



U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division

*Assistant Attorney General
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW - RFK
Washington, DC 20530*

September 3, 2008

2008 Federal Interagency Conference
On Limited English Proficiency
Bethesda, MD

Dear Conference Participants:

Welcome to the 2008 Federal Interagency Conference on Limited English Proficiency (LEP). As coordinator of the conference, the Department of Justice joins all of the other sponsoring and participating agencies and the Federal Interagency Working Group on LEP in expressing our gratitude for your presence here today.

The morning plenary sessions this year are devoted to overcoming language barriers in emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. Those impacted by natural disasters or other threats to public safety are protected by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin (including ability to speak English) by recipients of federal financial assistance. Any entity receiving federal financial assistance, including state agencies, local government entities, private organizations, and others, must comply with Title VI in carrying out its programs and activities.

That is why, in keeping with the focus of the plenary sessions, the Civil Rights Division is committing to release a tool on language access and Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. I also use this opportunity to encourage all agencies or individuals who have promising practices, recommendations, or documents that you would like considered as we finalize this tool to submit them by October 30, 2008. Please submit them to:
Anna.Medina@usdoj.gov.

The devastating summer floods in the Midwest, the fires in California, and the season of hurricane warnings remind us of the importance of ensuring that disaster preparedness and response activities are accessible to everyone. Please join me in taking this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to upholding Title VI. All individuals, regardless of their race, color, or national origin, including ability to speak English, are entitled to information, shelter, and many other relief services. In an effort to ensure that everyone is treated appropriately, the federal government coordinates across agency lines to swiftly respond to complaints of discrimination and to provide information channeling disaster victims to appropriate sources for assistance. As long-term recovery efforts continue, we must all remember the importance of ensuring nondiscrimination by our recipients.

There are many proactive steps that can be taken to ensure that race, color, and national origin, including ability to speak English, do not impede access to information, shelters, and other evacuation and relief services. Proactive steps include:

Conducting outreach to community and faith-based organizations serving minority populations for purposes of advising them about available assistance, eligibility standards for assistance, and including them in disaster preparedness, recovery, and reconstruction planning.

Ensuring that language services—including bilingual staff, interpreters, and translated materials—are in place so that limited English proficient persons are able to communicate their needs, apply for assistance, and receive important information about the process.

Sharing information about the minimum eligibility standards for obtaining benefits, so that eligible individuals, including eligible immigrants and/or their children can access aid without difficulty or fear. Ensuring that state and local agencies receiving federal funds do not apply more stringent eligibility criteria based on race, color, national origin, language or other prohibited bases.

Re-examining evacuation and disaster preparedness plans to ensure that plans address the needs of minority populations, particularly those that are isolated due to an inability to speak English, immigration status, or income level.

I would also like to take this opportunity to remind you that the Department serves as a clearinghouse for Title VI and LEP complaints. If agencies receive disaster-related complaints with unclear jurisdiction, they should contact the Coordination and Review Section at (202) 307-2222 for assistance in determining the appropriate agency for referral.

Please help us spread the word that anyone in need of assistance and unable to locate or otherwise access relief services due to a language barrier or for any other potentially discriminatory reason, can contact the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at Civil.liberties@dhs.gov or by calling:

Toll Free: 1-866-644-8360
Toll Free TTY: 1-866-644-8361
Local: 202-401-1474
Local TTY: 202-401-0470
Fax: 202-401-4708

Individuals who feel they have been discriminated against in seeking relief can contact the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice:

Coordination and Review Section - NWB
Civil Rights Division
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20530

(888) 848-5306 - English and Spanish (inglés y español)
(202) 307-2222 (voice)
(202) 307-2678 (TTY)

Thank you for your vigilance in all areas of language access. I look forward to our continued joint efforts in this important initiative.

Again, welcome to the 2008 LEP Conference. Please take full advantage of this opportunity to learn from each other, share, and take back with you the knowledge, skills, and will to make language access a reality.

Sincerely,



Grace Chung Becker
Acting Assistant Attorney General