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Equity in Emergency Response:

Addressing Multilingual Communication Barriers

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Image from [NBC News](#)

Executive Summary

Wildfires continue to devastate communities across California, disproportionately impacting Spanish-speaking populations who own businesses in high-risk zones. There is an urgent need for greater multilingual access to post-fire recovery resources to support Latino-owned

¹ Every summer, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends a cohort of ~30 Cal students to Sacramento for an eight-week public service internship. In 2025, the cohort included 11 Diversity & Entrepreneurship Fellows, who focused their research on topics related to POC, immigrant, and/or women-owned businesses.

businesses. These types of businesses often face barriers to receiving timely alerts, understanding disaster relief programs, and navigating the recovery process.

This policy proposal explores how political actors can support the expansion of language justice. It outlines three key interventions: establishing statewide standards for multilingual alert systems; allocating targeted funding for multilingual disaster outreach coordinators; and requiring agencies to collect and report data on language access and aid distribution. Together, these solutions aim to advance language justice and improve multilingual emergency response systems.

By improving access to inclusive communication, these resources will better support Latino communities and businesses. Expanding multilingual access is a matter of community safety and resilience.

Background on Multilingual Access

California faces a dual crisis: severe and frequent wildfires and systemic inequities in emergency preparedness. This primarily impacts non-English-speaking populations. Spanish-speaking businesses operating in high-risk wildfire areas, such as the San Gabriel Valley, Santa Monica Mountains, and Angeles National Forest, are frequently affected by wildfires. Although recovery support exists, barriers for Spanish-speaking communities are growing. These include limited access to emergency alerts, recovery resources, and underinvestment in multilingual services.

Current California law requires every local public agency serving “a substantial number of non-English-speaking people” to employ “a sufficient number of qualified bilingual staff”² to

² See California Legislative Information (https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=7.&title=1.&part=&chapter=17.5.&article=)

provide information and services in the language of the non-English-speaking population. It also requires that any materials explaining services available to the public must be translated into any non-English language “spoken by a substantial number of the public served by the agency.”³

While these agencies are required to provide translation services, they have discretion to define what qualifies as a “substantial number of non-English-speaking people.”⁴ This enables them to set high standards for translation services, even when serving a substantial non-English speaking population.

In 2023, Assemblymember Mike Fong (D-Alhambra) introduced AB 1638, which requires a local public agency serving a jurisdiction where 5% or more of the population primarily speaks a language other than English to provide all emergency-related information in that language⁵. AB 1638 acknowledges that current state translation thresholds are vague and insufficient, often excluding non-English-speaking or limited-English-proficient populations.

Furthermore, offices of legislators representing wildfire-affected districts often have limited multilingual capacity, especially for Spanish-speaking communities. Many legislative websites lack translated material, which are essential for constituent services during disaster relief. Key resources, such as financial aid applications and press releases, are usually only available in English, which makes them harder to access for Spanish-speaking business owners. When these

³ See California Legislative Information (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=7.&title=1.&part=&chapter=17.5.&article=)

⁴ See California Legislative Information (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=7.&title=1.&part=&chapter=17.5.&article=)

⁵ See Cal Matters (https://calmatters.digitaldemocracy.org/bills/ca_202320240ab1638)

owners reach out to legislative offices, staff often are not equipped to respond in any language other than English. This is especially troubling in wildfire-prone districts, where timely communication is vital for public safety and economic recovery in Latino communities.

Bills like Assemblymember Fong's AB 1638 are crucial for improving multilingual communication. Evacuation warnings, fire containment updates, and financial aid deadlines should not be privileges granted only to English speakers. Expanding multilingual communication systems ensures that Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs are not left behind during a crisis. Investing in language access in California will help bridge the gap between policymakers and underserved communities, particularly Latino-owned businesses, making disaster response more inclusive and effective.

Policy Recommendations

The first policy proposal to amend the multilingual wildfire recovery issue is to expand Multilingual Alert Systems with Statewide Standards. This means that the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) would enforce a statewide standard for emergency alerts. This includes mandating that counties with Spanish-speaking populations above 5% provide both Spanish and English alerts through text, radio, and television services⁶. Partnering with Spanish-speaking media would promote an influx of multilingual updates and information distributed by community-based organizations. This would provide clarity, speed, and accessibility to emergency alerts and resources for Spanish-speaking individuals, which in turn will further support business owners.

⁶ This proposal is modeled after Fong AB 1638
(https://calmatters.digitaldemocracy.org/bills/ca_202320240ab1638)

The second policy option is to fund multilingual outreach directors to aid in recovery efforts after a wildfire. The proposal would specifically allocate annual funding to wildfire-prone counties, which would then create liaisons between Spanish-speaking businesses and emergency responders. This is crucial for building trust between both communities and expanding recovery efforts. Additionally, multilingual outreach coordinators should conduct pre- and post-disaster resource navigation in Spanish, alongside collaborating with local chambers of commerce and small business development agencies to further support small businesses. This would be essential for encouraging participation in relief programs.

The third policy proposal is to require data tracking on language access for residents of California. Ideally, this proposal would collect demographic data on the languages spoken within counties that have received disaster aid. Agencies conducting the data tracking would monitor the percentage of Spanish-speaking businesses that have received financial assistance, identify gaps in outreach and language access delivery, and report this information to Cal OES⁷.

Currently, there is no consistent collection of linguistic background data for those receiving wildfire aid. This lack of data often results in failing to reach communities of color and other marginalized populations, especially Spanish-speaking businesses. Collecting this information would allow legislators to advocate for additional funding to help redevelop damaged businesses and strengthen access to language assistance.

Sacramento to Latino-Owned Businesses

⁷This proposal is modeled after the Preferred Language Spoken in California Facilities in health care (<https://data.chhs.ca.gov/dataset/preferred-language-spoken-in-california-facilities#:~:text=The%20dataset%20contains%20combined%20counts,the%20exact%20separation%20of%20languages.>)

Latino-owned businesses are pillars of California's economy, fueling growth and employment across all regions of the state. Yet, when disasters strike, they often suffer extensive damage to inventory, infrastructure, and income. Furthermore, they are frequently excluded from the recovery process due to language barriers with local agencies and community resources.

To create meaningful change, leaders in Sacramento must go beyond small gestures. With real investment, measurable equity, and political courage, language access can become more than symbolic, it can be transformational. Translations are not just words; they are trusted messages that guide Latino communities toward safety and recovery.

Tracking how aid flows into these neighborhoods is essential to ensure needs are being met and to identify where systems are falling short. This accountability is crucial to continuing the work of supporting businesses owned by California Latino business owners.

Language equity should never be framed as a luxury. It is a necessity. Political courage is needed to reform outdated systems and ensure that recovery efforts reach those who are too often left behind.

Improving multilingual access in disaster recovery is a vital step toward ensuring Latino-owned businesses are not excluded. It's a step toward building a California where every business owner has the opportunity to rebuild and thrive.