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Case

2 Southern California Wildfires of 2007: Preparing and Responding to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

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BACKGROUND

In late October 2007, 23 wildfires ravaged Southern California, affecting 7 counties, including Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Bernardino, Orange, and Los Angeles. San Diego County, in particular, suffered its worst wildfires in history—in terms of intensity, size, and impact—disproportionately affecting its large culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Whereas one-third of San Diego County had a Hispanic and Latino population, nearly 70% of the burn area was inhabited by this group, including concentrations of immigrants and migrant farmworkers from Mexico.

Overall, the response of the federal, state, and local governments to the 2007 wildfires was applauded for being swift and coordinated. In addition, San Diego County faced its broadest evacuation effort. However, reports from advocacy and community-based organizations revealed serious barriers to and gaps in communication between federal, state, and local responders and culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Of particular concern were the large numbers of diverse people who did not evacuate—due to fear related to their immigration status, misinformation, or simply no information regarding evacuation—from areas under mandatory evacuation, jeopardizing their safety, health, and lives. Barriers to communication—including language, culture, and mistrust—also manifested in the immediate aftermath during sheltering, response, and relief. These barriers and challenges, in many cases, resulted in delayed response or little to no means of recovery for those facing immediate health concerns, loss of jobs and housing, and other damages.

This case presents the events that unfolded during and immediately following the Southern California wildfires in San Diego County in 2007, focusing on communication between key public health and emergency response players and diverse populations. For the purposes of this case, diverse populations refer to people of different racial, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic heritage. Diverse populations comprise people with limited English proficiency (LEP), recent immigrants from foreign countries (both documented and undocumented), migrant workers, and others from diverse racial, ethnic, or linguistic heritage. Given the concentration of the Hispanic and Latino population in San Diego County, this case primarily presents data, stories, and examples from this ethnic group.

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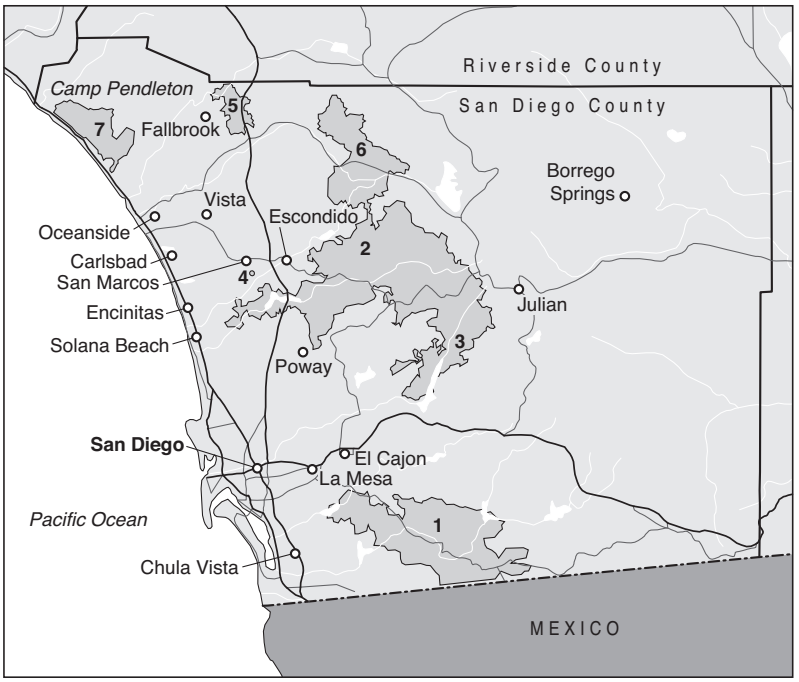
THE SAN DIEGO FIRES

On the morning of October 21, 2007, San Diego County faced what would become the largest firestorm and evacuation in the county's history. At approximately 9:30 AM Pacific standard time, strong Santa Ana winds, sometimes called "Devil's Breath," combined with extreme heat and drought, created the perfect circumstances to ignite the Harris wildfire in the far south of San Diego County, near the U.S.–Mexico border. Shortly thereafter, the Witch Creek Canyon fire began in central San Diego County, and within the following 2 days, another 5 fires were ignited, together ravaging nearly 15% of the county (see **Figure 2-1**). The firestorms resulted in 93 firefighter injuries, 23 civilian injuries,

Figure 2-1

San Diego County wildfire total burn area, October 21–27, 2007.



Firestorms

1. Harris Fire
2. Witch Creek Fire
3. McCoy Fire
4. Coronado Hills Fire
5. Rice Canyon Fire
6. Poomacha Fire
7. Horno Fire

Source: Adapted from Wiegand D, Steckelberg A. The San Diego Union-Tribune. Available at: http://weblog.signonsandiego.com/multimedia/utmedia/071030fireweek/.

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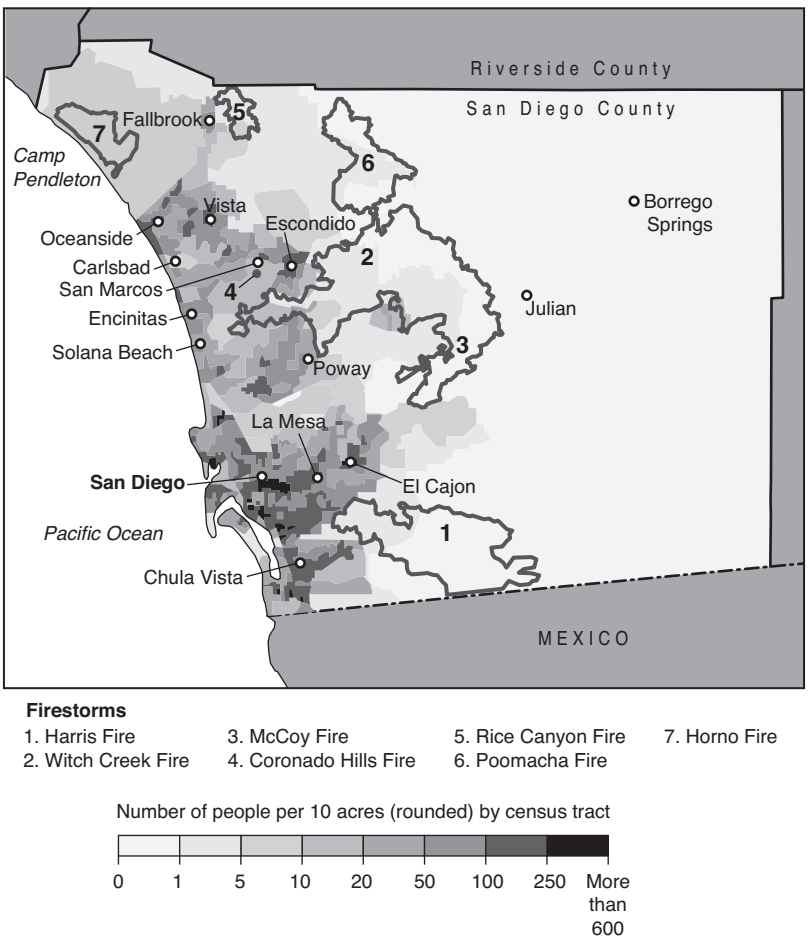
and 10 civilian deaths. Approximately 1,600 homes and structures were destroyed, and a total of 368,340 acres of land was burned, including rural farmlands. The fires were finally contained on November 9, 2007.[1] San Diego County is the fifth most populated county in the United States and the second most populated in California, with an estimated 3.1 million residents. **Figure 2-2** depicts the concentration of San Diego County's population in relation to the wildfire evacuation areas.

Figure 2-2

Population density and evacuations during San Diego County wildfires, October 21–27, 2007.



Source: Adapted from Wiegand D, Steckelberg A. The San Diego Union-Tribune. Available at: http://weblog.signonsandiego.com/multimedia/utmedia/071030fireweek/.

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Coinciding with general population growth since 2000, the county has experienced steep increases in racial and ethnic diversity. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, non-whites or racial/ethnic minorities compose more than half of San Diego County's population. Hispanics and Latinos represent the largest ethnic group—one-third of the county, or an estimated 991,348 residents. Approximately 11% of the population is Asian and 5% is black or African American. Whites only comprise 49% of the county's total population.[2] In addition, one-fourth of San Diego County is foreign born, and over one-third speaks a language other than English at home. An estimated 460,503 individuals have LEP or do not speak English very well.[3]

As the dominant ethnic group in the county, Hispanics and Latinos are highly concentrated (65%) in the southwestern region of San Diego County, including southeastern San Diego, National City, Chula Vista, and the border area of San Ysidro—communities not far from where the Harris fires blazed.[4] In recent years, however, the Hispanic and Latino population has grown dramatically in northern San Diego County, particularly with immigration of many indigenous Mexican families, including farmworkers. For example, in Escondido, a city close to the large Witch Creek and Coronado Hills fires, the Hispanic and Latino population grew from representing 23% of the city in 1990 to 39% in 2000 and 49% in 2010.[4] Similarly, other cities and towns near the fires, such as San Marcos and Fallbrook in North San Diego County, have large and growing Hispanic, Latino, and diverse populations (see **Table 2-1** and **Figure 2-3**).

San Diego County also has a unique population of immigrants from southern Mexico—such as the Mixtec community—who neither speak English nor Spanish; rather they communicate in a wide array of indigenous or native languages from their respective regions. Many of these immigrants work on the farms of San Diego.

It is estimated that there are approximately 24,570 immigrant or migrant farmworkers—primarily from Mexico—in San Diego County.[6] While commonly referred to as "migrant" farmworkers, many of these individuals are, in fact, a permanent part of the community given the year-round nature of the agricultural industry. Migrant farmworkers in San Diego contribute to the county's fourth largest and 1.4 billion dollar agricultural industry. However, they face significant socioeconomic and health disparities, along with anti-immigrant sentiments, making them considerably more vulnerable to public health emergency and disaster situations. Estimates indicate that nearly half of the migrant farmworker population is undocumented. In addition, many of these families are of mixed status; in other words, either one or both parents may

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Table 2-1 **Total Population and Percent Hispanic or Latino in Communities with Greatest Impact from the 2007 San Diego Wildfires**[5]

	Total Population	Percent Hispanic or Latino
Witch Creek Fire		
Escondido and San Pasqual River Valley	111,557	32%
Poway	48,104	10%
Ramona, Santa Ysabel, and Mesa Grande	34,505	17%
Rancho Bernardo	17,888	8%
Rancho Santa Fe	8,153	5%
Poomacha Fire		
Pauma Valley, Palomar Mountain, and Valley Center	17,561	23%
Harris Fire		
Jamul/Dulzura	9,092	20%
Taecate/Potrero	1,031	54%
Rice Fire		
Fallbrook/Rainbow	42,562	30%

Source: Modified from "Community Needs Assessment Report: After-The-Fires Fund." The San Diego Foundation, December 2007.

be undocumented, or some or all of their children may be U.S. citizens. Other data show that 70% of migrant farmworkers in California lack health insurance and their median income ranges between $7,500 and $10,000 per year.[6] In certain areas, such as Vista in San Diego County, migrant farmworkers have even lower socioeconomic status. For example, 96% of migrant farmworkers in Vista are uninsured, their median educational attainment generally ranges between fourth and sixth grade, and 87% of dwellings inhabited by this population are shared by two or more households.[6]

The wildfires impacted rural and farm communities, including Escondido, Fallbrook, Ramona, and Valley Center, devastating the livelihood of many migrant farmworkers. Several farmworker

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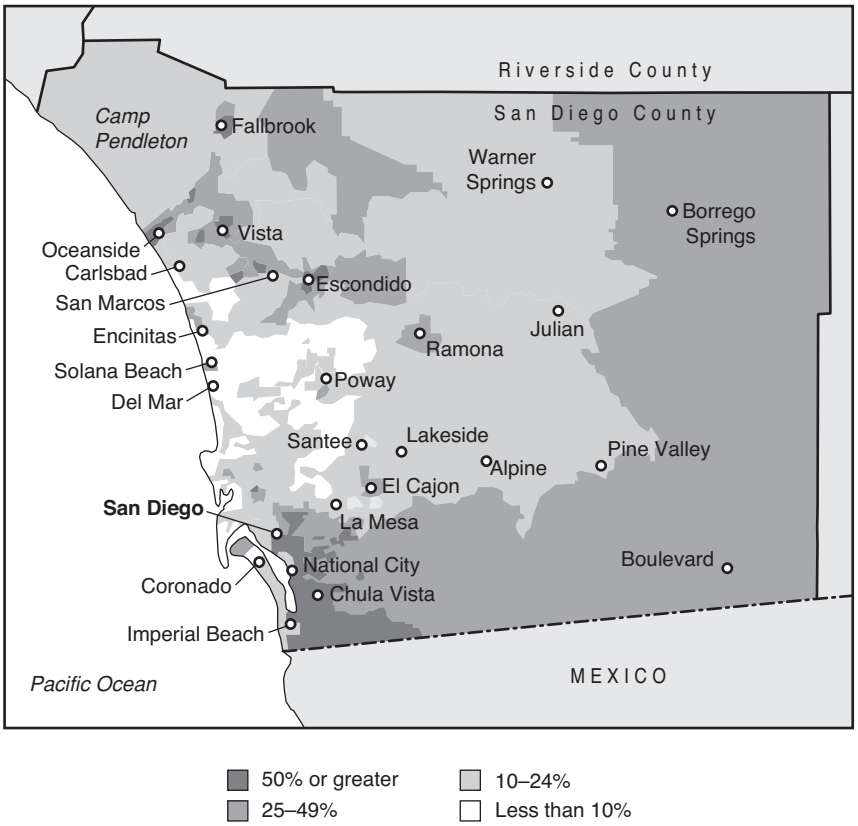
Figure 2-3

Percentage of Hispanic or Latino population by census tract in the San Diego region, 2009.



Source: Modified from U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Decennial Census for San Diego County, California.

families lost their homes, their jobs, or both. In addition, many farmworkers continued to labor in fields during the fires due to lack of warning or information on evacuation procedures by their employers. This posed an imminent threat to the health of farmworkers who were unnecessarily exposed to dangerous air contaminants and faced a disproportionate burden of injuries.[6] For example, the Harris fires resulted in 19 burn victims who

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were admitted to a burn center, of which 11 were undocumented immigrants.

WARNING AND EVACUATION

As the fires began, the San Diego County Office of Emergency Services (OES), the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, and the City of San Diego issued warning notifications and evacuation orders. Multiple channels of communication were utilized, including computerized mass-notification systems, such as Reverse 911; television, radio, and internet; police and fire rescue sirens and loudspeakers; authorities and responders going door-to-door; and informal, face-to-face interactions, such as with neighbors and family members.[7,8]

Reverse 911 Calls

Designed with funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Reverse 911 notification system was created to enhance regional disaster response capabilities.[9] The system uses geospatial mapping to identify residents living in areas vulnerable to a disaster and makes mass telephone calls for warning and evacuation communication. In a 1-hour period, approximately 240,000 calls can be made. The major advantage of this system is that it allows for timely, targeted, and consistent emergency communication to a wide population. In the San Diego wildfires, Reverse 911 was the dominant form of warning communication. Approximately 587,000 homes (almost half the county) were called using Reverse 911.[1] While helpful for directing residents to specific shelters, the system was also useful in pinpointing where to send and locate emergency and public health resources.

Despite the many advantages, however, Reverse 911 did not reach everyone. In fact, based on survey data, one study estimated that only 42% of households in the affected areas actually received a Reverse 911 call.[1] Families without landline telephones or registered cell phones were among those who did not receive a call. For example, many immigrant and farmworker communities in the Pala, Pauma, Rincon, and Rice Canyon regions of North San Diego County did not receive Reverse 911 calls. In addition, given that vital information and instruction was only provided in English,

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many non-English speaking populations in the region were also not reached through the system.[5]

Television, Radio, and Internet

While television and radio are typically common sources of emergency information in communities, postdisaster survey data revealed that only about 8% of residents affected by the fires received their first warning from these sources. This may be because media often does not provide specific information that is necessary for evacuation and other protective action. For individuals with LEP, this was another source of information that they could not make use of. As one woman stated, "I watched the English channels but it was hopeless because I can hardly understand it."[10] Many Spanish language television stations did not interrupt regular programming to provide information until many days into the fire.[10] In addition, while the Internet was used to obtain follow-up information on the wildfires, it was not a primary source for initial warnings.

Door-to-Door and Face-to-Face Interactions

Approximately 4% of residents received information from authorities who came directly to their homes, and another 4% from informal, face-to-face interactions. Information delivered by family, friends, neighbors, employers, and apartment managers was cited as being effective in ensuring compliance with mandatory and advisory evacuation orders. Door-to-door interactions with authorities, however, had mixed results. In some neighborhoods, such as those in Fallbrook, police officers going door-to-door were the primary source of warning, and many residents did comply. However, in other communities, such as Valley Center, preexisting tensions related to immigration status between authorities and immigrant and migrant families caused this method to be much less successful. This was in large part due to the fact that as border patrol traveled through neighborhoods with mandatory evacuation notices, they were also fulfilling their mandate to detain people who could not establish proper immigration status. This resulted in many immigrants, both documented and undocumented, staying back for fear of being detained or deported. The actions of other law enforcement agencies also reportedly contributed to sentiments of fear and intimidation, including the San Diego Sheriff's Department, San Diego Police Department, and U.S. Marshal.

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No Communication

More than one-third of the county's residents reported receiving no warning communication at all.[1] For example, residents in Warner Springs in northeastern San Diego County, homes on Indian reservations, and those located in remote canyon or hillside areas were among the communities that did not receive any form of warning or communication. Individuals and families with LEP, in particular, faced difficulties obtaining information. The following is an account of the lack of communication received by vulnerable diverse communities.

> A young child living on the Indian reservation received no warning of approaching fire until he awoke in the middle of the night to witness a river of fire blazing toward the trailer where he lived. He quickly awoke his family and his and other families fled toward the local casino where they sought shelter from the storm. Another family waited until the last possible minute to flee during an evacuation for fear of attracting the attention of the border patrol, whose vehicle was parked outside of their home during the fires.[4]

Migrant farmworkers of indigenous Mexican heritage—many of whom are undocumented—were among those physically as well as linguistically hard to reach with warning and evacuation orders.[11] Initially, until several days into the fires, no formal communication was reported to this group from officials. Many, such as the indigenous Mexican population of Mixtec, do not speak or understand English or Spanish, and generally are less likely to trust people unless they are approached speaking their language or dialect.[11]

SHELTER, RESPONSE, AND RELIEF

Approximately 515,000 residents of San Diego County evacuated in response to the warnings and evacuation orders. Forty-five shelters and evacuation centers were set up, including Qualcomm Stadium and Del Mar Fairgrounds, which were the largest, along with schools, civic centers, and churches. The evacuation sites were managed by the American Red Cross, including about 4,000 personnel and 800 volunteers who were supported by 70 Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) volunteers (composed of 48 nurses, 15 physicians, and 1 nurse

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practitioner, among other health providers) and 25 city emergency response personnel.[8]

Public Health and Emergency Response

A significant component of the successful coordinated response to the wildfires was preexisting relationships between the public health and emergency response systems. Existing ties between the local American Red Cross and the San Diego County Public Health Department facilitated direct communication and ready access to information for both entities. For example, a database of healthcare providers maintained by the county health department and shared with the American Red Cross allowed for timely mobilization of medical resources.[9] As such, the county health department was able to staff each evacuation center run by the American Red Cross with at least one public health nurse who monitored health needs and provided basic first aid.

Cooperation among the county, the Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial Counties, and the San Diego County Medical Society also facilitated a strong, coordinated response effort.[12] For example, the county's Emergency Medical Services employed its geographic information systems (GIS) mapping capabilities to overlay and identify hospitals, nursing homes, and other healthcare facilities at risk from fires, as well as those that could serve as evacuation centers. Preexisting ties afforded the opportunity to obtain patient census and plan for possible facility evacuations in a timely manner, as well as to continue to monitor bed capacity and other resources.

Recovery Assistance

As the wildfires continued to ravage the region, a number of designated local assistance centers (LACs), later known as Disaster Assistance Centers, were established and served as one-stop shops for disaster relief services and recovery information. These centers assisted evacuees in filing for insurance claims, applying for financial assistance, and obtaining temporary housing.[13] Only some LACs provided on-site translators to assist Spanish-speaking individuals and families.

Language Services

Only modest amounts of on-site interpretation and translation services were provided during sheltering and response. Specifically, 10 American Red Cross teams were deployed from Mexico to assist in

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interpretation and translation at sheltering grounds.[8] Personnel from the San Diego Immigrant Rights Consortium (SDIRC)—a conglomerate of community, faith, labor, and legal organizations that support and preserve the rights of immigrants through service, advocacy, and education—played a key role in meeting this need. As Andrea Guerrero, chair of SDIRC in 2007, stated in an interview:

> The Immigrant Rights Consortium has been serving as interpreters for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], Red Cross, city and county officials at the evacuation centers and at other locations. They have not come equipped with the language capacity that they need. They are not resourced to assist the Spanish-speaking monolingual community. That is a grave concern of ours. They have not distributed information in Spanish. The Spanish information that is available has been translated by us or by news agencies. It has not been made publicly available by the emergency response agencies themselves.[14]

Despite the language service resources, reports suggest that considerable gaps remained in meeting the need for language interpretation and translation at evacuation and local assistance centers, particularly for the Spanish-speaking monolingual community.

Law Enforcement

City officials invited U.S. Border Patrol to set up a tent at Qualcomm Stadium for informational purposes about the fire locations; however, their presence created immediate apprehension among both documented and undocumented immigrants.[14] The situation was further exacerbated when San Diego city police began checking for identification of evacuees to fulfill their mandate for enforcing the law and ensuring people had proper immigration status. One family, while encouraged by relief workers to take needed supplies back home, was accused of looting and was deported for not having appropriate identification and immigration documentation.[14] This created even more fear and intimidation among both documented and undocumented immigrants, who were reluctant to seek shelter at Qualcomm Stadium and other evacuation centers.

> During the San Diego wildfires in the fall of 2007, public employees asked evacuees to produce proof of identity and proof of residence from an evacuated area in order to enter the emergency

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> shelter, access emergency food and water, and speak to a relief worker. As a result, families who had escaped the fires with only the clothes on their backs were turned away, even though there was no legal requirement that they present proof of identity or residence in order to establish eligibility for emergency shelter and assistance.[15]

Many undocumented immigrants did not seek aid because of lack of trust in rescue workers. In many cases, the risk of deportation was seen as far more dangerous than the fires themselves.[11] In fact, many recent immigrant and farmworker families endured much harsher conditions in attempts to enter the United States. For these individuals, avoiding being caught by U.S. Border Patrol or Immigration and Custom Enforcement agents was seen as a greater priority than escaping the fires.[11,16]

Community Services

Community-based organizations (CBOs), advocacy groups, churches, and other community coalitions played critical roles in filling gaps in response and relief to Hispanic or Latino immigrant and migrant farmworker populations.

Community-Based Organizations

Many Hispanic-serving CBOs were involved in the procurement and distribution of services, while also ensuring cultural sensitivity. The initial response of CBOs and Hispanic-serving agencies was based on the perceived needs of Hispanic and Latino immigrant communities. Their actions included creating ad hoc points of distribution for supplies (e.g., generators, food, water, face masks) that were advertised via local Spanish-language radio and television stations; utilizing community workers to collaborate with farmworker communities to directly deliver evacuation notices and supplies; offering transportation for evacuation; setting up Hispanic and Latino shelters (not run by or associated with the federal or state government); collaborating with the American Red Cross to provide translation; and playing a critical liaison role between government entities and officials and the diverse communities impacted. In essence, these trusted organizations played critical roles in providing needed services to vulnerable individuals and populations.

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While many CBOs and Hispanic-serving organizations were swift to mobilize resources and services in response to the wildfires, some experienced serious delays and barriers to their efforts. Given the sheer size and magnitude of the fires, some CBOs and health clinics were closed in the initial days of the disaster either due to evacuation orders or inability of staff to travel to work. In some cases, this resulted in serious delays or lack of access to essential emergency and response services for the most vulnerable immigrant and LEP communities.

Advocacy Organizations

Advocacy-oriented CBOs, such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), were swift to respond to complaints (via phone and radio) of the presence of border patrol and law enforcement and the detainment of undocumented immigrants. The AFSC investigated these complaints at Qualcomm Stadium, where a mass shelter was set up, as well as in other local communities. Other advocates documented the accounts of Hispanics and Latinos, and immigrants.

Churches

Many vulnerable immigrant communities, including those fearful of authorities, turned to faith-based organizations for assistance during the firestorms. A number of churches served as temporary shelters as well as collection and distribution sites for food, clothing, and other emergency supplies. As trusted entities, neighborhood churches particularly played a critical role in serving as liaisons between emergency responders and evacuees of immigrant origin. They were also able to offer information and resources in a more culturally sensitive and linguistically competent manner.

Community Coalitions

As media and advocacy organizations raised the awareness of the disproportionate impact of wildfires on immigrants and migrant farmworkers, coalitions of community organizations were swift to mobilize resources and fill gaps in response and relief for this group. In particular, San Diego's Farmworker CARE (Coordination/Communication, Advocacy/Access, Research/Resources, Empowerment/Education) Coalition—a collaboration of several government entities,

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CBOs, and local emergency response agencies—came together to address the unmet needs of diverse communities. In particular, the group dispatched community health workers, or *lideres comunitarios*, to provide guidance to immigrants and migrant farmworkers on accessing shelters, clinics, and other relief resources.[17] In addition, the coalition sought to continue to provide services following the initial response and relief phases, particularly to communities reluctant to evacuate or access services and help from mainstream sources. For example, member agencies partnered with the American Red Cross to deliver food directly to community members in affected areas that did not evacuate (rather than holding food at a shelter). These organizations also worked to ensure that families were not forced to move to a shelter, but remained in safe, trusted, and comfortable community-based settings. The coalition also worked with Latino farmworker families to obtain food stamps and secure temporary housing, for example, by helping families file FEMA applications to receive funding for temporary housing.[18]

AFTER ACTION REPORTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Postdisaster assessments and reports are critical to improving future preparedness, warning, response, and relief efforts. Following the containment of the fires, the city and county of San Diego developed After Action Reports to examine disaster response. These were extensive and conducted relatively swiftly, particularly in comparison to past disasters in California, such as the 2003 wildfires.

While organizations and agencies provided considerable documentation following the wildfires, there was little mention of the challenges, barriers, and treatment of diverse LEP populations. Hispanic-serving organizations were the primary resource for bringing these concerns and problems to the attention of state and local agencies and others. As a result, several reports emerged from these sources highlighting barriers and challenges:

- Inadequate culturally sensitive preparedness education
- Lack of established translation and interpretation services and tools
- Underutilization of ethnic media and native-language radio stations by city and county responders

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- Little reassurance and information about issues related to immigrant eligibility for disaster assistance and emergency medical services

In addition, Hispanic- and immigrant-serving organizations acknowledged that they were unaware of local response players and were not involved in local preparedness planning, response, or relief activities. Agencies cited the importance of preexisting relationships and links to response players as critical for providing services to diverse populations.

CONCLUSION

The devastation wrought by the California wildfires affected millions across Southern California, but the burden of its consequences was acutely—and in some ways disproportionately—felt by both documented Hispanic and Latino families and undocumented immigrant families. Language and cultural needs, norms, and customs affecting communication were well served by many community groups, aid organizations, and some officials. But at the same time, other agencies and service-sector agendas sowed mistrust or provided inadequate or late information, whereas lack of coordination at times left these communities and populations on their own to sort through messages and to seek out trusted support sources.

The description of these events, subsequent response, and results in this case reinforce the vulnerability of diverse and, especially, immigrant populations during wildfires. The presence and commitment of critical organizations and other entities highlight the challenges and consequences to ensuring more effective integration of vulnerable individuals into plans and actions. However, it also emphasizes the value of identifying and fully involving community-based and community-accessible assets. These resources—many of which have considerable experience in addressing the needs of these populations—can both perform important functions and serve as an informational reference point for others who are less familiar with how to address such vulnerabilities. Finally, the lessons learned from the wildfires, cast in the context of developing and adapting services, programs, and policies, can work to minimize the ill effects on diverse populations in the future, both for areas in California and across the country.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which competencies described in the Appendix does this case demonstrate?
2. What communication issues do immigrant communities face (especially those with LEP) that can affect their response in emergencies?
3. Which actions do agencies or organizations take that can encumber effective communication and engagement of diverse populations during an emergency?
4. What are ways that organizations can coordinate messages during emergencies?
5. What roles do data and mapping of diverse population characteristics and community assets play in planning for and responding to wildfires and other emergency events?
6. What should be the public health responsibility in coordinating and facilitating communication response to wildfires affecting diverse communities?

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