

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCATES

March 2024

POLICY BRIEF

EQUITABLE EMERGENCY RESPONSE STRATEGIES FOR CALIFORNIA

Authored by:
April Jean, Abigail Hewins, and Holden Slattery with Public Health Advocates' Emergency Resilience Project

Contributors:
Madison Jablonski-Sheffield
Melissa Jones
Meredith Lee
Lan Nguyen
Adriana Ramos-Yamamoto
Crystal Sanchez
Dr. Karen Smith
Dr. Trinidad Solis
Iliana Soto Welty

The Emergency Resilience Project is committed to building California's resilience to future emergencies by confronting inequities in our emergency preparedness and response systems and shaping a future where resources and investments reach communities facing the greatest harm.

"When it comes to equity, the way we allocate resources is really important... one standard formula doesn't fit all."
- Local Government Leader

To make our emergency preparedness and response system work for everyone, steps must be taken at both the state and local levels using legislative and administrative approaches.

Background

California must grapple with how we address emergencies. From infectious diseases to extreme weather events, wildfires, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and rising sea levels, emergencies threaten the well-being of all California residents.

These emergencies are not experienced equally by all. Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), low-income, LGBTQ+, rural, homeless, and other marginalized communities suffer disproportionately when an emergency inevitably strikes. Historical and systemic inequities embedded in California's social fabric intensify the vulnerability of these communities during emergencies. Unequal access to resources, discriminatory policies, and socioeconomic disparities all increase harm for those already marginalized. Addressing these disparities requires a targeted and intentional approach that acknowledges and rectifies historical injustices. As California strives to navigate its emergency response landscape, it is imperative to recognize that **a one-size-fits-all approach will never suffice.**

Approaching emergency response using an equity lens is not a new concept. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), for example, recognizes that it "*must be aware of, and responsive to, the needs of different individuals and communities to ensure that the benefits of FEMA programs are available*" (FEMA).

California can build resilience and mitigate the disparate impact of future emergencies by investing in our emergency preparedness and response systems while focusing on the state's most vulnerable communities. Public Health Advocates, a statewide working group we assembled, and community leaders we interviewed have collectively developed state and local policy recommendations to build resilience in these systems, starting with an equity framework for emergency response.

What is an Equity Framework for Emergency Response?

An equity framework is a structured approach that promotes fairness, justice, and inclusivity while addressing historical and systemic inequities. Its aim is to ensure the equitable distribution of resources across public policies and programs to meet the needs of communities facing increased harm. Key components of an equity framework include:

- **A thorough analysis of existing disparities, focusing on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic and housing status.**
- **Funding allocations based on vulnerability and need.**
- **Inclusive decision-making that centers the voices of impacted communities and diverse stakeholders.**
- **Targeted interventions to address specific disparities and historical harms.**
- **Mechanisms for transparency and accountability.**

As part of its equity approach, Public Health Advocates is focusing on equitable funding during emergencies because the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the ways in which historically vulnerable populations suffer increased harm and delayed recovery when an emergency strikes. Partners working with Public Health Advocates cited that BIPOC and other marginalized communities were among the last to receive important public health information, contact tracing, access to testing and vaccines, and recovery support. An equity emergency funding framework would position California to swiftly and effectively direct resources based on vulnerability and need in times of crisis.

Gaps in California's Current Emergency Response Systems

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for a paradigm shift in our approach to emergency response in California. Shortcomings emphasize the need for adaptability, inclusivity, and resilience in emergency response. Importantly, we must be better prepared to face new emergency declarations. Given historical emergency declarations in California, these are likely to include **communicable diseases, extreme weather, earthquakes, wildfires, and non-natural hazards** such as toxic waste spills and explosions. In all these situations, deep-rooted inequities can result in disproportionate harm. An equitable response system must consider:

- **Vulnerability and exposure:** Inequities make some groups more likely to contract an illness, live in an area prone to disasters, or reside in a home that is less resilient to damage.
- **Resource allocation:** Inequities make it harder for emergency responders to reach certain populations, while organizations serving racial and ethnic minorities often struggle to obtain funding to provide relief services for these vulnerable communities.
- **Trusted messengers:** Challenges presented by cultural and language divides, stigma, and mistrust are solved by empowering diverse messengers to reach those communities.
- **Economic impact:** Job loss and lack of access to food and housing can all be heightened during emergencies for those who are already marginalized.
- **Health impact:** Communities already experiencing adverse health outcomes suffer more than the general population when a communicable disease outbreak or significant environmental hazard occurs. Interruptions to medical services can put life-saving procedures on hold, disproportionately impacting communities already at the highest risk.

Five Likely Causes for Emergency Declarations in California:



Input from Key Informants

Public Health Advocates conducted key informant interviews with 12 stakeholders from August to October of 2023 to understand and evaluate emergency response strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies. Interviewees represented California regions statewide and included a mix of state and local government officials and CBO leaders. Through these interviews, Public Health Advocates collected real-life experiences of disinvested communities during times of emergency.

The interviews revealed key challenges and future priorities.

Key challenges

- Insufficient flow of resources from local governments to BIPOC-led and serving CBOs.
- Insufficient data and infrastructure for providing culturally responsive support, resources, and services to vulnerable populations.

Future priorities

- Exacerbation of existing socio-economic inequities.
- Collect and disaggregate more inclusive population data by expanding current demographic categories.
- Prioritize equity by funding and resourcing BIPOC-led and -serving CBOs for emergency response.

"When we don't disaggregate data, we don't get equal resources to our communities."

- Community-Based Organization Leader

Recommendations for California State Policy Makers

1. Establish an equitable emergency funding framework as a California Equity Standard.

Established by the Governor, the Racial Equity Commission has been tasked with establishing equity standards for California. Naming equitable emergency response as a state equity standard will protect the lives and livelihoods of BIPOC Californians.

2. Conduct an equity impact assessment for emergency funding to identify and address potential disparities.

Assessment findings should be used to inform and adjust funding strategies throughout the emergency response period.

3. Target funding for BIPOC-led and -serving community-based organizations.

When emergencies strike, BIPOC CBOs can be found at the front lines providing life-saving, culturally responsive information, resources, and services, often with insufficient resources to do so. As trusted messengers in their own communities, BIPOC CBOs are uniquely positioned to respond effectively when disaster strikes. California can bolster BIPOC-led and -serving CBOs by:

- Allocating them a specific portion of emergency response funds
- Establishing grant programs specifically designed to support these organizations in delivering culturally responsive and community-driven emergency response initiatives, and
- Providing BIPOC-led organizations resources for capacity building to enhance their ability to respond effectively to emergencies and to secure other resources to support that work.

4. Expand state data collection categories by creating subcategories for ethnicity and race.

Lived experience and culture vary wildly within the minimum federal standard race categories. With expanded demographic data, California can more effectively target funding to communities experiencing the greatest risk in

times of emergencies. The state also can better focus partnerships on organizations that assist these populations in culturally responsive ways. New racial and ethnic subcategories may include South Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern North African (MENA), Afro-Latino and Black/African.

5. Establish a process for data sharing across state agencies and other emergency response organizations to create a more holistic understanding of California's racial and ethnic populations.

Disaggregated demographic data can help the state understand the varied experiences and needs within a population group. Establishing a framework to layer population data with available data from state departments, local governments, and humanitarian organizations regarding income, homelessness, home ownership, language, and education will prepare state lawmakers to respond more effectively when emergencies occur.

Recommendations for Local California Policy Makers

1. Conduct an equity audit of city and county emergency response plans and procedures for the events that most commonly result in a state of emergency: communicable diseases, earthquakes, wildfires, extreme weather, and non-natural hazards.

Evaluative questions may include:

- Is the county or city prepared to translate urgent information into all local threshold languages?

  The primary language of 5% of the local population or 3,000 residents (whichever number is lower) can constitute a threshold language. The Medi-Cal Eligibility Data System uses these numbers to determine the threshold languages of its beneficiaries.
- How quickly and effectively can the jurisdiction make life-saving shelters available to unhoused individuals?
- What key external partnerships does the jurisdiction have in place to coordinate a response during and immediately following an emergency?
- Which demographic groups are most likely to be impacted by each type of emergency or disaster?
- Will the age and condition of buildings and infrastructure have a greater impact on some of the jurisdiction's population groups in the event of a natural disaster such as a flood or earthquake?

2. Conduct a landscape analysis and survey of community-based organizations in the jurisdiction.

Due to historical disparities in funding BIPOC-led CBOs, many California cities and counties lack relationships or knowledge about these potential partner organizations in their area. The first step to identifying CBOs who have trusted relationships in their communities that can be used for emergency response and to understand their strengths and the barriers they face in getting funds during disasters and emergencies.

3. Invest funds to build the capacity of BIPOC-led and -serving community-based organizations.

Many small and medium sized BIPOC-led and -serving CBOs lack organizational infrastructure necessary to compete for city and county contracts. Cities and counties can help address this inequity by funding larger nonprofits with experience fulfilling large government contracts to support and help build the capacity of smaller CBOs. Targeted funds for BIPOC CBOs paired with this support can greatly bolster efforts to serve California's most vulnerable communities.

"We need the CBOs to be a part of this network, but always being able to get them the money or the resources to do that [is important]. It's not like we can just do that when the earthquake happens. Those pipelines must be established with clear triggers for when to implement that kind of speedy delivery."

- Community-Based Organization Leader

Reference List

Building up communities by breaking down data. (n.d.-b). PRB. https://www.prb.org/articles/building-up-communities-by-breaking-down-data.

Can capturing more detailed data advance health equity? (n.d.). RWJF. https://www.rwjf.org/en/insights/blog/2018/08/can-capturing-more-detailed-data-advance-health-equity.html

Embedding Equity Into Emergency Operations: Strategies for Local Health Departments During COVID-19 & Beyond.

Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative and Public Health Alliance of Southern California, July 2020.

Goal 1 - Instill equity as a foundation of emergency management. (2023, October 16). FEMA.gov https://www.fema.gov/about/strategic-plan/goal-1

Kauh, T. J., Read, J. G., & Scheitler, A. J. (2021b). The critical role of Racial/Ethnic Data disaggregation for health equity. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *40*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-020-09631-6