

Department of Homeland Security **Office of Inspector General**

**FEMA Should Take Steps To Improve the Efficiency
and Effectiveness of the Disaster Assistance
Helpline for Disaster Survivors That Do Not
Speak English or Spanish**






OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
Department of Homeland Security

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Joseph L. Nimmich
Assistant Administrator, Response and Recovery
Federal Emergency Management Agency

FROM: John V. Kelly 
Assistant Inspector General
Office of Emergency Management Oversight

SUBJECT: *FEMA Should Take Steps To Improve the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Disaster Assistance Helpline for Disaster Survivors That Do Not Speak English or Spanish*

We audited the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) initial response to the Colorado Flood (FEMA Disaster Number DR-4145-CO). This memorandum advises you of a related issue that came to our attention during that audit. Namely, FEMA should make improvements to its Disaster Assistance Helpline (Helpline) to ensure that it efficiently and effectively accommodates non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors.

We conducted this performance audit pursuant to the *Inspector General Act of 1978*, as amended, and according to generally accepted government auditing standards. We issued our complete audit report (OIG-14-111-D) on July 1, 2014, which included our findings on FEMA's initial response to the Colorado Flood (Flood). Appendix A to that report provided our audit objectives, scope, and methodology. The objective of this aspect of the audit was to determine FEMA's efficiency and effectiveness to register non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors for disaster assistance and provide them with information through its Helpline. We reviewed the capabilities, management, and policies and procedures of FEMA's Disaster Assistance Helpline from September 2013 to June 2014. To accomplish our objective, we interviewed FEMA officials from the Response and Recovery Division, the National Service Processing Center, Disaster Affairs, External Affairs, Strategic Communications, Public Affairs, and the Helpline itself (operators); reviewed policies, procedures, processes, executive orders, strategy documents, as well as FEMA's Limited English Proficiency efforts, as they relate to the Helpline; analyzed the efficiency, effectiveness, and accessibility of the Helpline through covert testing; and performed other procedures necessary to accomplish our objective. We did not assess internal controls related to FEMA's Helpline because it was not necessary to accomplish our objective.



Background

A severe storm system, without advanced warning, impacted 18 Colorado counties most significantly on September 11–12, 2013, when record-breaking precipitation occurred. Flood waters overflowed creek beds and rechanneled waterways, damaged roads, bridges, and vegetation, and carried debris along its path. At one point, more than 30 State highways or interstates were closed due to infrastructure damage or water inundation. The President declared an Emergency Declaration for severe storms, flooding, landslides and mudslides on September 12, 2013, and issued a Major Disaster Declaration on September 14, 2013. FEMA established the incident period as September 11–30, 2013. The State of Colorado has estimated that damage costs to roadways and bridges currently amounts to around \$475 million.¹ The flood led to 10 fatalities, 218 injuries, 1,067 families who required sheltering, and the registration of 28,348 disaster survivors for Individual Assistance—not all of whom spoke English or Spanish.²

On September 26, 2013, the Office of Inspector General deployed an Emergency Management Oversight Team (EMOT) to the Joint Field Office located in Centennial, Colorado.³ The EMOT serves as an independent unit for oversight of disaster response and recovery activities. It provides FEMA an additional resource for proactive evaluation to prevent and detect systemic problems in disaster programs and help ensure accountability over Federal funds. One area that we identified throughout the course of our fieldwork as being integral to FEMA’s mission to support the needs of disaster survivors—and thus prudent for us to test—was FEMA’s Disaster Assistance Helpline.

¹ The State estimated this figure on September 30, 2013, and it is therefore subject to change. See <http://www.coemergency.com/2013/09/statewide-flood-quick-facts-and.html> for additional information.

² Individual Assistance is financial or direct assistance to individuals and families whose property has been damaged or destroyed as a result of a Federally-declared disaster, and whose losses are not covered by insurance. It is meant to help disaster survivors with critical expenses that cannot be covered in other ways. This assistance is not intended to restore damaged property to its condition before the disaster.

³ The Joint Field Office is a temporary Federal multiagency coordination center established locally to facilitate activities related to disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. The Joint Field Office provides a central location for coordination of Federal, State, local, tribal, nongovernmental, and private-sector organizations with primary responsibility for activities associated with threat response and incident support.



RESULTS OF AUDIT

FEMA's Disaster Assistance Helpline could not consistently accommodate a variety of non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors seeking to register for disaster aid and receive answers to their FEMA-related questions in an efficient or effective manner. Non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivor callers can experience challenges in applying for and/or receiving disaster assistance because they are unable to communicate with Helpline operators. Because of the important role that these operators have in interacting with disaster survivors, FEMA needs to take every cost-effective measure to ease the burden on all survivors—not just English/Spanish-speaking survivors.

FEMA translates more than a dozen disaster assistance fliers, brochures, and pamphlets into 23 different languages. However, FEMA should update those materials to prepare the non-English/Spanish-speaking survivor for the English language-related capabilities or resources they may need throughout the Helpline process. FEMA should also consider having other language-based resources available to assist operators communicating with callers who cannot speak English or Spanish.

FEMA's Multilingual Outreach Activities

FEMA recognizes the importance of addressing the language needs of disaster survivors. To accommodate disaster survivors who do not speak English or Spanish, FEMA relies on its Strategic Communications Division within the Office of External Affairs to establish proactive planning and coordination for agency offices and programs. The Division, through its strategic communications advisors, is responsible for coordinating internally with agency offices to prioritize, organize, and implement communication strategies and produce materials. Further, when FEMA is activated as the lead agency for Emergency Support Function 15 (External Affairs), its Planning and Products section is responsible for Limited English Proficiency/Accessible Communications strategies and translation of materials designed to benefit the survivor population.⁴

These activities, in part, align with Executive Order 13166 (Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency); DHS' Language Access Plan; and FEMA's

⁴ National Response Framework's Emergency Support Functions provide the structure for coordinating Federal interagency support for a Federal response to an incident. They are mechanisms for grouping functions most frequently used to provide Federal support to States and Federal-to-Federal support, both for declared disasters and emergencies. (See Emergency Support Function 15 *Standard Operating Procedures*, Annex G 3.3, 2013, for more information on FEMA's language-related communication responsibilities under this Function.)



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Strategic Plan (Fiscal Years 2011–2014), which establishes that FEMA must meet these goals:

- Develop and implement a system by which limited English proficient persons can meaningfully access the agency's services. (Executive Order 13166)
- Provide meaningful access for individuals with limited English proficiency to operations, services, activities, and programs by providing quality language assistance services in a timely manner. (DHS Language Access Plan; Policy)
- Incorporate language access considerations into its routine strategic and business planning, identify and translate crucial documents into the most frequently encountered languages, provide interpretive services where appropriate, and educate personnel about language access responsibilities and how to use available language access resources. (DHS Language Access Plan; Policy)
- Foster a Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management nationally. (FEMA Strategic Plan (FY 2011-2014); Initiatives; Number 1)⁵
- Support the needs of disaster survivors and the recovery of affected communities effectively. (FEMA Strategic Plan (FY 2011-2014); Administrator's Statement of Intent for FY 2012-2016 Priorities; Number 3)

A Federal Coordinating Official summarized FEMA's intent regarding multilingual support, saying that "one of the main goals during a disaster recovery effort is to get the message out to everyone about the many ways FEMA can help eligible survivors. That means bridging all possible communication barriers." FEMA's efforts to do so have included:

- Deploying bilingual and multilingual specialists with the FEMA Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams who canvass neighborhoods shortly after the presidential disaster declaration to help American Sign Language and non-English speakers understand the registration process.
- Translating more than a dozen disaster assistance fliers, brochures, and pamphlets into 23 different languages.⁶ For example, the FEMA *Help After a*

⁵ FEMA recognizes in this approach that it takes all aspects of a community to effectively respond to and recover from any disaster. FEMA notes that it is therefore critical to work together to enable communities to recover in a way that sustains or improves the community's overall well-being.



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Disaster guide is available in a variety of languages and alternative formats, including large print and Braille. This guide explains the FEMA Individual and Households Program and provides guidance on applying for assistance.

- Providing information to multilingual media outlets and community groups across the affected areas to get the word out to residents whose primary language is not English.
- Ensuring that Helpline phone operators are available to assist non-English speaking survivors register for disaster aid and to answer questions.⁷

Addressing the language-needs of disaster survivors is critical because of the prevalence of non-English/Spanish speakers. The United States Census Bureau recently reported in its American Community Survey (August 6, 2013) and “Language Use in the United States: 2011” that 20.8 percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home. Of these 60.6 million people who spoke a language other than English at home in 2011, almost two-thirds (37.6 million) spoke Spanish. In addition to English and Spanish, there were 6 languages in 2011 spoken at home by at least 1 million people: Chinese (2.9 million), Tagalog (1.6 million), Vietnamese (1.4 million), French (1.3 million), German (1.1 million), and Korean (1.1 million).

FEMA’s Helpline Is Not Fully Accessible to Disaster Survivors Who Do Not Speak English or Spanish

Disaster survivors who do not speak English or Spanish would benefit from FEMA increasing the accessibility of its Disaster Assistance Helpline. When disaster survivors call the FEMA Helpline, they first must select (telephonically) an option for English callers, an option for Spanish callers, or an option for “all other callers.” Although the options for English and Spanish are respectively communicated in those languages, the latter option is communicated solely in English, without being presented in the variety of languages FEMA intends to support (see FEMA’s Multilingual Outreach Activities). Therefore, the non-English/Spanish speaker may not be able to comprehend that there are multilingual phone operators and translators available to register them for disaster aid and answer their questions. In addition to confusion, this could likewise result in the survivor discontinuing the call and not receiving the assistance for which he or she may be eligible.

⁶ Please refer to the following site for additional information: <http://www.fema.gov/help-after-disaster>.

⁷ After dialing FEMA’s Disaster Assistance Helpline, 800-621-3362, or (TTY) 800-462-7585, callers can choose Option 2 for Spanish and Option 3 for other languages. Those who use 711-Relay or Video Relay Services can call 800-621-3362. FEMA’s Helpline is under the authority of FEMA’s Recovery Division.



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Further, throughout various phases of the Helpline process, there is an English-only recording asking the caller to standby for further assistance—which, again, is a message that the non-English/Spanish speaker may not be able to understand, and one which could lead to the disaster survivor ending the call.

Lastly, if disaster survivors make it as far as selecting the appropriate “all other callers” option, they are generally paired with an English-speaking Helpline operator or specialist/coordinator who must—on their own, without assistive resources—determine the spoken language of the disaster survivor in order to contact the appropriate translator. This obstacle, as detailed in the following sections, creates many effects that negatively impact disaster survivors.

FEMA officials said that the automated technology they are using at the Helpline call centers is limited. They said that FEMA may implement more advanced technology in fiscal year 2015 to provide enhanced self-service capabilities in multilingual formats. They told us that FEMA supports continued advancement of technological capabilities to improve disaster survivor’s experiences; however, adding pre-recorded messaging in numerous languages in the current call center platform is not cost effective or a practical approach with FEMA’s existing telecommunications capabilities. They added that FEMA will (1) provide options to activate other solutions through a separate 800 number for bilingual support in larger events with numerous callers requiring language assistance; (2) further explore opportunities to expand language options beyond English and Spanish to include the top three languages encountered by FEMA; and (3) evaluate telephonic capabilities in multiple languages, which could include expanding the existing pre-recorded options by keypad selection. FEMA officials stated that they anticipate these improvements will begin in Fiscal Year 2015, when they implement the Contact Center Capability Modernization Program to replace the current Advanced Call Center Network platform.

FEMA’s Helpline Operators Could Not Efficiently or Effectively Register or Answer Questions from Non-English/Spanish-Speaking Disaster Survivors

FEMA’s Helpline poses a variety of challenges for disaster survivors who do not speak English or Spanish. We called FEMA’s Helpline (1-800-621-FEMA) and conducted 12 tests, across 2 days, employing 4 (non-English/Spanish) languages. We made these calls to identify and evaluate the processes and procedures that Helpline operators used



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to register non-English/Spanish-speaking survivors.⁸ We spoke with a different operator each time. These operators worked from various call centers across the United States.

The processes and procedures that operators used were inconsistent from one operator to the next, which negatively impacted the efficiency and effectiveness of operators' assistance to disaster survivors.

Specifically, our tests revealed—

- Low Language Identification Rate. Operators correctly identified the language of the disaster survivor only 2 out of 12 times; or 17 percent.
- Haphazard/Inconsistent Language Identification Techniques. Operators tried to identify the disaster survivor's spoken language by, for example, saying the English names of various languages, guessing the ethnic background of the survivor by State of residence, connecting the call to an available translator (of any language), and asking the translator to provide feedback.
- Extensive Wait Times/English-Only Instructions. When the operator recognized that the disaster survivor needed other language assistance and sought an interpreter, the survivor often had to wait a long time listening to an English-language only recording. This English-only recording asked the caller to standby for additional assistance until an interpreter became available.
- Multiple Transfers. For 10 of our 12 calls, or 83 percent, the operator could not identify the language we spoke. In those instances the operator transferred us, sometimes multiple times, to different translators.
- Hang-Ups. Operators intentionally hung up on us after recognizing we had non-English/Spanish language needs (and being unable to determine how to accommodate those needs), 2 out of 12 times, or 17 percent.⁹

FEMA officials told us that they are aware that operators sometimes have difficulty identifying the language spoken by a caller, which can impact their ability to transfer the survivor to the appropriate translator. They said that a standardized process (or

⁸ FEMA officials specifically informed us that the Flood significantly impacted Asian communities. Therefore, we conducted our tests in four different Asian languages: Mandarin (Chinese), Vietnamese, Thai, and Khmer (Cambodian).

⁹ In our overall experience, Helpline operators typically demonstrated a positive attitude, resourcefulness, and a helpful disposition.



automated technology) for language identification does not currently exist (see the previous section). FEMA officials also said that they provide translator services through a third-party vendor and that they may forward operator performance-related issues to the contracted party to ensure the services comply with FEMA's standards.

FEMA Does Not Have Sufficient Policies, Procedures, Training, and Resources To Enable Helpline Operators To Fully Execute Their Responsibilities

FEMA's Helpline operators need more resources and training to better assist non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors. Two operators told us that FEMA did not provide specific policies or procedures to assist in determining the language of the speaker and to promptly route the speaker to the appropriate translator. The operators also said that FEMA did not provide them training relevant to this issue, nor resources to assist in identifying languages. We attempted to interview additional operators; however, they told us they were not authorized to speak with us.

FEMA headquarters officials acknowledged that FEMA has not established a standardized process or training for operator-based language identification. They stated that, although they have field-based language and translation resources (e.g., visual documents, Internet translation tools) for in-person use, they do not have effective tools for providing over-the-phone services. Therefore, and in the absence of additional capabilities (which may be forthcoming; see the previous sections), operators must continue to rely upon translators (of any language) and Helpline language specialists/coordinators to identify the correct language a survivor speaks. However, in response to our audit, FEMA officials told us that they will develop a job aid for the top three languages they typically encounter beyond English and Spanish. They told us that the job aid will assist operator specialists in identifying the language of the disaster survivor and more effectively obtain interpreter services to complete the call and enhance the survivor's overall experience.

FEMA's Printed Resources Do Not Adequately Prepare Survivors To Navigate the Basic Language Requirements of the Helpline Process

FEMA's printed materials informing disaster survivors of its Helpline do not adequately prepare non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors on how to use the service. They do not provide survivors with adequate instructions on how to fully navigate the various telephonic Helpline menus and ultimately connect to the appropriate translator. As a



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result, FEMA may not be meeting survivors' language needs, which negatively impacts their ability to register for the disaster assistance for which they are eligible.¹⁰

FEMA provides "Disaster Assistance" flyers and Applicant Guides in a variety of languages. However, these resources do not indicate that callers must either (1) understand a minimum degree of English; (2) have someone available who can assist them in selecting the appropriate options from FEMA's automated menus and communicating what language they are speaking; and (3) indicate that the survivor should select option 3 for languages other than English or Spanish.

Currently, FEMA's existing materials inform the survivor to prepare by calling in with the following—

- private insurance information, if available;
- address and zip code of the damaged home or property;
- directions to the damaged home or property;
- telephone number; and
- Social Security Number.

These materials, however, do not prepare the non-English/Spanish-speaking survivor for the English language-related capabilities or resources they may need throughout the Helpline process.

FEMA officials said they will update the printed/written Helpline resources to indicate that the disaster survivor should select option 3 for languages other than English and Spanish, and provide updates as changes occur.

Conclusion

FEMA could better support non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors by improving its Disaster Assistance Helpline and Helpline-related printed materials. Currently, to register for disaster aid and receive answers to FEMA-related questions, some disaster survivors must undergo a confusing and lengthy process that may be ultimately unproductive. FEMA should improve its processes and procedures to provide multilingual Helpline registration, support, and printed materials to disaster assistance survivors. Doing so will optimize operational efficiency and effectiveness, particularly in

¹⁰ The printed materials disseminated by FEMA in Colorado did not adequately prepare non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors on how to optimize their experience with the FEMA Helpline. However, we reviewed FEMA's printed materials associated with other disasters/states and determined that they were virtually identical, thereby indicating that this is a systemic, FEMA-wide issue.



the critical period after a disaster when survivors most need financial assistance and essential information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that FEMA's Associate Administrator, Response and Recovery:

Recommendation #1: Provide additional multilingual options to support the identification of disaster survivors' languages for FEMA Helpline's current telephonic capabilities. Consider performing a cost/benefit analysis of available technology, including that which could notify the Helpline operator of the caller's requested language (to assist the operator in pairing the caller with the appropriate translator) and/or expanding the current pre-recorded prompts for selecting a numerical option on one's keypad beyond English and Spanish to include the most other widely-spoken languages (based on U.S. Census data) (e.g., "Press 3 for Mandarin/Chinese...press 4 for Tagalog...press 5 for Vietnamese," etc.).

Recommendation #2: Provide a language identification tool to assist Helpline operators in the identification of a disaster survivor's language for the top three languages encountered on FEMA's Helpline beyond English and Spanish and provide training on how to most effectively and efficiently use this resource.

Recommendation #3: Update FEMA's printed/written Helpline resources to indicate that the disaster survivor, prior to calling, should select option 3 for languages other than English or Spanish. As FEMA expands availability in other languages, incorporate updates into printed/written materials.

DISCUSSION WITH MANAGEMENT AND AUDIT FOLLOWUP

We discussed the issues we identified in this report with FEMA officials during our audit and at meetings on March 7, 2014, June 3, 2014, and June 5, 2014. FEMA officials declined a formal exit conference, but provided us comments on May 28, 2014, and June 12, 2014. They generally agreed with our findings and recommendations and said they would provide their written response after we issue our final report.

Within 90 days of the date of this memorandum, please provide our office with a written response that includes your (1) agreement or disagreement, (2) corrective action plan, and (3) target completion date for each recommendation. Also, please include contact information for responsible parties and any other supporting



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documentation necessary to inform us about the current status of the recommendation. Until we receive and evaluate your response, we will consider the recommendations open and unresolved.

Consistent with our responsibility under the *Inspector General Act*, we will provide copies of our report to appropriate congressional committees with oversight and appropriation responsibility over the Department of Homeland Security. We will post the report on our website for public dissemination.

Major contributors to this report are Humberto Melara, Director; Devin Polster, Audit Manager; Connie Tan, Auditor; Victor Du, Auditor; and Montul Long, Auditor.

Please call me with any questions at (202) 254-4100, or your staff may contact Tonda Hadley, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit Services, at (214) 436-5200.



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