



**U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL)
Listening Session Recap, Santa Rosa, CA
Thursday, June 14, 2018**

I. Introduction

The Sonoma County Fire and Emergency Services hosted this listening session, which was held in Santa Rosa, CA. In attendance were representatives of non-governmental organizations, service providers, community members, and government partners. Introductory speakers included:

- Cameron Quinn, DHS Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
- Regis Phelan, Acting Director, FEMA Office of Equal Rights
- Samuel Wallis, Emergency Coordinator, Sonoma County Fire and Emergency Services
- Roxanne Crawford, FEMA Region IX Disability Coordinator
- Anna Hinken, DHS CRCL, Moderator

The listening session began with Mr. Wallis welcoming participants. Ms. Hinken introduced Officer Quinn who explained the purpose of the meeting. Officer Quinn explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hear about concerns and experiences related to the impact of the disaster had on individuals with disabilities and the surrounding areas. She asked that participants also share “what worked,” or effective practices. By better understanding these experiences, and in partnership with the state and local entities, including non-profit organizations, she noted that we can do more to improve preparedness, response, and recovery for persons with disabilities in time for the next hurricane season and other disasters.

Prior to opening up the session for comments, Officer Quinn introduced Roxanne Crawford and Regis Phelan. Also participating was Selin Cherian-Rivers with the Federal Coordination and Compliance Section (FCS) of the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Civil Rights Division who introduced herself and explained that DOJ/FCS monitors potential discrimination during disasters against individuals based on race, color, and national origin, including limited English proficiency

II. Issues/Concerns and Effective Practices Noted

A. Communication Access for People with Disabilities

- **The Government¹ Should Make Improvements in the Emergency Notification Process for People with Disabilities** – The Becoming Independent representative told us it was “chaos” when residents were evacuating. The representative specifically told us about a deaf individual who had not heard the warnings although staff was ultimately able to obtain the assistance of a first responder who provided access to this person’s residence. The representative cited the need for more effective warning systems for the deaf, such as bed vibrators.
- **The Federal Government Should Implement Standards for Emergency Notifications** - Community members who lived in an apartment complex for individuals with disabilities shared a story about their experiences during the fire. They had not received accurate information about the fire from their apartment complex owners. According to the community members after the fire they requested that the FCC improve wireless communication to such facilities and to the deaf community. According to a community member, there needs to be a federal standard governing how first responders will issue emergency alerts and warnings so the “entire” community could be reached through one system.
- **Effective Practice: Use Social Media for Emergency Notifications** - The city of Santa Rosa Emergency Operations Center sent out alerts via cell phone. The Fire Department sent out alerts on Facebook and through other social media. Community members told us the use of social media was very effective in reaching residents.
- **The Government Should Improve Emergency Warning Systems for the Deaf Population** - A married deaf couple who lost their home and all their belongings reported they had received no warning about the impending disaster. They were asleep as the fire approached and their

¹ The Government” or “Governments” as used in this document refers to federal, state, or local governments, depending upon which of these entities has a role or responsibilities in the area described.

dog woke them up. The couple said there was a need to improve the warning system for notifying deaf residents of impending emergencies.

- **Community Member Experience: Improving Emergency Warning Systems to Include Non-Power Dependent Methods** - A community member who resided in a rural area said that she had no cell phone reception during the fire and noted that this needed to be resolved in order to receive alerts and warnings during future disasters. Some participants were told that due to gas breaches, power was cut in many areas due to gas line breaches and this could have impacted cell reception in certain areas. Additionally, many homes have discontinued use of landlines (which would have been operable) and now rely only on cell service.

B. Preparedness and Evacuation

- **Community Member Experience: Alerting First Responders about Residents with Disabilities** - We heard from a community member who was a resident of the Journey's End mobile home park, a neighborhood that was destroyed in the fire. He had written a letter that he read to all present. He was very emotional as he described hearing a dog barking as he fled from his neighborhood and looking back to discover that a neighbor of his who uses a wheelchair was still sitting inside of her home looking out the window as the flames approached. He rescued the woman and she told him that she had been "left behind." He proposed legislation be enacted to provide all people with disabilities who need assistance with evacuation a placard with a wheelchair symbol to be placed in their house window so that when rescuers are going through a neighborhood they will know to provide assistance. Other participants approved of this idea, some suggesting that the signage be more specific to a person's disability, e.g., a symbol of an ear with a line striking through it to indicate that a deaf person resides in the residence. Some community members expressed concern that this may constitute a security and privacy risk.
- **Governments Need to Ensure Transportation Continues to Operate during an Evacuation** – A community member noted that the transportation process for evacuation needs improvement. The intermittent or lack of cell phone service had an impact on transportation and the messaging related to notifications about transportation. A

representative suggested satellite phones be used in maintaining effective communication during evacuation.

- **The Government Should Ensure Access to Durable Medical Equipment** - A community member reported that items required for ADA access were not available in an organized manner after the fire. Individuals with disabilities who needed hospital beds, canes, accessible showers, and other medical equipment were sometimes left without these items. The community member asked whether these items could be stockpiled on a regional basis. Another community member also noted that there had been a multi-state shortage of portable, accessible showers after the fire.
- **Effective Practice: Work Across County Lines** - Community members told us that the Human Service Department had many service providers who evacuated and had to get their own families out of harm's way. As a result, the Department had to look to neighboring counties to obtain services for providing accessibility to residents in need of such services, e.g., American Sign Language Interpreters.
- **Governments Should Ensure Agreements with Pharmacists on obtaining medications before a Disaster** – A community member told us CVS was helpful and cooperative during/after the fire regarding medications and other pharmaceutical items, however, this arrangement was ad hoc, and it would be better if an agreement with CVS or other pharmacists is put in place as part of emergency planning before the next disaster.
- **Effective Practice: Non-Profits Produced Handouts on Preparedness for People with Disabilities** - A representative from the Pacific ADA Center told us the organization has a wealth of information in handouts and online related to people with disabilities and the handouts could be distributed to communities and organizations.
- **Effective Practice: Community Partnerships** - A community member reported that a positive aspect of the fire was the community's willingness to help each other. Community members told us there were good "next door partnerships." In addition, the durable medical equipment recycle center and the veterans' organizations were very

helpful. Partnerships between neighbors and among community organizations was something that worked well this time.

C. Sheltering

- **Effective Practice: Collecting Medical Information** - A community member praised the work of the American Red Cross during/after the fire noting that they collected medical information electronically using digital tablets. This streamlined collection was used to obtain medications, provide treatment, and monitor shelter residents with medical needs.
- **Effective Practice: Salvation Army Care** - A community member noted that the Salvation Army also provided good care to shelter residents, noting that the Salvation Army provided appropriate treatment to people with breathing issues and provided good food.
- **Effective Practice: Earle Baum Center's Work on Providing Medical Supplies** - A community member noted that the Earle Baum Center for the Blind worked with shelter providers to supply aids and other related supports to residents who were blind or had low vision.
- **Shelter Providers Should Ensure Staffing to Assist Limited English Proficiency (LEP)** - Several community members reported that there were no staff in shelters to assist LEP individuals.

D. Access to FEMA Resources and Programs

- **FEMA Should Ensure Call Centers are Fully Staffed** - A community member reported that the wait to speak with a live person from the FEMA Call Center was too long, saying that there was a wait of two to three hours to get information.
- **FEMA Should Ensure In-Person Assistance Is Available to Answer Community Members' Questions** - A community member told us that there is a need to issue more Section 8 vouchers, especially for those who lost their homes at Journey's End. She sought assistance from a FEMA representative (in-person) but the representative only had five minutes to discuss what assistance was available and this was not good enough.

- **FEMA Should Ensure Staffing is Available to Assist LEP Individuals** - Community members reported that there was very little access to FEMA for LEP individuals.
- **FEMA Should Review Funding for Preparedness Activities** - A community member noted that emergency preparedness programs in the area were not robust enough and there was not enough funding to improve programs. For example, there was a need to go to the private sector for support in obtaining durable medical equipment. A community member asked if FEMA is a reasonable resource for preparedness funding.

E. Services and Supports for Recovery

- **Community Member Experience: Mental Health Services** - A community member spoke about a family member who had mental health issues before the fire and described the mental health services provided in the area as “outstanding.” One concern he had, however, was that since the fire this relative’s case manager had been replaced twice. He asked for more stability, so that treatment can continue.
- **Governments Need to Ensure that Improvements are Made to Infrastructure** - An organization representative talked about the importance of power restoration and noted that there was a law (possibly in Florida) that maintains that hospitals are the first to be powered up once the grid is returned to functioning and that skilled nursing facilities are next on the list. This is something they would like to see in California.
- **Effective Practice: Long-term Recovery Funding** - The Salvation Army representative talked about the funding they have available to assist in long term recovery, mostly with housing issues. They prefer to work with survivors who are looking to relocate to apartments or homes rather than hotels as hotels are expensive. Some people are still living in their cars. This same representative indicated that providing things such as gasoline cards are just “band aids” if a person does not have adequate housing.
- **Governments Need to Place Emphasis on Affordable Accessible Housing within their Long Term Recovery Plans** - Several

participants said that affordable accessible housing was a concern. The housing market in the impacted area is not robust and the housing that does exist is not affordable to many people. Many people simply had no place to go after sheltering.

- **Effective Practice: Mental Health Care** - An organization representative reported on the provision of mental health care following the fires, noting that for survivors who had pre-existing mental health conditions and those who developed them because of the trauma of the fire, the Crisis Counseling Program (CCP) was very effective. They have funding for this program through January but will reassess the need as that time approaches and may need to extend the program.

III. Conclusion

CRCL and FEMA thanked participants for sharing concerns and encouraged people to reach out after this meeting if they find themselves with additional concerns or questions that were not brought up during the session.