

Nearly half of US states fail on emergency plan communication, new study shows

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Seven years after Sept. 11, and in the wake of many major natural disasters such as forest fires, hurricanes and flooding, nearly half of U.S. states either have no state-level emergency plan or do not provide it readily to the public, reveals a new study by George Mason University Communication Professor Carl Botan.

Despite federal laws that require a state emergency operations plan (EOP) as a prerequisite to some federal funding, 22 states were unable to provide Botan with an EOP, withheld the plan on security grounds or made it difficult for even trained researchers to gain access. Residents of these states, Botan says, may question their state's preparedness because they are unable to find out how the highest authorities in their state coordinate responses to major disasters or how to have a say in those plans.

"While most Americans will have access to some important state-level information during emergencies, many may not. When minutes may make the difference between life and death in an emergency situation, the population should not have to waste precious time looking for answers or who to turn to," says Botan.

The study, "Using Sense-Making and Co-orientation to Rank Strategic Public Communication in State Emergency Operations Plans," graded and ranked the state emergency operations plans of the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia on their communication components.

Botan analyzed the accessible state EOPs for three criteria: if the plans had a two-way communication component, if they addressed the communication needs of vulnerable populations and if they treated public communication as important enough to specifically address it in the plan.

He found that the 29 jurisdictions that do have plans available make provisions for public communication—including news releases and public broadcasts, but only 16 of them make explicit or implicit provisions for two-way public communication such as community forums and focus groups. Botan feels that two-way public communication is essential in the plans, for that will allow the state to understand what its residents feel they need in emergency situations.

Of the 29 plans obtained, only two—Washington, D.C. [which is treated as a state-level entity for this purpose] and New Mexico—received a perfect score of eight for communication.

In addition, while 16 states mentioned vulnerable publics, only 13 of these discussed specific communication strategies for these vulnerable publics in their plans. For example, California mentions specific strategies such as dispatching special teams targeting vulnerable populations like the aged and the disabled, while Arizona simply mentions that emergency managers must pay attention to "special needs" people like residents of nursing homes and the hearing impaired, but does not outline specific strategies to communicate with them.

As of 1988, all states are required under the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act to have a written EOP in order to qualify for some federal funding. "Billions of tax dollars have been spent on homeland security in the last half-decade," Botan says. "It's very important that these plans are available to the public. Otherwise residents can't be confident their needs have been thought of, and aren't sure who

they can count on."

The study, co-authored by George Mason University alumni Paul Penchalapadu, is to be presented at the National Communication Association annual conference in San Diego on Saturday, Nov. 22.

Source: George Mason University

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