



University of Michigan
School of Public Health
**Michigan Center
for Public Health
Preparedness**

Communicating with Diverse Populations

Gregory V. Button, PhD
School of Public Health
University of Michigan
June 15, 2005




- One of the central roles of government is protecting its citizens from harm
- An important part of this role is protecting those who are might be at risk for being more vulnerable



- Sometimes these populations are referred to as 'special needs' populations
- The term is however, ambiguous at best and pejorative at worst
- These populations are not a homogeneous group
- The term 'special needs' is often used to include disabled populations and cross-cultural populations



• A better way to speak about these populations is to use the word 'diverse' as opposed to 'special needs'



• Who are these diverse populations?

• They can include, among other groups, the following:

- Physically disabled
- Mentally disabled
- Medically fragile
- Frail seniors



- Limited or non-English speaking people
- Homeless people
- Culturally isolated people
- Geographically isolated people
- Poor people
- Single parents with no support systems




- Undocumented persons
- Pet or livestock owners
- Children
- Visually or hearing impaired
- Ethnic minorities
- Tourists


• These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive




- When people speak of the needs of diverse populations they often neglect a large segment of our population
- 65 million Americans live in rural areas
- While many categories of diverse populations reside there as well, rural populations face additional challenges




- Rural areas often lack adequate funding for all social services
- Rural areas often have poorer highway systems
- Rural areas often fall outside major media markets and often lack local radio/TV stations or newspapers
- Rural areas often lack adequate resources to prevent, respond to, and recover from disaster



- Some special considerations that need be considered for diverse populations
 - Communication
 - Evacuation
 - Sheltering
 - Food
 - Returning people home




- Know your community members
- Identify concentrations of diverse populations who live in your community
- Work with local organizations who serve or are affiliated with diverse populations
- Consider developing a special needs registry



- Communication is the key
- Communicating with hearing impaired or sight impaired is a challenge
- So is communicating with speakers of other languages, rural /remote residents, tourists, and the homeless
- Communicating in a culturally sensitive manner is essential




- Communicating with diverse populations must be viewed differently depending on which population you are trying to reach
- Different media reach different populations and are viewed differently by diverse populations



- The mainstream media is not utilized or perceived the same by all people
- Research and experience has demonstrated that some ethnic groups do not trust the mainstream media or, for that matter, rely on traditional media for communication



- You must identify the medium on which people depend, whether it be a local Spanish language newspaper, a black radio station, a respected community leader, or a local organization
- During the time of crisis, informal communication networks are often more effective and relied upon by many diverse populations



- You need to identify respected community leaders and organizations in advance and establish an ongoing, effective and credible relationship
- You need to incorporate these leaders and organizations into your communication networks
- Provide them with a voice and a role in planning and responding to crisis



- In some cultures communication depends heavily on the context, or non-verbal aspects of communication
- In other cultures communication depend on explicit verbal communication



- When communicating with other language speaking groups do not rely on mere literal translations of text. Not all ideas, feelings, or thoughts translate readily into other cultures.
- Cultures have vastly different ways of perceiving risk, expressing anxiety, showing empathy, etc.



- Non-verbal communication or body language differs from culture to culture
- Studies show more than 60% of communication is non-verbal
- Be sure you are familiar with non-verbal cultural practices



- Pay special attention to the following:
 - Eye contact; smiling; laughing; touching; spatial relationships; and time