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NEW REPORT REVEALS A LACK OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS FOR IMMIGRANT AND LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT COMMUNITIES

The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) released a joint study today which finds that immigrant and limited English proficient populations are not fully incorporated in disaster preparedness educational efforts and emergency response plans.

The report – “Disaster Preparedness in Urban Immigrant Communities: Lessons Learned from Recent Catastrophic Events and Their Relevance to Latino and Asian Communities in Southern California” – was prepared with assistance from the Asian American Justice Center. The study examines selected Latino and Asian immigrant communities in Southern California for disaster education and response preparations in order to improve disaster awareness among immigrant community members and to help emergency response personnel better serve limited English speaking populations.

Key findings in the report include:

- A lack of disaster preparedness materials in languages other than English that reflect the demographics of the service populations.
- A shortage of bilingual staff and volunteers among emergency response crews and nonprofits that typically do outreach during emergencies.
- That ethnic media outlets are underutilized as important tools for communication with immigrant and limited English speaking communities.
- Concern that members of the immigrant community will not come forward for assistance for fear that their status will come into question.

The report recommends that federal and state governments establish a baseline of minimal secondary language resources and that local agencies take a lead in creating informational materials and response plans that take into account the language needs of their constituents. Current state legislative efforts to address this issue include AB 1930 (Torrico) which would build upon our existing emergency preparedness system and incorporate the language needs of Californians in disaster preparedness planning, response, and recovery.

Governments must also address a key concern among some immigrants that seeking emergency help could result in deportation or lead to problems with receiving benefits. “When you have a major disaster and people flee their homes, immigration documents may well be lost,” said Harry Pachon, President of TRPI. “Our field researchers heard reports that people were turned away for assistance in New Orleans because they couldn’t prove their legal residency status. Others avoided reaching out for help because of their fear of being deported.”

“This study shows that we are ill-prepared to serve the limited English proficient community in the event of a major catastrophic disaster,” said Stewart Kwoh, Executive Director of APALC. “By not taking into account the special needs and concerns of these communities in our disaster preparedness and response plans, we are putting many lives at risk.”

The project, conducted over two years, involved two focus groups of Latino residents, one of Mandarin speaking residents and another comprised of Vietnamese speaking residents. Researchers also interviewed 34 members of disaster service providers, non-profit organizations and ethnic organizations in Southern California. Additional interviews focused on emergency service providers in the quake-affected areas of Northridge, Calif. (1994) and the Hurricane Katrina disaster areas in Louisiana (2005). The study addresses the need to prepare for similar large-scale emergencies and man-made disasters. The U.S. Geological Survey forecasts that California has a 46 percent chance of an earthquake with at least a 7.5 magnitude in the next 30 years.

The report was made possible with funding from the Ford Foundation.

The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute is one of the premier policy institutes on Latino issues. The Institute is headquartered at the University of Southern California with a satellite office at Columbia University in New York City.

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center is the largest organization in the country focused on providing multilingual, culturally sensitive legal services, education, and civil rights support to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. APALC is affiliated with the Asian American Justice Center (formerly known as NAPALC) in Washington, D.C.

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