

# Desconectado:

How Emergency Information Got  
Lost In Translation During The  
Northern California Wildfires

An Information Ecosystem Assessment  
focusing on the needs of the Spanish-  
speaking population in Sonoma and  
Napa Counties during and after the 2017  
wildfire season



**Internews**  
Local voices. Global change.

September 2018

## About this report

Internews is an international non-profit that empowers local media to give people the news and information they need, the ability to connect, and the means to make their voices heard. For 35 years and in more than 100 countries, Internews has worked with local partners to build hundreds of sustainable organizations, strengthen the capacity of thousands of media professionals, human rights activists, and information entrepreneurs, and reach millions of people with quality, local information, improving lives and building lasting change.

Internews has over a decade of experience in responding to humanitarian emergencies and disasters through addressing communication needs at times of crisis in a diverse range of settings, including in Haiti, Chad, Central African Republic, Kenya, Somalia, Syria, Jordan, South Sudan, Liberia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Gaza and the West Bank. In the United States, Internews has worked to support the information needs of communities in post-hurricane New Orleans, New Jersey and Puerto Rico. Internews' Humanitarian programs provide critically important resources to ensure that we can deploy quickly in times of crisis, and proactively develop tools, strategies and techniques that build resilience in vulnerable communities.

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## I. Executive Summary

The 2017 wildfires in Northern California were referred to by Governor Jerry Brown at the time as potentially the “greatest tragedy that California has ever faced.” While the 2018 Mendocino Complex fire is the largest fire in California history, last year’s fire remains the most destructive. More than 5,600 structures were destroyed, damages exceeded \$2 billion, and 44 people lost their lives. Like the majority of residents in the affected region, many Latino community members experienced devastating loss. Theirs, however was exacerbated by a lack of access to emergency and recovery information in their primary language, Spanish.

In humanitarian disasters, people affected by the crisis have an urgent need for information. Getting the right information can mean the difference between life and death. Affected communities need information – in languages they can understand - about safe places to seek shelter, how to reconnect with family members or what aid services may be available for them. Otherwise, rumors and misinformation can exacerbate the crisis and lead people to make poor or uninformed decisions.

Latinos comprise almost a third of the population in the North Bay region, with up to a quarter of them undocumented. This population struggled to get news in Spanish on where the fires were spreading, how to stay safe, and how to access aid and services. Misinformation and rumors made it even more difficult - including stories about shelters asking for valid picture IDs and social security numbers, and that an undocumented Latino man had caused the initial fire.

“We didn’t have any electricity or water,” said a young woman from Sonoma. “We were really afraid to ask for help because we did not know the language.”

This assessment aims to understand the challenges the Spanish-speaking population faced in accessing information during the fires, reasons for the lack of information in Spanish, and consequences of not having information in one’s primary language. It also offers some insights and suggestions for how to address this issue, to both continue recovery from the 2017 wildfire season, and to prepare for future disasters.

This report is based on five months of collaborative research, during which time we meet with 26 community-based organizations, talked to more than 300 Latino community members of Napa and Sonoma counties, conducted face-to-face surveys and facilitated Listening Circles, visited local media, and attended community fairs and gatherings. From this research some consistent themes arose.

**Lack of information in Spanish caused fear and uncertainty:** Over and over we heard from residents that the inability to access timely, accurate information in Spanish exacerbated the already fearful and dangerous situations caused by the fires. “The fear I felt from not speaking English is something I had never felt before,” said one resident. This resulted in residents not

seeking help at shelters and crisis centers because they either didn't know about them, they didn't trust them, or they were fearful of ICE being present. As such, many slept in their cars in fields, or near the beach, because they didn't know where else to go. Lack of information was also a health issue: a number of residents spoke about continuing to work outside while the fires were ongoing, without masks or without proper masks. While they were concerned about their health, they simply didn't know how to protect themselves, where they could get masks, or what they could say to their employers.

**People trust people and rely on community organizations:** While local government entities were slow to put crucial emergency information out in Spanish during the wildfires, many in the Latino community banded together to fill in these gaps. They translated important news, created parallel recovery resources for residents afraid of accessing official aid because of immigration concerns, and pushed local leaders to expand their efforts with bilingual press conferences and emergency SMS systems.

Many residents heard about Nixle, the emergency text alert system, through their children's schools. Other efforts led by Latino community organizations and activists included posting key emergency information on a variety of trusted Facebook groups, organizing a Spanish-language town hall in Santa Rosa, and facilitating word-of-mouth campaigns. As they had consistent and ongoing outreach efforts prior to the fire, they already had well-established trust and the ability to reach the community.

**Local radio station KBBF was a critical resource:** A spectacular effort came from the Santa Rosa-based bilingual community radio station KBBF. When news of the wildfires began to disseminate, KBBF station manager Edgar Avila turned his community programming into a 24/7 Spanish-language emergency news format as families looked desperately for information they could understand. For many families it was the only way to know what was happening. Napa resident Elba Gonzalez-Mares said her mom dragged an old battery-powered radio out of storage. "And she was listening to KBBF," said Gonzalez-Mares.

Not only did the station become an information resource, it also became a hub for all sorts of resources as families dropped off food, clothes, water, and other amenities. Because many Latino families were not able to access the shelters - either because they were afraid that ICE might be at the official shelters, they didn't know where they were, or they didn't feel comfortable as they lacked linguistic and culturally appropriate assistance - many came to KBBF instead to access emergency supplies.

**Translations matter:** Using machine translation or translation services may be the fastest way to get information out, but it is often confusing and incorrect, or simply not appropriate. Fully understanding the difference between simply translating emergency information into Spanish, and ensuring it is culturally relevant and accessible is important, including taking into consideration education levels, technical language, context and culture.

**People still feel unprepared:** Many residents expressed great concern about the possibility of another fire and the fact that they still have very little information about what to do and how to prepare. “Nobody has come to provide us with information or to inform us on how to prepare for another potential crisis,” said a Napa Valley farmworker.

**Accountability starts before disasters:** True accountability is about dialogue, which begins long before a disaster strikes. We heard from a number of community organizations about the importance of ensuring the Latino population is not only represented but included in planning future disaster response in the county. This includes developing Language Access Plans, as well as ensuring bilingual staff are employed, particularly in positions that interact with the public.

## II. Background

The North Bay’s Latino population began to grow under a series of labor agreements between the US and Mexico in the 1940s, when immigrants began working in the wine industry. Information needs at that time included immigration, housing, employment, and education, topics that remain key to the hundreds of thousands of Latinos who continue to work in agriculture, tourism, and other area industries.

The Latino population in the North Bay is now a mixture of generational residents and more recent arrivals, meaning some residents rely heavily on Spanish, while others are bilingual, or mostly English speaking. In [recent years](#) more Central and South American immigrants have come to the area, adding to a population that has traditionally been dominated by Mexicans. Around 30% of Sonoma’s residents are Latino, and they are predicted to be the majority ethnic group in both Sonoma and Napa counties by [2050](#).

	Number of residents	Hispanic residents	Adults who speak Spanish at home (18+)	Children who speak Spanish at home (5-17)
Sonoma County <sup>1</sup>	504,217	27%	17.6%	34.5%
Napa County <sup>2</sup>	140,973	34%	25.7%	35.6%

<sup>1</sup> <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US06097-sonoma-county-ca/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US06055-napa-county-ca/>

Immigration issues are front and center in the region, as current federal policies are increasingly aggressive towards local undocumented laborers. Immigration [raids](#) in the area in February left many families fearing for their futures. A rapid response phone number was set up by local immigration advocates to help families who might be experiencing immigration issues. Sonoma County, and its Sheriff's Department, have taken a mostly supportive stance towards undocumented people working in the area, knowing local industries rely on that labor. While relatively few Latino families lost homes in the wildfires, they were impacted in other ways, specifically employment. Many individuals worked housekeeping and gardening jobs in neighborhoods that burned down, or at restaurants that were damaged, and were left without paychecks for weeks, months, and some continue to be unemployed. Vineyards were also impacted by the fires, putting many agriculture jobs in jeopardy.

A local \$4 million relief fund called [UndocuFund](#) helped bridge the gap for more than a thousand families who might not have otherwise received disaster assistance. With many families afraid to engage FEMA because of their immigration status, this money helped cover rent, lost wages, and food until impacted Latino residents were able to recover.

Affordable housing is also an issue that was significant before the wildfires, and even worse after. Before the fire, the area had around 97% home occupancy rates, and that number has gotten worse as thousands of homes were destroyed or damaged. With median area rent for housing at more than three thousand dollars a month, many Latino families are forced into overcrowded and substandard living conditions. One resident related an anecdote of a house divided by the landlord into 10 small spaces, each rented out for \$300 a month. Despite being out of work for months due to the wildfires, people still have utility bills, rent, and mortgages to deal with. The possibility of losing existing housing has taken on an even greater weight post-disaster as there are hardly any replacement options.

How has housing been impacted?	
Before Fires	After Fires
<p>Rent was high</p> <p>RENT went up 25% per year.</p> <p>my wages remained stagnant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Since demand went up, landlords were very picky and didn't return calls</li><li>- Rent extremely high, # of available houses decreased</li><li>- Unable to find housing</li></ul>

During a group session in April, clients at On the Move in Santa Rosa identified housing concerns as a major issue, both before and after the fires. Photo by Deborah Ensor



### III. Research Methodology

Making sense of the inevitable information chaos in a crisis starts by listening to the affected population. It is critical to find out what information people need and what they are not getting. A parallel track of inquiry examines the local context, what we call the information ecosystem. This local ecosystem will have its own particular nuances, strengths and weaknesses. And perhaps most importantly, its areas of trust and influence. The information ecosystem is composed of the physical, social and institutional infrastructures that support information production and flow, including media outlets, government agencies, community groups, and local organic news sharing. It includes the information needs and gaps experienced by local residents in both an immediate and ongoing context, and the topics that are of primary interest. The ecosystem also considers where a community's trust lies in terms of their ability to ask questions and get answers and information regarding the issues impacting their day-to-day existence.

**Information Needs Assessment Calendar**

**April, May:** Conducting field research, in-person and phone interviews with community leaders and organizations

**June:** Planning and organizing with local partners for community engagement activities

**July-August:** Conducting 5 Listening Circles, attending 6 community events, collecting 256 surveys

This report is based on five months of collaborative research, during which time we meet with community-based organizations, facilitated Listening Circles, surveyed hundreds of residents, visited local media, and attended community fairs and gatherings. The information needs assessment included:

#### CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, LOCAL LEADERS

We held in-person visits and interviews with 26 community-based organizations across both Sonoma and Napa counties (please see annex at the end of this report), listening to the experiences of these agencies during the fires, and the amazing work they continue to do to help communities – particularly the Latino community - to recover and prepare for future disasters. In addition we:

- Talked with government officials and higher education institutions
- Held discussions with North Bay residents affected by the wildfires
- Visited community gathering places and observed how people share information



## MONITORING THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

During our visits, we continually monitored Spanish-language media coverage of the 2017 wildfires, and met with Spanish-language radio stations and newspapers, as well as bloggers, moderators of Facebook pages, and filmmakers. We checked out bulletin boards at local businesses and restaurants, and flyers distributed through health clinics and community organizations.

## COMMUNITY LISTENING CIRCLES

In partnership with six different local organizations, we hosted five Listening Circles with enthusiastic participation from 41 participants. The Listening Circles, which lasted from 60-90 minutes, were an opportunity for community members to talk about their experiences during the wildfires, and specifically to hear about their thoughts on receiving information during and about the wildfires in Spanish. It was also an opportunity to discuss their information needs now – almost a year later – and to provide their own suggestions for how they might like to



Members of the UpValley Latina Seniors group discuss their concerns about receiving information during the fires at a Listening Circle event at Calistoga Family Apartments on Aug. 16. Photo by Mili Gomez

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receive information in the future. Discussion questions included:

- What sort of information do/did you want to know about?
- Where did you go to find information about that issue?
- What particular challenges did you face in finding information you were looking for?
- What information do you wish you had gotten?
- Was there ever a time when you were not able to find info you were looking for?

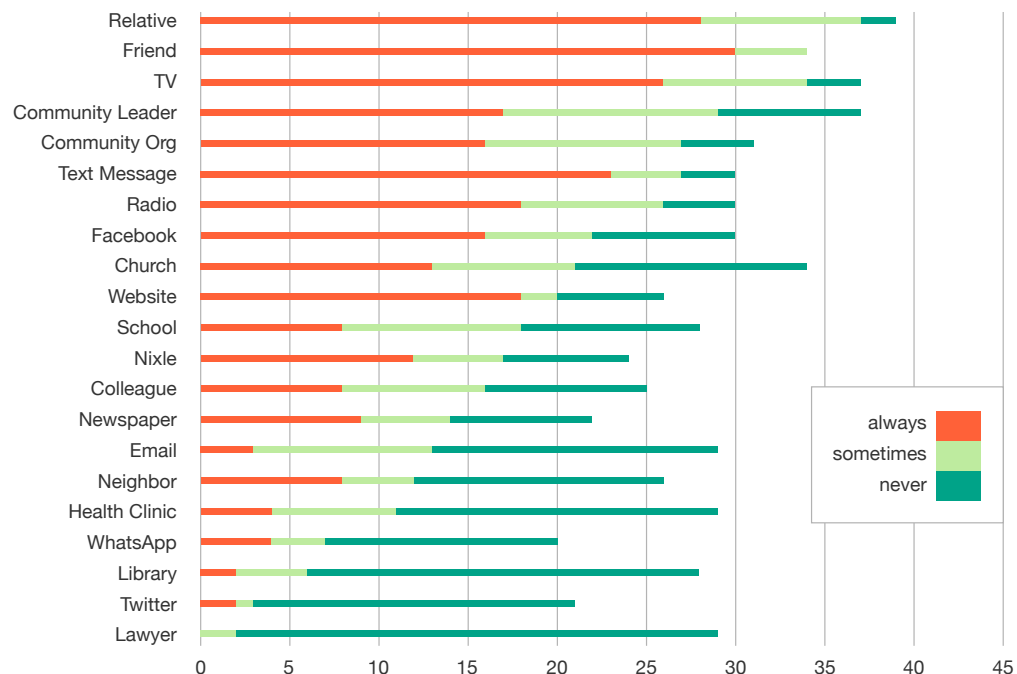
Discussion points and input from the Listening Circles are included throughout this assessment.

We also included an interactive exercise, asking people how often they go to the following sources – including media, community spaces and people – to be informed. They indicated whether they utilize the sources “always,” “sometimes” or “never”.

The sources that received the most “always” and “sometimes” responses were: relative, friend, TV, text message and community organizations.

The sources that received the most “never” responses were: lawyer, library, health clinic, Twitter and email.

#### How often do you use these sources of information?



*The Listening Sessions were conducted by Internews consultants with the support of the following community organizations:*

1. **Logrando Éxito Academia (LEA).** A parents group that meets monthly to be informed and engaged on local issues, coordinated by Rafael Vazquez at Santa Rosa Junior College.
2. **UpValley Latina Seniors at Calistoga Family Apartments.** An elder women's group that meets monthly, convened by UpValley Family Center.
3. **On the Move** hosted parents from a number of their different programs, at McPherson Elementary School in Napa.
4. **St. Helena Campesino Housing of California Human Development** hosted the discussion with resident Napa Valley farmworkers in the cafeteria during dinner.
5. **La Luz Center**, in partnership with California Hope, convened clients and staff for a listening circle in Sonoma.

## SURVEYS AND COMMUNITY EVENTS

We hosted tables at six different events in the Latino community across Napa and Sonoma counties, gathering 256 responses. At all of the events, we assisted people to complete the survey, so they could ask questions and discuss their thoughts and ideas as well. The survey was translated and checked by six different native Spanish speakers, to ensure it was culturally accurate. The survey asked:

1. When the fires happened, where did you get information?
  - Radio station
  - Newspaper
  - TV
  - Online
  - Facebook
  - Community organization
  - County alerts
  - Other

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Survey tables were set up at the Back to School Health Fair at Sonoma Charter School on Aug. 1 to hear from community members about their experiences finding information during and after the wildfires. Photo by Mili Gomez

2. Please list the actual name of the source used in relation for the question above. Ex. If you chose TV, which channel did you tune into?
3. What were the challenges you had with getting information during the fires?
4. What is the most trusted and useful source of information within your community?
5. In the aftermath of last year's fires, and the start of this year's fire season, which issues are most important to you? (choose all that apply)
  - Loss or lack of employment
  - Provision of basic resources (food, water, clothing, etc.) as a result of the fires
  - Housing
  - Child care
  - Health care
  - Fire prevention/preparedness
  - Immigration status
  - Other:



## 6. Demographics:

- Age
- Gender
- Neighborhood/community
- Primary language

The survey respondents were from Calistoga, Cloverdale, Glen Ellen, Larkfield, Santa Rosa, Sonoma, Vallejo, with majority from Santa Rosa (64) and Sonoma (74). Survey respondents were ages 17-76, with the average age of 39. For all but two, Spanish was their primary language. The majority of respondents were women (79%).



Internews hosted a table at the Evento Cultural Indigena at Montgomery High School in Santa Rosa on Aug. 12 to collect surveys on the information needs of area residents during and after the fires. Photo courtesy of Movimiento Cultural de la Union Indigena

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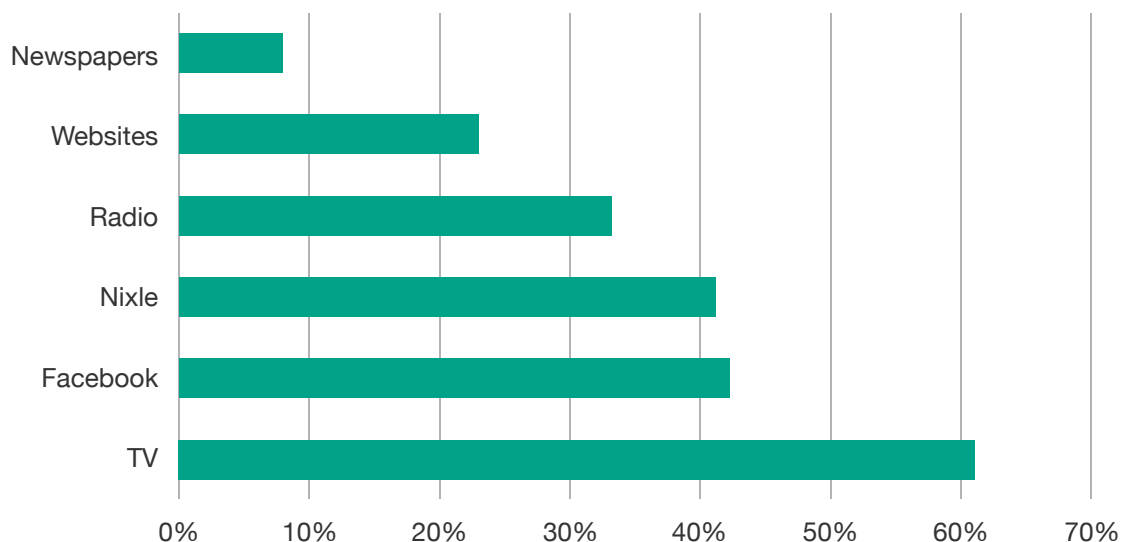
#### *The surveys were conducted at the following community events:*

- Napa Valley Farmworkers Foundation Día de la Familia street fair
- Back to School Health Fair, Sonoma Charter School
- Evento Cultural Indigena, Montgomery High School, Santa Rosa
- Health Fair, Alliance Medical Center, Healdsburg
- Health Fair, Alliance Medical Center, Windsor
- UpValley Back to School Event, Calistoga Elementary School
- Surveys were also completed by clients or members of 5 partnering organizations/groups

## IV. Survey Responses: Information Access

### WHEN THE FIRES HAPPENED, WHERE DID YOU GET INFORMATION?

The first question we asked focused on what sources people turned to when the fires first broke out. Even though TV did not have hyper-local information about what to do or where to go, the majority of respondents looked there first. Social media was the second most popular go-to source, including Facebook and Nixle, the county's text-based emergency alert system.

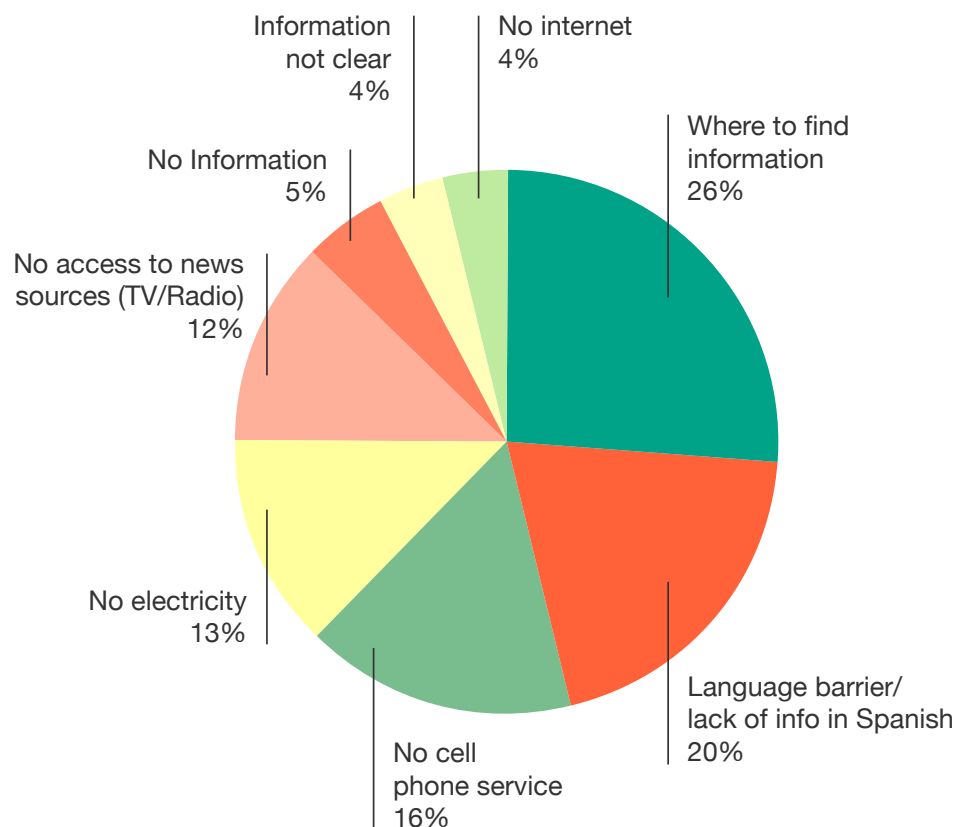


\*Note percentages do not add up to 100, as participants were allowed to select multiple answers

## WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES YOU HAD IN OBTAINING INFORMATION DURING THE FIRES?

This was an open-ended question, answered by 169 people. 56 people responded with answers not directly about information, listing challenges such as smoke, fear or concern for their children. Of the 113 who provided answers about their information challenges, the largest concern was about where to go to get information (mostly about shelters, resources and neighborhood specific information) that was trustworthy, reliable, timely, and that they could access from wherever they were – at home, in their car, or at a shelter. The next issue was receiving that information in Spanish. “There was a lack of reliable information in Spanish,” said one respondent. “There was no information on Nixle in Spanish,” said another. “All the news was in English and my parents didn’t know what was going on.”

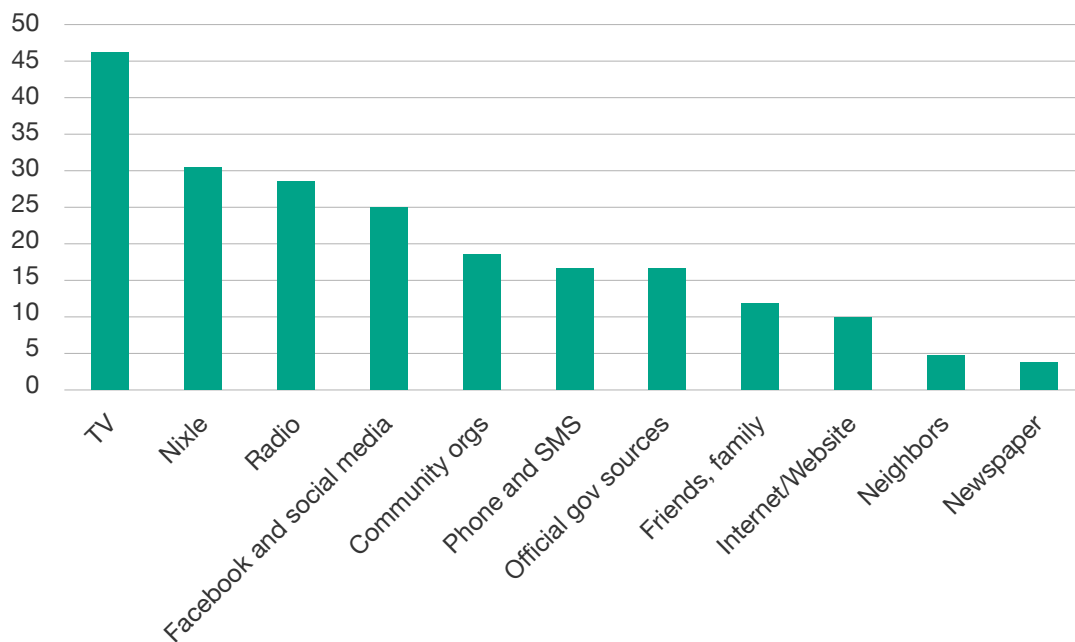
Lack of access to information – including not having cell phone service, electricity, access to the internet, or news on TV or radio, was also critical. Finally, several respondents indicated they had no information at all, or that the information they received was confusing and unclear. Only one respondent indicated they had no problems with information.





## WHAT IS THE NUMBER ONE MOST TRUSTED AND USEFUL SOURCE OF INFORMATION WITHIN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Finally, we asked what is the number one most trusted and useful source of information within your community. Again, TV was the most common answer, and despite the fact that the Nixle messages were in English, they were still highly trusted. Radio - especially Spanish-language radio - is also highly trusted.



\*Based on number of respondents, with a total of 215

## V. Media Landscape Pre- and Post-Fires

Sonoma County's signature newspaper, the Press Democrat, started publishing in the 1850s, and has long been the go-to English-language media source in the county. Six years ago the paper was owned by a Florida-based media conglomerate and its future was cloudy, but then area business leaders purchased it and established local ownership. While the paper's staff is still a fraction of what it used to be, they put out an essential information resource for the region. Reporters, while trying simultaneously to ensure the safety of their own homes and families, covered the wildfires that killed 44 residents and burned more than 5,000 homes. And the paper was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for its efforts.

Santa Rosa-based public media outlet KRCB produces some North Bay specific television and radio content for local audiences, along with broadcasting PBS and NPR national

programming. The radio station offered space and collaboration opportunities with San Francisco-based NPR affiliates KQED and KALW during wildfire coverage.

As a nod to the growing Latino population in its coverage area, the Press Democrat launched Prensa Sonoma in 2015, a Spanish-language news site and monthly paper. It joined existing bilingual newspaper La Voz, which publishes a monthly edition with positive profiles of the local Latino community and resources like job notices. In Napa, the local [Napa Valley Register](#) used to offer some Spanish-language articles through google translate, but no longer does so.

Only 4% of survey respondents identified newspapers at the most useful source of information in their community, and only 8% turned to them during the fires. Community residents said they didn't rely on newspapers during the fires, as the information was not as up-to-date as other sources. They noted there are limited Spanish-language papers available, most which don't publish frequently enough for emergency information.

The go-to outlet for Spanish-speaking residents since its debut in the early 1970s has been community radio outlet [KBBF](#), considered one of the first dedicated bilingual radio stations in the country. The station has traditionally relied on a majority volunteer staff of DJs and producers to air informational and music programming throughout the week. The station has also long aired national Spanish-language news programs from Radio Bilingüe like Línea Abierta. During the wildfires, because of a lack of emergency information in Spanish, the station became a critical source of news for many Spanish-speaking residents. Station management changed the format to 24/7 news and talk, asking DJs to share the latest fire updates and invite in guests who could inform residents on issues related to shelters, jobs, school, and other crucial topics.

A number of commercial music and sports-focused radio stations also broadcast in Spanish in Sonoma and Napa counties. [KZNB](#) broadcasts in Spanish, focusing on a Mexican pop music format on both FM and AM channels, and is based in Petaluma. [KXTS](#) broadcasts regional Mexican music, and did some emergency broadcasting during the fires. [KJOR](#) is based in Windsor, and has a Spanish-language oldies music format, and is part of the larger Radio Lazer network. [KIQI](#) is based in San Francisco and reaches up to the North Bay, sharing news, music and sports to a predominantly Latino audience. [KKSE](#), also broadcasting from the Bay Area, has a Spanish-language sports format.

And while TV is one of the most utilized media by the Spanish-speaking community (especially Telemundo and Univision), the consensus among residents we spoke with is that the English-language stations provided more useful emergency information. “Los en inglés tienen más información,” a community member's child told her during fires, so they switched over to those channels, with children helping out with translation.

Anecdotally, some of the local media outlets in the Sonoma region mentioned feeling crowded by more resourced media from the San Francisco area, as well as national reporters who came to cover the wildfires. They indicated that the North Bay has some nuances that outside

media missed while covering the emergency, and there was some resentment around that. Considering the local Latino audience, however, the wildfires brought bilingual reporters from Bay Area Telemundo and Univision newsrooms who are not as likely to cover the North Bay, giving residents local Spanish-language news they don't normally get.

## VI. Information Ecosystem Findings

As is the case in many emergency situations, the main media outlets are not necessarily the best ways to get crucial information to communities in need, especially traditionally isolated ones like the Latino immigrant community in Sonoma and Napa counties. While the local paper was winning a Pulitzer for its coverage, thousands in the area were not necessarily benefitting from that news, because it wasn't in their language, and it wasn't being delivered through their trusted channels.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

Elba Gonzalez-Mares is the Executive Director of a health initiative in Napa County. When an earthquake hit her area a few years ago she realized local leaders didn't have a plan for getting emergency information to Latino residents, including her own family. She began pushing for official efforts to make SMS alerts and social media from law enforcement bilingual. But more than that, she began to work with a group of other community organizers called COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disaster) on how to not only get crucial information disseminated in Spanish, but how to make it culturally relevant too.

Latino community members "trust people," said Gonzalez-Mares. "So if I say, this is legit, they're going to read it," she said. Her formula for getting the word out doesn't even involve media outlets or official government entities. "Community-based organizations, faith-based organizations and schools. You go to those three, you're going to get to the Latino population."

*"Community-based organizations, faith-based organizations and schools. You go to those three, you're going to get to the Latino population."*

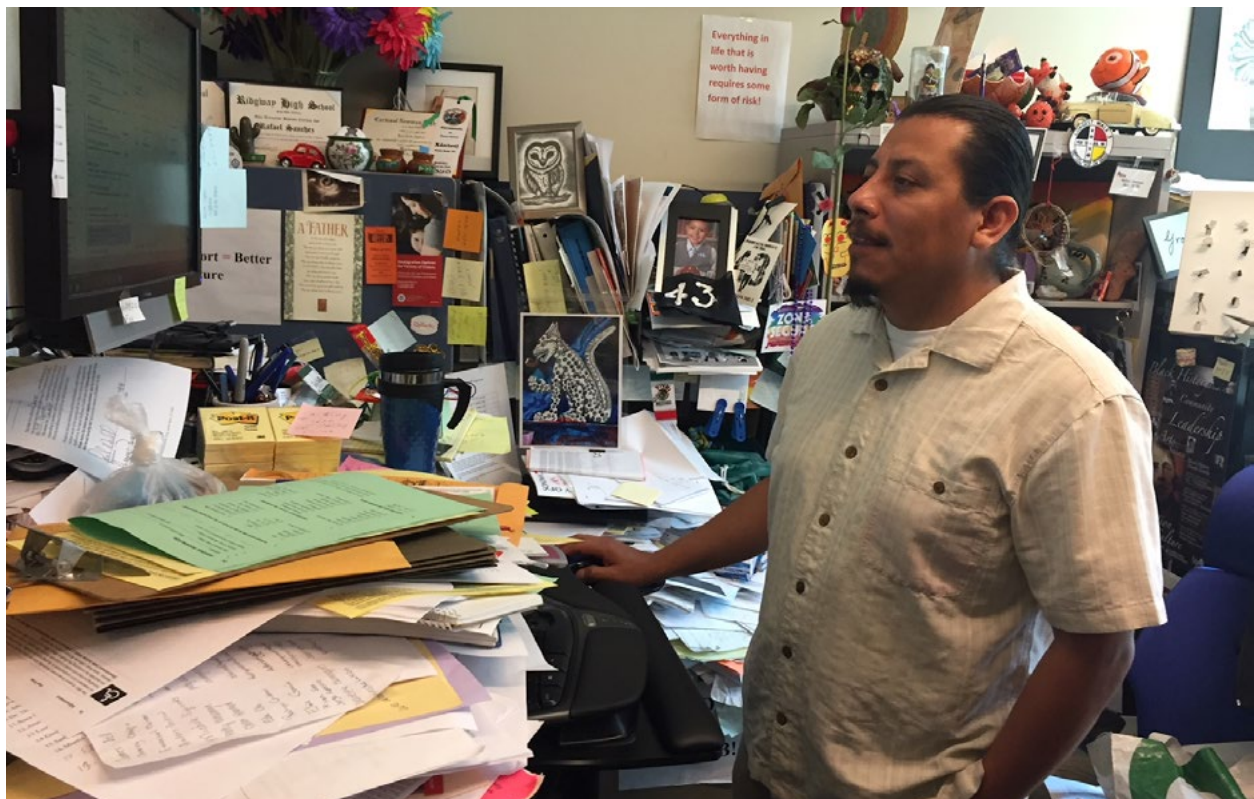
- Elba Gonzalez-Mares, Executive Director of a health initiative in Napa County

One of the go-to bilingual community organizations in Sonoma is La Luz. Staff there help area residents access basic needs like food, housing, jobs, health care and counseling. Much of their focus before the wildfires had been assisting Latino residents with immigration issues and navigating the Affordable Care Act. Offering key information on those topics in Spanish helped them develop some outreach strategies that came in handy during the wildfires. They began putting out fliers through a local food distribution inviting

people to apply for monetary assistance connected to the disaster. “The next day we had a whole line of people wanting to know what this was about,” said La Luz’s Veronica Vences. The non-profit wound up distributing nearly a million dollars to local Latino families to help with wage loss after the wildfires, which was integral to residents paying rent and keeping their homes.

In addition to offline grassroots strategies, a host of popular local Spanish-language Facebook pages exist as well. Vences says one page in particular, an online swapmeet called “Ofertas de Napa,” became a kind of emergency information newswire. “They were going crazy with the information on the fire,” she said. Gonzalez-Mares said she also noticed a lot of online fire-related information was incorrect, so she started to post some Spanish-language fliers with sourced emergency facts. There’s also a [Pulga de Santa Rosa](#) with more than 60,000 group members who often share local community news.

When Gonzalez-Mares says the local Latino community trusts people, she means people like Rafael Vazquez, an outreach coordinator at Santa Rosa Community College and a prolific community news sharer. He disseminates bilingual information on topics relevant to local Latino families like immigration, housing, and jobs via a radio show on KBBF, a popular Facebook group called [DACA Sonoma County](#), a text messaging system that reaches hundreds of local Latino residents, and he regularly organizes information events that take place at his college.



Rafael Vazquez, at his office as an outreach coordinator at Santa Rosa Community College, is a prolific community news sharer. Photo by Deborah Ensor

Other individuals also stepped forward during the fires. Mario Castillo, a community organizer and blogger, drove around for two hours on the morning of the fire. “I was wondering, where are all these people going, acting out of fear? No one is telling them what to do, where to go.” So he decided to stay, and started to livestream videos in Spanish, trying to share advice on what to do. “I saw people posting false information, no one stepping up to say ‘we are here for you.’ So I took it on myself, going to sites to provide information. I became a source for my community.”

Latino residents of Sonoma and Napa counties respond to and trust individuals more than institutions. Perhaps that’s part of the formula for KBBF’s success in connecting with residents during the wildfires. Their DJs are also community members, neighbors, and leaders, and when their familiar voices deliver crucial information, people are more likely to listen.

KBBF’s managers say they first realized they had trust with the local Latino community in 2013 when they covered the [shooting death](#) of a local Latino teen by a Sheriff’s deputy. The community wanted unbiased coverage, and KBBF provided it. They say the wildfires gave them a better sense of what kind of talent they had in their DJ pool. Two hosts who normally produce music programs showed an aptitude for news, and are now hosting a Friday evening local news program called [Informe](#). They also pointed to longtime morning host [Don Francisco Pardo](#) as somebody who had a real impact during wildfires. They said Pardo’s especially effective in connecting with farmworkers because he plays classic Mexican folk ballads and tells stories that remind people of their hometowns.

After the fires were over, a station fundraiser allowed KBBF to witness the extent of that trust they’d developed with their listeners. Community members who benefitted from the radio station’s coverage stopped by to share their appreciation with cash and checks. “Five dollars, ten dollars, veinte dolares...it was all Spanish speakers,” said station manager Alicia Sanchez.

Another interesting example of trust is the success the Mexican Consulate had when it set up a resource fair in Santa Rosa after the fires. Despite the fact that many immigrants left Mexico because the country failed to provide basic needs, when the wildfires upended things, a familiar presence was welcomed. Alegría de la Cruz said the turnout was impressive. “There were like 400 people lined up to get a little piece of paper from the Mexican Consulate saying, I have entered my name into the system and someday maybe I’ll get money. Instead of going to the local assistance center where there was tons of resources and every agency imaginable,” she said.

Belia Ramos is one of two Latino Napa County Supervisors, and as a bilingual voice of authority, she was a trusted source for Spanish-speaking families during the wildfires. She made sure she was sharing official emergency information in Spanish on as many bilingual outlets as possible. One of her main goals was to get the word out that she had assurances from federal agencies that immigration authorities would not be present at relief shelters. And she did everything to get that message out, including “knocking on car windows in the Target parking lot,” and, “receiving a phone call from a woman saying, ‘Are you at the shelter? It’s me and my three kids and I won’t check in unless you check me in.’” “I was like, you got it,” Ramos said.



At the first official Napa County emergency press conference, Ramos said she got up to address the immigration issue, and when she began speaking, Spanish came out. “That was absolutely spontaneous,” said Ramos. “The people who are concerned, primarily about immigration, their default language, that language we revert to when we are in crisis, is not English.” She realized the community that needed the information needed it in their native tongue, Spanish, not just for the details, but for the comfort it brought.

Ramos said since the wildfires, she has been busy working on organizing a bilingual protocol for Napa County’s emergency response that will be in place regardless of whether or not there’s a Spanish-speaking County Supervisor on hand, like her.

## CULTURALLY RELEVANT TRANSLATION

Sonoma County Supervisor Shirlee Zane said one of the biggest takeaways for her from the wildfires experience was fully understanding the difference between simply translating emergency information into Spanish, and figuring out how to make it culturally relevant and accessible. “These more traditional forms of communication we’re using these days, those aren’t always the effective methods in informing the Spanish-language community,” said Zane, who is bilingual. She said she’s hoping to establish some new approaches in local government for what bilingual outreach looks like. “It’s not going to look exactly like speaking to the English community. It’s different forms of communication.”

Victor Reyes has lived in North Bay for decades, and at one point worked on a bilingual paper in Marin County. He now lives in Sonoma County and works translating materials for local organizations. Reyes said while making sure important information is bilingual, there’s an additional layer that needs to be considered in order to make materials relevant to Latino residents. He said translated documents, even when done properly, are often done from an Anglo point of view. Many Latino immigrants coming from Mexico and Central America don’t have the same education levels in their native tongue as somebody raised in the US might have in English. Therefore some concepts and technical language, even if translated into proper Spanish, won’t resonate.

Reyes pointed out that this issue is especially a problem during wildfire recovery because in order to navigate things like insurance, county assistance, and other bureaucratic processes, people don’t just need documents in Spanish, they need somebody to explain those documents to them in ways they can understand. There’s a cultural translation, according to Reyes, that needs to happen in addition to a Spanish translation. All the leaflets and pamphlets organizations have translated since the wildfires and put out at strategic locations are mostly useless, he says, because they don’t take into account people’s education levels. Even local bilingual media miss this point he says, because Latino immigrants are used to a more tabloid culture of news, with more images and illustrations to get a point across.

## EXPANDING THEIR PROFILE

While bilingual community radio station KBBF had decades of experience connecting with the area Latino community through hyper-local programming, the wildfires [expanded their profile](#). When the wildfires started, KBBF immediately shifted their programming to “news you can use”

*“They had a person who does sign language, but no Spanish-speaking people.”*

- KBBF station President Alicia Sanchez

format, requiring their community DJs to share essential emergency information from local officials. When station President Alicia Sanchez went to the first Sonoma County press conference, she quickly realized local authorities had not prepared to share information in Spanish. KBBF set up a system where somebody would translate in real time what local officials were saying. When local authorities announced a second press conference, Sanchez went in person, so she could ask a few questions. “They

had a person who does sign language, but no Spanish-speaking people,” she said. So after the event she asked some local leaders why they weren’t putting out information in Spanish. Finally, by the third press conference, they had an interpreter.

KBBF staff were also monitoring social media to see what kinds of rumors were spreading in the Latino community related to the wildfires. The main misinformation revolved around whether or not ICE was present in the emergency shelters. KBBF staff began explaining on the air in Spanish that shelters were safe, but community members weren’t convinced, and almost none of them stayed at shelters.

Information was shared at shelters and crises centers. But many residents said they didn’t go to these sites because they either didn’t know about them, they didn’t trust them, or they were fearful of ICE being present. So they missed receiving important information. For those that did go, the shelters also struggled with having enough Spanish interpreters.

“Because FEMA has connections to immigration (ICE), there was a lot of fear in the air within the Latino community that left many unaware of whether to ask for help or not,” said a community member at the La Luz center.

Instead, many residents began going to the KBBF station to access food, clothes, and other resources that people were dropping off. Residents trusted the radio station more than local government to help them out.





Alicia Sanchez and Edgar Avila of KBBF radio, a popular bilingual community radio station that was a critical source of news during the wildfires. Photo by The Press Democrat

## VII. Information Needs and Gaps

Sonoma community organizer Veronica Vences said when the fires hit, information was at a premium, in both English and Spanish. “The lack of information was pervasive throughout the county. Everybody was expecting the next piece of news,” she said. Local authorities have been cross-examined over what many agree was a poorly structured emergency communications plan. The fact that so little information was coming out in Spanish made things particularly difficult for Spanish-speaking residents.

*“If it wasn’t for a phone call I received from a friend, who knows if I would still be here.”*

- Napa resident

“I learned (about the fires) because relatives called from Mexico,” said a Calistoga resident. “If it wasn’t for a phone call I received from a friend, who knows if I would still be here,” said a Napa resident who lives in a secluded neighborhood that the fires came precariously close to.

Vences’s organization La Luz started getting lots of calls along the nature of “what’s happening, and how long is it going to last?” “Part of the problem was, we ourselves didn’t know,” she said. Fear and panic grew as families weren’t able to make decisions on safety without necessary information, which led to a lot of rumors. “Families would leave the valley during the day, and

come back at night, because of reports of looting. A lot of fear, and miscommunication, and not being sure of what was going on,” said Peter Heredia, also of La Luz.

Perhaps more than the information itself, making sure key news is simply available in Spanish has been a real issue in the North Bay area, before, during, and after the wildfires. Local filmmaker and teacher [Malinalli Lopez](#) used to work for the City of Santa Rosa and said she routinely advised them that they needed a professional Spanish-language translator to make sure important information was getting out to the Latino community. She said that sort of professional effort has never existed at the city or county level. Lopez said this reality is especially frustrating in the aftermath of the wildfires, “there is information all over the place; it’s all in English.”

Community members echoed this challenge presented by the lack of Spanish-language information over and over again. “The fear I felt from not speaking English is something I had never felt before,” said one Santa Rosa resident. “Our major challenge,” said a Windsor resident, “is that my husband and I don’t speak English.”

*“The fear I felt from not speaking English is something I had never felt before.”*

- Santa Rosa resident

In addition, many first-generation Latino immigrants relied on their children to translate information they had into Spanish for them. While this was effective, a number of younger people said this became difficult and exhausting.

“My parents don’t speak English,” said a young woman from Sonoma. “Every time I am away from home and hear the fire truck sirens, I automatically call my mom to ask if she is okay. My dad says I’m paranoid, but honestly I’m just really scared.”

Lopez said when local government or businesses do put materials out in Spanish it’s often done with Google translate, which shows a lack of follow-through. Because of the wildfires, the Sonoma Sheriff’s department began offering Nixle, the emergency alert text-messaging system in Spanish, but the translations aren’t professional, and still link to English-language announcements online.

Many residents learned about Nixle during the fires, through their children’s schools or other announcements. As they didn’t know of it before, they didn’t receive notification at the start of the fires. Those who registered say they find it very useful, though many rely on relatives to translate the English messages.



A community notice board outside La Luz Center, a community organization in Sonoma, provides a variety of information in Spanish to residents. Photo by Deborah Ensor

Alegría de la Cruz works as a lawyer for Sonoma County, and she says when the wildfires hit, county officials were not prepared to make sure Spanish speakers had the information they needed in their primary language. As calls came in from Latino families wanting essential emergency information, the county began forwarding those people to de la Cruz, who did her best to respond. She also began using her personal Facebook page as a Spanish-language ‘news you can use’ resource for families.

De la Cruz also said that the county’s emergency headquarters, where people could stop by and get information and other resources, was not set up to help Spanish speakers. She said Department of Homeland Security signs were up at the site, which scared Latino families seeking assistance. De la Cruz said she had some local teens help her create signs that read “Todos están bienvenidos aquí,” so Latino residents felt welcome.

De la Cruz said during the disaster recovery phase, she’s had to reach out to state and federal agencies to request bilingual information on policies for relief assistance. Their response, according to De la Cruz, “We’ve never been asked to get stuff translated as quickly as we’ve been asked to do it here.” “I was like, guys, come on, YES, that’s what you do. YES, that’s what we need here. All the state benefits people need here, with documentation, without documentation. What are the documentation requirements,” she said. It was a positive learning experience for government agencies she said, one that will hopefully become policy.

One of the Sonoma County Supervisors, [James Gore](#), speaks some Spanish and began trying to share news in Spanish during the wildfires, which gave some residents comfort. De la Cruz says the county also organized a Spanish-language [town hall](#) in Santa Rosa for the Latino community, where local authorities and disaster agencies agreed to attend and take questions. She said turnout was relatively small, around 50 people, but the event was live-streamed by Prensa Sonoma. De la Cruz says ultimately Sonoma County needs to hire an official Spanish-language Public Information Officer in order to show the Latino community they are serious about including them.

*“The only thing that I cared for at that moment was for my family to be safe and away from danger. But due to my lack of English, things got complicated and I did not know who or what to rely on.”*

- Sonoma Resident

“The fires were horrible. It was a situation in which I did not care if I lost my house, my job or anything,” said a 37-year-old female resident from Sonoma. “The only thing that I cared for at that moment was for my family to be safe and away from danger. But due to my lack of English, things got complicated and I did not know who or what to rely on.”

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LEARNING

Oscar Chavez, the Assistant Director of Human Services in Sonoma County, spent 10 days “nose to the ground” running a shelter after the fires. “I experienced the structural challenges to get and communicate information,” he said. “It was pretty chaotic. There was a lot of misinformation or disinformation.”

“We missed the opportunity to do a better job disseminating accurate, timely information,” Chavez said. “There was a lot of information disseminated through our county website that was not translated. Google translate is not good for disasters. It needs to be appropriate to the region.”

Chavez says reflecting back on what happened, “there’s a good opportunity to dissect, look at how can we strengthen our communication, learn how different groups communicate. There is tremendous value engaging in such an exercise.”

A group of 14 local community organizations started this reflection process, submitting a list of recommendations for Sonoma County Disaster Planning, proposed by the Spanish-speaking community. They presented their recommendations to the County Board of Supervisors in June. It included a section on the media, with the recommendation that all official



communications from local jurisdictions be made in English and Spanish, with translation into other languages available, including press conferences and emergency alerts. The report also recommended that all county personnel make a pro-active effort to involve all media outlets in disseminating information about disasters, including creating and updating an ongoing list of media outlets and contact information.

Daysi Carreno, who lost her home in the fire, attended the meeting to help present the recommendations to the county. “We would like to be informed and be prepared for the future,” she told KRCB radio in an interview after the meeting. “We do not want to be last in the line. We want to be equal.”

Later in June, the County of Sonoma released its Emergency Operations Center After Action Report and Improvement Plan. The findings included a section on public information, noting that “early on, the lack of Spanish speakers in the PIO unit was a significant challenge.” Its recommendations include to develop messaging, communications, and services that fully address the requirements of the whole community; to develop a Language Access Plan; to ensure provision of alerts and warnings in Spanish; and to provide rapid access to translators at shelters and via the public information hotline.



Napa Valley farm workers share their experiences on the information challenges they faced during the fires at a listening circle event on August 27 at St. Helena Campesino Housing of California Human Development. Photo by Madeleine Bair

## DESCONECTADO

### How Emergency Information Got Lost In Translation During The Northern California Wildfires

As Sonoma county continues to learn how to improve communication with the Spanish-speaking community, it held its first wildfire recovery meeting entirely in Spanish On Aug. 28th – nearly 11 months after the October fires. About a hundred people showed up at Lawrence Cook Middle School in Roseland to meet with county officials, who wanted to hear directly from community members what their concerns were. While residents were angry about ongoing issues of high rents and FEMA disaster assistance applications, the concern they expressed over and over was the general failure of the county to communicate with Spanish speakers. “The experience was very, very sad,” said one resident at the meeting. Her neighbor woke her at 1am to alert her about the fire. “You don’t know. There’s no information in your language.”

As part of a revamp of its emergency services, Sonoma County announced it’s establishing a new Department of Emergency Management with nine staff members. County supervisors have allocated \$2 million to get this new department up and running and expect it to be staffed by the end of 2018. County officials have said that they plan to put future emergency alerts in both English and Spanish, and create a new emergency website with information posted in both languages as well.

## CURRENT ISSUES OF CONCERN

Many of the residents who participated in our surveys and Listening Circles expressed great concern about the possibility of another fire and the fact that they still have very little information about what to do and how to prepare.

*“Nobody has come to provide us with information or to inform us on how to prepare for another potential crisis.”*

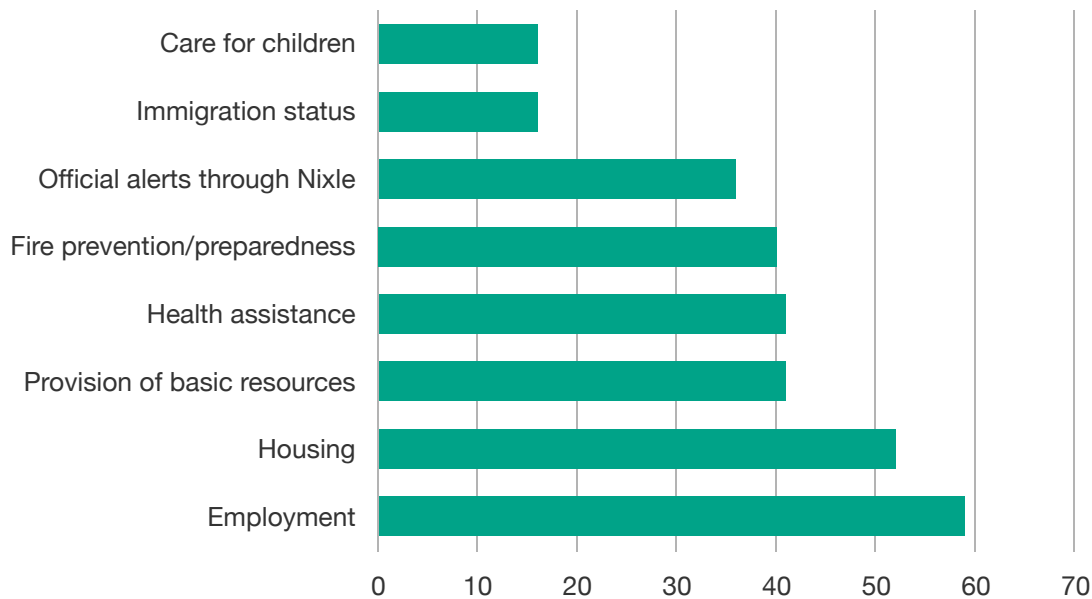
- a Napa Valley farmworker

“Nobody has come to provide us with information or to inform us on how to prepare for another potential crisis,” said a Napa Valley farmworker.

Key questions residents have are how to prepare their family, how to prevent fires, and where to get information. There’s also a need for access to physical and mental health services and information, as many residents expressed how they

are still trying to overcome trauma from their experiences during the fires. Employment and housing security, due to increasing rents, continues to be of great concern.

### Top issues of concern currently



## VIII. Insights & Suggestions

This assessment is based on our conversations with local media, community organizations, government and emergency agencies, area leaders and residents. Hearing from these important voices about information flow in the Latino community before, during, and after the 2017 wildfires helped us form some recommendations for how best to support existing efforts to get crucial news and information to residents who are either bilingual, or primarily Spanish-speaking. Some efforts are being made by local government to revamp their policies for how information gets shared during emergencies, and some community organizations and bilingual media are trying to incorporate what they learned during the fires into ongoing information outreach strategies.

- 1. Ensure the Spanish-speaking community has a voice at the table.** Including representation of the Spanish speaking community in planning future disaster response in the county can go a long way in ensuring their needs and questions are met when a disaster happens. At the heart of effective emergency communication is accountability, ensuring that people in the midst of disaster – and during the recovery and preparation phases - have the opportunity to have a say in the response effort. This includes ensuring there are trusted feedback loops, to continually communicate how feedback is taken into consideration and what has been done to address concerns and suggestions. True accountability is about dialogue, which begins long before a disaster strikes.



2. **Provide information to the Spanish-speaking community about preparation for future disasters.** Many residents expressed concern that they still don't know what to do or where to go should another disaster hit. Hosting workshops and community events with trusted community organizations and sharing resources, such as fliers, at housing complexes or gathering places would be a helpful way to share info about crisis preparation and fire prevention. Local media could produce more content specific to preparation, working closely with local officials and organizations. Information residents are looking for include: What to take (blankets, important documents, water, clothing), how to obtain resources for up-to-date information (what number to call, Facebook page to follow, text-messaging platform, etc.); how to register for Nixle etc.
3. **Ensure Nixle messages and links are in Spanish, and promote the service in the Spanish-speaking community.** While some residents did not know of Nixle, a large number (42% of survey respondents) relied on it. Ensure Nixle message are properly translated into Spanish, as well as any information that is linked on the Nixle message. While many residents say their kids translate messages for them, this should not be necessary to understand crisis information. Promoting Nixle to the Spanish-speaking community more widely would also help, as many residents say they prefer information on their phone.
4. **Ensure all translations are culturally competent.** Using Google translate may often be the fastest way to get information out, but it is often confusing, incorrect and not appropriate. Consider having a vetted list of translators available, and build relationships with organizations and volunteers willing to help translate in emergencies.
5. **Utilize trusted community Facebook pages to share information.** Facebook was a popular resource (42% of respondents). Establishing relationships with trusted community Facebook pages ahead of a crisis, and ensuring they are on the list of media contacts for local officials would ensure these audiences are reached. Collaborating with and promoting a Spanish-language Facebook page specifically focusing on preparedness and recovery information, such as Preparados Napa <https://www.facebook.com/preparadosnapa/> can help expand efforts already underway. Another interesting model to follow, which utilizes trained community correspondents to generate trusted news, is the InformationAsAid Puerto Rico page <https://www.facebook.com/Information-As-Aid-Puerto-Rico-152562456.0819598/> which has almost 72,000 followers.

6. **Consider building upon a trusted text messaging platform to create a news feed for disaster, recovery and preparedness information.** As friends, relatives, text messages and community organizations were cited by our survey respondents as the most common information sources, consider sharing information via a text messaging system through a trusted community organization or current local SMS feed. Most residents we surveyed do not rely on Twitter or email, so reaching them directly through SMS is a strong option. Spanish-language news outlets could consider mobile-based reporting.
7. **Local news outlets - both Spanish and English - may want to consider how they can better serve Spanish-speaking audiences.** Local Spanish-language newspapers were never mentioned as regular sources of information, while several residents said during the fires they found themselves going to English-language newspapers and TV stations because they had timely, critical information, even if they needed their children to translate it. Local newspapers may want to think through how they can translate their articles and distribute them via Facebook to more effectively reach the Latino immigrant community, particularly during times of crisis. Local Spanish-language community radio stations could build relationships with other news outlets to bolster their local news reporting capacity.
8. **Support the bilingual radio station KBBF.** KBBF provided a critical service during the fires which thousands of residents relied on. The community station is all-volunteer, with no paid staff and very limited resources. Finding ways to support the station, through underwriting, donations, community drives, partnerships or grants will help the station to continue doing what it does best every day - not just when a disaster hits.
9. **Build and update Spanish- language media contact lists.** County officials, police, fire and community organizations should proactively seek out Spanish- language media, including social media, trusted Facebook pages, community bloggers etc. to meet them and get to know them. Continually disseminate information about disaster response, recovery and preparedness, including creating and regularly updating a contact list of media and social media outlets.
10. **All official communications from county and other officials should be available in Spanish and English, with translation into other languages available.** This includes response, recovery and preparedness information, through press conferences, public forums, post-fire information meetings, emergency communication alerts, fliers, websites etc. All health and safety training materials should also be available in Spanish, and when in-person alerts are necessary, officers should be fluent in Spanish.

- 11. The county and crisis response organizations should support the hiring of bilingual staff.** This includes Public Information Officers and emergency personnel who are in public-facing positions. Official staff who can speak Spanish should be available for press conferences and as guests and sources for radio interviews. Emergency shelters should have Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers, and all signage and materials should be translated in Spanish.
- 12. Counties should develop and regularly update a Language Access Plan (LAP) for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries.** Planning for communication with LEP individuals should occur at all stages of disaster management—including preparedness, response, and recovery. Ensuring language access is not only good practice: it is also the law. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI) prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin by recipients. The Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice provides guidance, tips and tools for reaching LEP communities in Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. <https://www.justice.gov/crt/file/885391/download>
- 13. Diversify crisis response communication channels.** Relying on one system to share information is not effective as systems can often fail. One of the biggest obstacles to receiving information and communication was the lack of electricity, phone service and internet. Agencies and media outlets should have multiple Spanish-language communication channels available, such as text alerts, social media, radio broadcasts, fliers, Spanish-speaking officers, even generators at radio stations to ensure they can stay on air if the power goes out. Including battery or solar powered radios in home preparedness kits can help people stay connected to emergency news.
- 14. Utilize TV for emergency broadcasting information in Spanish.** TV is very popular (61% of respondents), specifically Univision and Telemundo. It would be worth exploring a local emergency alert system through these channels.



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The 256 people who took the time to answer our survey  
The 41 people who spent hours with us in Listening Circles to share their stories

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