



COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

Department of Emergency Management

9711 Farrar Court, Suite 200, North Chesterfield, Virginia 23236
TEL 804.267.7600 TDD 804.674.2417 FAX 804.272.2046

CURTIS C. BROWN
State Coordinator of
Emergency Management

ERIN SUTTON
Chief Deputy State Coordinator
of Emergency Management

November 23, 2021

Dear Reader,

On behalf of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, thank you for your patience with the additional time needed for the submission of our annual reports. Since January 2020, our small team of around 150 teammates has been working 24/7/365 serving our citizens and visitors across the Commonwealth through dozens of natural and humanmade disasters and large-scale events. This includes several significant rallies, flooding events, civil unrest, COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, inauguration, the Capitol riot, a cyber attack on critical infrastructure, hundreds of protests, repatriation, winter weather, hurricane season, and numerous other high-profile and impactful incidents. My agency is ready to help, and here to serve. Thank you.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Curtis C. Brown".

Curtis Brown, State Coordinator



Virginia Department of
Emergency Management

**REPORT PURSUANT TO
CHAPTER 590**

**Access & Functional Needs
and Limited English Proficiency**

November 2021

The Virginia Department of Emergency Management hereby submits this report pursuant to Chapter 590 from the 2020 General Assembly session.

§ 1. The Department of Emergency Management shall review its emergency services and disaster preparedness programs to determine if changes to those programs are necessary in order to address the needs of individuals with limited English proficiency and individuals with access or functional needs. The Department shall complete its review no later than November 1, 2020, and report its findings to the Chairs of the Senate Committee on General Laws and Technology and the House Committee on General Laws. Such report shall include any recommendations for legislation that would be required to fully address the needs of individuals with limited English proficiency and individuals with access or functional needs. As used in this section, "individuals with limited English proficiency" means individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and who have limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English.

Communications Overview Addressing Above Changes

During emergencies and disasters, public messaging can mean the difference between life and death. While many platforms can be used to push out timely information, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust society into more online dependency. Due to limitations with social distancing and quarantines, vulnerable populations will now rely more than ever on access to digital messaging such as the internet.

Workarounds and alternatives to digital messaging have been used in the past to meet requirements set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. However, many critical aspects of daily life have moved online, making it difficult to rely on those other methods. Interactive tools and/or sites that are well-intentioned suddenly prevent those with access and functional needs from accessing information readily available to those without access and functional needs.

The Commonwealth recognizes the importance of giving every Virginian and visitor access to critical information – whether it be in an emergency or to perform a daily function. It is for this reason that several key initiatives have been implemented to ensure equity in messaging.

Training for State Employees

One of the first steps in filling this gap is recognizing that not everyone understands the complexities and requirements for providing accessible communications. To address this, *Communication Accessibility during a State of Emergency: Guidance for State Agencies* was published in April and distributed to all state agency Public Information Officers. This document was created to provide key guidance related to provision of information and messaging which is accessible to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf blind, blind, and visually impaired.

To accompany this guide, an online training course was also made available. The course included information on how to effectively make public service announcements, improve accessibility for press briefings, and secure resources such as Sign Language Interpreter (SLI) services, and Real Time Captioning/CART for remote meetings such as teleconferencing and video conferences. The training also addressed site accessibility for people with disabilities including the major features of 508 compliance: closed captioning and subtitles, screen reader capability, accessibility with the keyboard, and transcription.

In an effort to address health equity as well, just in time training was delivered to government employees at the state and local level, assisting with programs for vulnerable communities across the Commonwealth. *Health Equity Before, During, and After a Disaster — Just in Time Training* allowed personnel to discuss several key topics such as the rationale for centering equity in disaster response, recognizing the differences between equity and equality, understanding the social determinants of health, utilizing data and research related to health equity, and explaining unconscious bias and cultural humility. This training was developed by the Health Equity Working Group and the Virginia Emergency Support Team to promote the consideration of health equity in all aspects of preparedness, response, and recovery to a disaster.

Press Conferences and Written Guidance

In addition to the ongoing efforts to address digital roadblocks, great progress has been made at the state level to address accessibility issues for press conferences and written guidance as well. ASL interpretation is now made available for all press conferences, and all Executive Orders have undergone ASL translation as well. To be inclusive of our communities with limited English proficiency, all Executive Orders and guidance related to COVID-19 have been translated into Virginia's top 6 languages – Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. Virginia is also one of only a handful of states that now offers live Spanish translation of all Governor's press conferences.

Social Media and Community Engagement

Social media graphics and content are one of the fastest ways to reach a large audience. Recognizing this, all life safety graphics produced by VDEM are now translated into the top six languages and posted to social media and the vaemergency.gov webpage. This year, the *Hurricane Evacuation Guide during the COVID-19 Pandemic* was also translated into multiple languages, including plain text format, to ensure it was accessible. Printed copies were made available to localities for distribution to those communities that cannot access digital information or that requested a hard copy.

Increased efforts have also been made to amplify public safety messages to vulnerable communities. This includes TV ads, radio messaging, and public events that also take diversity, equity, and inclusion into consideration. Research has been conducted to identify these communities, and targeted outreach efforts have been conducted to ensure messages are received by the whole community. VDEM is in the process of launching a Virginia Partners in Preparedness Program, which will bring together various groups to serve as trusted messengers for their communities. Examples of these partners include advocacy groups, non-profits, faith based and voluntary organizations. The goal is to have these groups promote emergency preparedness and keep their communities informed of response and/or recovery measures as well.

Websites

State agency websites are in the process of being evaluated for accessibility issues. This summer, a memo was sent to all state agency heads promoting the accessibility of the Commonwealth's digital properties. The Virginia Joint Information Center, led by VDEM, partnered with Virginia-based company Capital One to assist with this effort. Capital One's Digital Accessibility Group is providing pro bono reviews of public facing portions of state websites to determine what pages and functions are not accessible to those using assistive devices and technologies. These reports will assist state agencies in better understanding where the issues are and how to correct them.

Recommendations

During emergencies and disasters, public messaging can mean the difference between life and death. While many platforms can be used to push out timely information, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust society into more online dependency. Due to limitations with social distancing and quarantines, vulnerable populations are now more reliant than ever on access to digital messaging such as the internet, which can further exacerbate inequities and access issues. The following recommendations are intended to capture potential legislative options to enhance the Commonwealth's capacity to better serve those with access and functional needs and limited English proficiency.

Partners in Preparedness/Community Outreach Program Manager

In an effort to combat the pre-existing systematic inequalities that leave many communities vulnerable before, during, and after a disaster, VDEM recommends developing a program manager position that will assist with the creation and coordination of a formalized Partners in Preparedness program and ongoing community outreach campaign. This position will work to ensure that the agency thoroughly engages with partners that can promote and enhance programs and communication by serving as trusted messengers within their communities. These partners come from all industries including but not limited to advocacy groups; education; business/commerce; faith-based; health care; nonprofits; and government agencies.

This program will be data-driven and provide critical resources and support needed to be prepared and resilient, including but not limited to preparedness brochures, real-time emergency information, and access to disaster-focused webinars, forums, town halls, and other events. The position would be responsible for engaging with all VDEM divisions and the Virginia Emergency Support Team to ensure response and recovery plans and procedures take equity and inclusion into consideration, and serve as a liaison during disasters to vulnerable communities by working with the trusted community partners.

Seven (7) Regional Public Communications Specialists

Currently, VDEM's seven regional offices do not include the capacity to maintain communications campaigns or outreach events tailored for the communities they serve. Instead, they rely on communications division staff members at headquarters in Richmond to handle the public information for all 130+ localities served by VDEM. These positions are not only responsible for the agency's entire communications strategy, but during a disaster, they are tasked with managing the state Joint Information Center.

Having full time communications and outreach specialists in the regions not only enhances the agency's ability to communicate as a whole, but provides an individualized focus whereby communities most at need are prioritized and have a local point of contact to provide timely and accurate information. In addition, by having communications personnel living and working in the region they serve, they are also more attune to the needs of the communities, current gaps, and resources available to assist. During blue sky days and disasters, these positions will also serve as a liaison to HQ and the state JIC, informing them in real-time if there are any communications needs coming from their communities.

Public Outreach Competitive Grant Program

In Virginia, many localities have emergency managers and/or public information officers that are not full- time, have other primary job responsibilities, or are volunteers. To better assist our localities with public outreach and preparedness campaign development, a pass-through grant program should be developed to provide funding for developing, enhancing, and sustaining communications efforts, particularly to communities disproportionately impacted, communities of color, those with access and functional needs, limited English proficiency, and others most at risk.

This program would provide localities with support that could fund efforts such as those listed below:

- Have a dedicated Public Information Officer or Outreach Specialist that could work with communities to identify needs, development outreach materials, and engage with their residents before, during, and after an emergency
- Create campaigns that are inclusive of their whole community and plan for/address any gaps
- Conduct public outreach events that bring information and resources directly to the communities, potentially partnering with community leaders/trusted messengers
- Provide technology support and/or enhancements that can assist with reaching the whole community with a specific emphasis on those with access and functional needs
- Ensuring digital communications are 508 compliant, to include websites, apps, and documents
- Provide digital and print resources in multiple languages that are present in their communities

Additional Support Opportunities

211 Virginia is staffed with trained professionals (run by VDSS) that take public inquiry calls and suggest sources of help using one of the largest databases of health and human

services in Virginia. Currently, they have one bilingual-Spanish Community Resource Specialist (CRS) on staff and a temporary specialist in training that is bilingual in English and Spanish. 211 currently uses Transperfect for translation services. Ideally, to provide Spanish Language services they would need at least 5 bilingual CRS plus a bilingual supervisor who can perform call monitoring in both languages.

211 could also use additional permanent CRS to address capacity issues in general. They have augmented staff with temporary workers from a service, however this has been challenging to keep these positions filled.

In addition to this support, there is also a need to have a dedicated language translation line that can assist call takers in all languages, particularly during disasters. With more than 100 languages spoken in Virginia, it is impossible to have this capacity built in. These translation services can be accessed 24 hrs/day, 7 days/week to assist during blue sky and disaster operations.