



City of Austin

MEMO



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RECEIVED

AUG 21 2007

OFFICE OF COUNCIL MEMBER
JENNIFER KIM

Date August 21, 2007

To Council Member Jennifer Kim

From Stephen L. Morgan, City Auditor

Subject Information on City of Austin preparedness for emergency communication with Asian communities

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On June 25th, 2007 you requested information on the City of Austin (COA) preparedness to communicate emergency information to the Asian Community during crisis or emergency situations

The U S Census Bureau estimated that between the years 2000 and 2005 the Asian population in Austin grew from 30,960 to 35,449. In 2000 the Census Bureau classified forty three percent of the Asian population five years and over in Austin as speaking English "less than very well"

The Asian community in Austin includes Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese. Language and cultural differences represent the major barriers to communicating with non-English speaking Asian-Americans during crisis or emergency times. Due to these barriers non-English speaking Asian-Americans may not be able to prepare for disasters, respond to a disaster, or recover from a disaster.

It is the City's responsibility to determine how to communicate with the non-English speaking population and the languages in which it will communicate information. The federal and state governments provide only broad guidelines on these issues. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) advises local authorities to identify and list the non-English speaking groups "in excess of some planning threshold" but does not define the threshold. FEMA also advises local authorities to note the method that should be used to communicate with each identified group, but does not mandate what method to use.

Similarly, the State of Texas mandates local authorities to describe the methods that may be used to disseminate emergency information to special groups such as non-English speakers. However, the State does not set a minimum population threshold for requiring communication, nor does it mandate any methodology for communicating emergency information.

Currently the City disseminates emergency and disaster messages in English and Spanish only. The City's Office of Emergency Management has not developed criterion for determining when other languages should be required during crisis or emergency times. The means of

The City of Austin is committed to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Reasonable modifications and equal access to communications will be provided upon request.

communication to non-English speaking communities during emergency situations include the use of multi-lingual personnel from Austin Fire Department and Austin Police Department. However, the City Emergency Operations Management Office told us that currently EMS, Fire, and Police dispatchers do not have Asian speakers. For languages other than English and Spanish, the 911 dispatchers have access to an interpreter over the phone.

The City Emergency Operations Management Office told us that they intend to establish an Asian Community Emergency Response Team Program (CERT). Currently the City has only implemented a Spanish CERT to work alongside its overall CERT program. CERT training includes courses in emergency preparedness and response principles such as fire suppression, storm watching, first aid, search and rescue, and advanced training such as CPR. The Emergency Management Office noted that any effort to establish an Asian CERT will be contingent on identifying funding. Initial costs for training a team of 50 people (standard for CERT classes) is \$3750 or \$75 per person. The Office of Emergency Management will request for funding from the Federal grants in the fiscal year 2008. In the event that these funds are not obtained, then a request for additional funding will be included in the Office of Emergency Management budget for the fiscal year 2008-09.

We noted that some cities have taken additional measures to address the problem of emergency communication to non-English speakers.

- The City of Seattle provides emergency and disaster preparedness information in 14 languages on its official City website. These languages include Asian languages such as Chinese, Cambodian, Japanese, Korean, Hmong, Laotian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. In order to determine the new languages that should be considered for the purpose of emergency communications, the City of Seattle Office of Emergency Management uses the predominantly requested languages for translation at the 911 center as criteria. Furthermore, the City has developed and trained disaster aid and response teams in neighborhoods throughout the City. These teams are trained to go house-to-house delivering emergency messages to people in the neighborhoods who are not conversant in the English language.
- The City of Houston Hurricane & Disaster Preparedness Guide is available in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Although the City's Office of Emergency Management officials pointed out that the decision to translate the guide into Chinese and Vietnamese was based on the size of the Chinese and Vietnamese population in the City, they stated that they were not aware of any existing criteria for the City to determine a required language.
- The Office of Emergency Management in Franklin County's City of Columbus, Ohio uses the services of the people in the immigrant communities to interpret at various "emergency scenes." The City Office of Management officials reported that this helps to mitigate the fear some of these groups have in dealing with government agencies.

We welcome the opportunity to provide information to you on this issue. If you have any questions about the information we have provided, please contact Assistant City Auditor Russ Needler at 974-2836 or Auditor Henry Katumwa at 974-1335.

cc Mayor

Council Members

City Manager