



Meeting minutes - San Patricio Health Equity Task Force Meeting #17

Date/Time: March 11, 2025, 10:30 am – 11:30 pm central time

Attendees:

Seferina Cortez

Laura Flores

Vada McGlothlin

Katy Hernandez

Sylvia Balli

A Aguilar

Jes R

Alexandria A

Tim Dominguez

Judy Telge

Meeting Facilitators:

- Dee Grimm
- Kimberly Watson
- Christina Alfaro

Executive Summary:

- Kimberly described a recent wildfire incident that exposed significant communication breakdowns, including lack of awareness due to service outages, ineffective school evacuation communication, and reliance on informal channels for information dissemination.
- Key communication barriers were identified for both information providers (e.g., lack of training on accessible messaging) and recipients (e.g., limited internet access, challenges for elderly populations with technology), highlighting the need for comprehensive improvements in emergency communication strategies.
- Proposed solutions include implementing community-wide alarm systems, improving Public Information Officer training, involving people with disabilities in communication strategy development, and exploring multiple modalities for message delivery to ensure accessibility for all residents.

Meeting Notes:

Meeting Overview

- The meeting focused on discussing accessible communication issues in San Patricio County, particularly during emergencies.
- Participants included emergency management professionals, community members, and individuals with lived experience of disabilities.
- This session was part of an ongoing series to identify problems and develop solutions for emergency preparedness and response for people with disabilities.

Recent Emergency Communication Issues

- Kimberly described a recent wildfire incident where communication breakdowns occurred:
 - Many people were unaware of the fire due to lack of cell service or power outages.
 - School evacuations were not effectively communicated to parents or county employees.
 - Information was primarily shared through informal channels like student-to-parent communication and Facebook pages.
- Official channels like reverse alerts were ineffective for those not registered or without service.
- Local news stations were present, but there were gaps in their coverage, particularly for people with disabilities (e.g., lack of ASL interpretation).

Identified Communication Barriers

Issues for Information Providers

- Lack of understanding among Public Information Officers (PIOs) and other officials about creating accessible messages for diverse audiences.
- Insufficient training on crafting and delivering accessible messaging.
- Absence of pre-prepared scripts for various emergency scenarios.
- Lack of involvement of people with disabilities in message development and dissemination planning.
- Assumptions made about how people with disabilities receive information, leading to gaps in communication strategies.

Issues for Information Recipients

- Limited internet access in rural areas due to financial constraints or lack of infrastructure.
- Challenges for elderly populations in using modern communication technologies.
- Reliance on single communication methods (e.g., TV news) that may not be accessible to all.
- Power outages affecting ability to receive alerts or access online information.
- Lack of awareness about available emergency notification systems (e.g., reverse alerts).
- Inaccessibility of information for people with specific disabilities (e.g., deaf individuals unable to hear audio alerts).

Current Communication Processes

- Dee Grimm emphasized the need to understand existing communication methods before developing solutions:

- Current public communication systems in San Patricio County are not well-defined or understood.
- There's a need to assess how different groups, especially those with disabilities, currently receive emergency information.
- Understanding gaps in the current system is crucial for developing effective solutions.

Ideas for Improving Emergency Communication

- Implement community-wide alarm systems, similar to tornado sirens, to alert residents of emergencies.
- Develop backup systems for those who can't hear audio alerts (e.g., visual cues for deaf individuals).
- Improve training for PIOs on creating accessible and audience-appropriate messages.
- Involve people with disabilities in the development and testing of emergency communication strategies.
- Create pre-prepared, accessible scripts for various emergency scenarios.
- Conduct a study to determine current communication processes and identify gaps, including input from people with lived experience of disabilities.
- Explore multiple modalities for message delivery (e.g., captioning, large print, audio).
- Improve coordination between agencies to ensure consistent and comprehensive information dissemination.

Next Steps

- The information gathered will be organized into a format similar to previous focus areas (transportation and competency).
- At the next meeting, the group will:
 - Review the organized information on communication issues.
 - Begin discussing potential solutions for each identified problem area.
 - Consider cross-referencing solutions that may address multiple issues.
- Participants are encouraged to come prepared with ideas for solutions to the identified communication barriers.
- A PDF of the whiteboard will be made available on the San Patricio website under resources (note: users will need to zoom in to view details).

End of Meeting Minutes