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## In weather emergencies, a lack of Spanish-language information endangers the public

Weather officials, media recognize call; taking action



*A man stands on a flooded Miami street in Hurricane Irma's wake on Sept. 10, 2017. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)*

By **Kay Nolan**

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During extreme weather, the ability to receive storm warnings can save your life. But many non-English speakers in the United States have limited access to information about hazards as dangerous as tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires and floods.

Emergency personnel, media broadcasters and weather forecasters have ramped up efforts to serve the Spanish-speaking population, but it's a work in progress.

An incident in 2013 exposed the danger of the lack of non-English severe weather information. As a tornado moved through El Reno, Okla., a family of seven took refuge in a drainage ditch. They were originally from Guatemala and warnings of the risk for severe flash flooding never reached the Spanish-speaking family. All drowned. A

National Weather Service review concluded that a lack of Spanish-language communication was a factor in the tragedy.

Progress has since been made in providing emergency information in Spanish via mobile devices. The federal government's Wireless Emergency Alerts system, which transmits National Weather Service storm warnings, now supports Spanish text. (The ability to receive these alerts in Spanish is dependent on the wireless carrier and individual device settings.) Many local officials also post important weather information on social media platforms and have bilingual staff that respond to comments in Spanish.

Yet almost all official weather bulletins from the National Weather Service, as well as federal emergency alerts issued by FEMA via the Emergency Alert System, are sent out in English only, laying bare the considerable work which remains to fill the language gap.

Media professionals say television and radio reliably reach a large segment of the Spanish-speaking population and are critical platforms.

### **The benefits of reaching Spanish speakers**

According to the U.S. Census, the number of Hispanic people in the United States surpassed 60 million in 2019, which is 18.5 percent of the nation's population. Twelve states had a population of 1 million or more Hispanic residents in 2019 — Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas. Language other than English is spoken in more than 20 percent of Hispanic households.

Meteorologists say the efforts made in recent years to reach Spanish speakers have proved worthwhile and, in some instances, lifesaving.



Univision Channel 23 meteorologist Nelly Carreño interviews a tornado survivor in October 2019. (Univision Channel 23 DFW)

In Dallas in October 2019, Univision Channel 23 meteorologist Nelly Carreño interviewed survivors as part of her live coverage of a tornado outbreak and its aftermath. A small-business owner, standing amid the ruins of his shop, in front of a parcel truck that had been flipped on its roof, told her in Spanish he'd had no time to flee, "but I remembered you once told us to get under the bed." He believed the sheltering advice likely saved his life.

"That's why we're in this business," said Chris Peña, senior vice president for news and local media at Univision, which operates 61 Spanish-language TV stations. Since 2016, Peña has hired 10 credentialed meteorologists at stations across the country. In 2018, the company launched new websites and social media apps, making weather information a priority

John Morales, who works at Miami television station WTVJ, led the way as the first bilingual degreed meteorologist in the United States. He worked at Spanish-language Univision and Telemundo before switching to an English-language NBC affiliate.

"I started to work in 1991 — and in 1992, one of the worst hurricanes in the history of this country, Hurricane Andrew, struck this area of Florida," Morales recalls. "It's a Latino-heavy community, and they'd never had a knowledgeable person guiding them through an emergency like that. People were so appreciative. Competing Spanish-language stations scrambled to find someone who had a degree whom they could put on the air."



A screenshot of a tweet from Carolina Fernandez Cubero (@CFCubero). The tweet text reads: "Miami es posiblemente la ciudad mas vulnerable del planeta en términos de las amenaza del cambio climático" followed by mentions of @JohnMoralesNBC6 and @ricardobrown, and a link to a YouTube video: [youtu.be/R3qKCKCvsow](https://youtu.be/R3qKCKCvsow) via @YouTube. The video player shows two men, John Morales and Ricardo Brown, in a split-screen video call. The video has 10 likes and was posted at 8:12 AM on May 7, 2021.

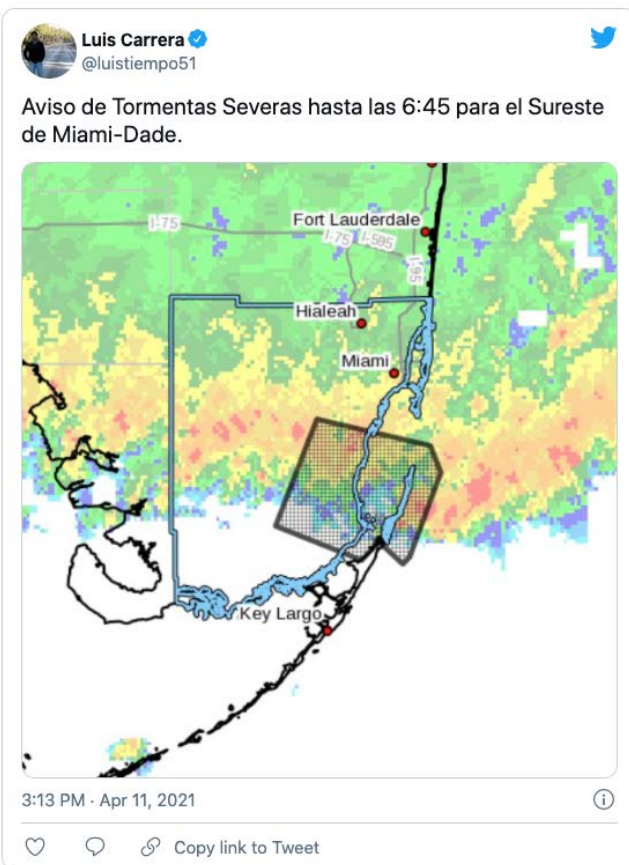
## Education and building trust are key

Bilingual meteorologists work to educate viewers about potential seasonal threats so they can be prepared if they happen.

Many Hispanic immigrants are unfamiliar with hurricanes, ice storms or tornadoes, as these phenomena are rare in parts of Mexico, Central America and South America.

Luis Carrera, a meteorologist with Telemundo in Miami says it's important to teach meteorology in "little bits" along with presenting daily weather forecasts. He knows that Florida residents from countries such as Chile and Argentina have never experienced hurricanes. He says he tries to convey the seriousness of hurricanes in Florida in a way that all listeners can understand, regardless of their educational level or experience.

"It's not easy," says Carrera. "Some people assume we are exaggerating or simply sending them to Home Depot to buy supplies. But for the first time in their lives, they have to trust me that they could lose their homes, their jobs, their lives. Every year, new immigrants come, and we have to repeat the information."



## Benefits all around

Those in charge of evacuations and other disaster response efforts say it's in everyone's best interest to ensure that Spanish-speaking residents get the word.



In California, where recurring wildfires have wiped out millions of acres since 2017, emergency responders have discovered the importance of disseminating evacuation information in Spanish.

“We’re all human, and we all deserve a chance to get out of harm’s way, regardless of what language we speak,” said Misti Wood, spokeswoman for the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department, adding that jammed evacuation routes affect all motorists, as well as law enforcement. “That’s why having emergency alerts in Spanish is so critical. The faster we can get everyone out, the faster we can get out of the way and let the firefighters do their job.”



*Grape vines at Chateau Boswell Winery burn as the Glass Fire moves through parts of Napa Valley on Sept. 27. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)*

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire) Sonoma-Lake-Napa unit holds daily news briefings during wildfires and other events in English with closed-captions for the hard-of-hearing, immediately followed by a briefing in Spanish, said public information officer Tyree Zander. Residents are also referred to the partially bilingual Ready For Wildfire site.

Cecile Juliette, public information officer with the San Mateo-Santa Cruz unit of CalFire, went ahead and hired a translator able to convert announcements into Spanish quickly when every hour matters.

Meanwhile, emergency management teams in other states are also taking steps on their own to initiate Spanish-language alerts and updates.

A fast-moving 2017 wildfire that literally crossed mountaintops overnight to threaten residential areas in Longmont, Colo., was a wake-up call to the Boulder County Department of Emergency Management, according to director Mike Chard. The city has an estimated 13- to 15-percent Spanish-speaking population. Not only were emergency warnings issued in English only, police who went door-to-door to alert residents to evacuate found that many were afraid to answer their doors, perhaps fearing the officers were immigration authorities, Chard said.

“The Sunshine Fire really highlighted the gaps in communication,” Chard said. Now, police are equipped with door hangers with information printed in both English and Spanish.

### **Radio is key platform for Spanish speakers, yet often neglected**

While strides have been made in making Spanish-language information available across many information platforms, that’s not the case for radio, which holds a particularly important place in Spanish-speaking communities.

“Latinos are the largest listening audience and the longest ‘time-spent-listening’ audience of radio,” said David Cruz of the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a national Hispanic advocacy organization. “We’re also the fastest-growing podcast audience.”

Yet hardly any Spanish-language radio stations have meteorologists on staff. The burden then falls on employees with no training in meteorology to translate urgent Weather Service bulletins from English to Spanish on a moment’s notice.



*Julio Cesar Camacho, right, is a Venezuelan journalist and one of the most popular Spanish-language radio hosts. (Wilfredo Lee/AP)*

Cruz deplores what he calls “toothless” Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules that require all stations to broadcast Emergency Alert System monthly tests, as well as emergency warnings, but doesn’t require them to be sent out in Spanish.

Otto Padron, president of Meruelo Media in Los Angeles, which operates a TV station and three radio stations, says he can’t remember any Emergency Alert System messages coming to the station in Spanish.

“We will get EAS alerts for emergencies, but they are all in English — they don’t care if your audience speaks Spanish,” said Padron, adding that many broadcasters won’t translate or delay the alerts because they want to be in FCC compliance by airing the alerts as transmitted.

In May 2020, LULAC, along with the Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council formally asked the FCC “to provide for comprehensive multilingual communications in emergencies such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and pandemics.”

Paloma Perez, an FCC spokeswoman, said the agency requires broadcasters to maintain the capability to transmit EAS messages, but said that FEMA, not the FCC, writes and transmits them. The FCC, however, now publishes some website updates on extreme weather events in both English and Spanish; it did so, for example, during a winter storm in Texas in mid-February.

A spokesman for FEMA, who asked that comments be credited to Wade Witmer, acting director of FEMA’s Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) program, sent a written statement confirming that the agency is not required by Congress to mandate EAS alerts in languages other than English.

“FEMA, however, encourages alerting authorities to include alert message content in English and Spanish and other languages applicable for people in their jurisdiction in all emergency messages sent via FEMA’s IPAWS to EAS and WEA (Wireless Emergency Alert),” the statement said.

## **Efforts ongoing within the National Weather Service**

While most of its forecast bulletins are still only provided in English, the Weather Service has launched several initiatives to reach Spanish speakers.

Krizia Negrón, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Melbourne, Fla., has been volunteering countless hours to help the Weather Service translate vital emergency alerts from English to Spanish.

Negrón is among approximately 30 bilingual meteorologists at the agency who have formed two teams:

- The Multimedia Assistance in Spanish team, created in 2019, provides short-term translation assistance to local meteorologists in areas that are experiencing a hurricane or other emergency.
- The Spanish Outreach Team, formed in 2014, has prepared weather safety educational materials, including informational graphics posted online.

In addition, the Weather Service makes its seven-day forecasts for all 50 states available in Spanish online.

Susan Buchanan, director of public affairs at the Weather Service, says the agency recognizes more Spanish-language services are necessary.

“We agree with our emergency management and Weather Enterprise partners that there is a growing need for Spanish translation of weather forecast products,” Buchanan wrote in a statement.

Buchanan said the agency is developing automated translation software for tropical weather outlooks and advisories and storm key messages that it will test this Atlantic hurricane season, which is forecast to be a rough one.

“As we refine and improve this new translation service, we will add more geographic coverage and additional types of weather threats,” Buchanan wrote.

*Kay Nolan is a journalist based in Milwaukee, where she has covered public policy, education, business, health care and breaking news as a correspondent for The Washington Post, the New York Times, Christian Science Monitor, WisPolitics.com and more. She is a former reporter and multiplatform copy editor for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.*