

HHS Office for Civil Rights in Action



OCR Issues Guidance to Help Ensure Equal Access to Emergency Services and the Appropriate Sharing of Medical Information During Hurricane Ida August 30, 2021

As Hurricane Ida makes landfall, the HHS Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and its federal partners are working to ensure that emergency officials effectively address the needs of at-risk populations during their emergency response. To this end, emergency responders and officials should consider adopting, as circumstances and resources allow, the following practices to help make sure all segments of the community are served:

- Employing qualified interpreter services to assist individuals with limited English proficiency and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing during evacuation, response, and recovery activities;
- Making emergency messaging available in languages prevalent in the affected area(s) and in multiple formats, such as audio, large print, and captioning and ensuring that websites providing disaster-related information are accessible;
- Making use of multiple outlets and resources for messaging to reach individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and members of diverse faith communities;
- Considering the needs of individuals with mobility impairments and individuals with assistive devices or durable medical equipment in providing transportation for evacuation;
- Identifying and publicizing accessible sheltering facilities that include accessible features, such as bathing, toileting, eating facilities, and bedding;
- Avoiding separating people from their sources of support, such as service animals, durable medical equipment, caregivers, medication, and supplies;
- Placing persons with disabilities in integrated shelters to the extent possible; and
- Stocking shelters with items that will help people to maintain independence, such as hearing aid batteries, canes, and walkers.

Recent natural disasters have demonstrated the importance of ensuring accessibility to health and human services for everyone living in the United States, including individuals who are limited English proficient or with disabilities in need of interpretation and translation services. HHS' Office for Civil Rights led efforts by the HHS Language Access Steering Committee to develop a [plain language checklist - PDF](#) | [En Español* - PDF](#) to help first responders provide services to individuals with limited English proficiency and individuals with disabilities during emergency response and recovery efforts, in accordance with federal civil rights laws. The checklist includes recommendations, specific action steps, and resources to assist first responders in providing on-the-ground language assistance and communicating effectively in disasters. Practical tips range from how to identify language needs in a disaster-impacted community to effectively utilizing interpreters.

Being mindful of all segments of the community and taking reasonable steps to provide an equal opportunity to benefit from emergency response efforts will help ensure that the disaster management in all areas affected by Hurricane Ida is successful.

For more information regarding how Federal civil rights laws apply in an emergency, visit the [OCR's Civil Rights Emergency Preparedness page](#).

For information regarding Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and other civil rights authorities, visit the [OCR's Civil Rights Laws and Regulations Enforced page](#).

For information about emergency requirements for long-term care facilities, visit the [CMS Emergency Preparedness Rule page](#).

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