding to Patients With Disabilities

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**Article inquiries welcome.** On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or [jcavanagh@bridgmultimedia.com](mailto:jcavanagh@bridgmultimedia.com).**