

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 3, 2023

The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel  
Chair  
Federal Communications Commission  
45 L Street NE  
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chair Rosenworcel:

Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs) are an important lifeline for Americans. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires that WEAs be distributed by wireless carriers in English and Spanish, however, there is no such requirement to assist the growing population of non-English and non-Spanish speakers with a different primary language. Lives are put at stake without this crucial information about impending inclement weather events, stay-at-home orders, AMBER alerts, and other emergencies.

According to the American Public Health Association (APHA), “Asians are the fastest growing racial group in the United States”<sup>1</sup> “Census data demonstrates that Asian American populations are highly concentrated in coastal regions, so ‘flooding and storm surges associated with sea level rise increase risks for drowning, injury, and displacement.’”<sup>2</sup> In the same study, APHA states that “some Asian American populations have low English proficiency rates, which can lead to difficulties accessing and receiving effective care... in 2014, 34 percent of Korean Americans, 29 percent of Vietnamese Americans, 19 percent of [Indian Americans], and 18 percent of Filipino Americans, and 10 percent of Japanese Americans surveyed reported poor communication with their physician.”<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, a Pew Research Center study showed that “around six-in-ten Asian Americans (57 percent), including 71 percent of Asian American adults, were born in another country.”<sup>4</sup> Of that percentage only about 57 percent of the foreign-born Asian community were proficient in English.<sup>5</sup> And even though a majority of the Asian community do speak English, two thirds “speak a language other than English at home.”<sup>6</sup>

When Hurricane Ida ravaged the eastern seaboard in 2021, many Asian Americans and their families were not given warning in an accessible way because WEAs distributed by

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Rudolph, Catherine Harrison, Laura Buckley, and Savannah North, *Climate Change, Health, and Equity: A Guide for Local Health Departments*, Oakland, CA and Washington D.C., Public Health Institute and American Public Health Association, 277 (2018), [https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/climate/guide\\_appendix.ashx](https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/climate/guide_appendix.ashx).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, at 282.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, at 279, citing R. J. Blendon et al., “Disparities In Health: Perspectives Of A Multi-Ethnic, Multi-Racial America,” *Health Affairs* 26, no. 5 (September 1, 2007): 1437–47, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.26.5.1437>.

<sup>4</sup> Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, *Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population*, Pew Research Center (April 29, 2021) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

wireless carriers are required to be in English and Spanish but not in other languages— creating a language barrier. New York Attorney General Letitia James notes,

*[The National Weather Service] sent several WEAs to all WEA-enabled mobile phones in the area warning of a flash flood emergency. Flash flooding from the storm caused 18 deaths in New York State; the majority of those victims were Asian immigrants and resided in communities with high rates of limited proficiency in English or Spanish, based on census data. However, the WEAs were only sent in English and Spanish.<sup>7</sup>*

This could happen anywhere in the United States. As mentioned in the Pew Research Center study, nearly half of Asian Americans live in the Western United States, putting them especially at risk of growing, intense wildfires and extreme heat we have seen in the West.<sup>8</sup> This risk could be further heightened as APHA states that “Asian Americans are 32 percent more likely than Whites to live in areas where heat-retaining hard surfaces cover more than half the ground, and more than half the population lacks access to cool shade-producing green space and tree canopy.”<sup>9</sup>

With Asian Americans expected to be “the nation’s largest immigrant group by the middle of the century,”<sup>10</sup> and the linguistic barriers faced by this community demonstrate a need for accessible emergency notifications so that non-English and non-Spanish speaking communities can be prepared for extreme weather events. This is understood by the FCC as well, with the FCC noting that “critical alert messages should be accessible to all”<sup>11</sup> and that “alert originators have translated their alert messages into additional languages within the longer version of their alert, and can also include in their alert message an embedded URL that leads to a webpage where translations in multiple languages can be accessed.”<sup>12</sup> This is a temporary solution, however, and with a rise in non-English and non-Spanish speakers we urge the FCC to examine mandating languages other than English and Spanish in WEAs. We ask that you respond to the following questions by February 24, 2023, so that Congress may better understand how to address this matter:

1. Since FCC Order 16-127, have discussions of expansion of the language access in WEAs occurred in talks between the FCC and industry stakeholders? What has been the biggest concern from stakeholders? Does the FCC find any such concerns as being pertinent, probable, and pernicious?
2. Has the FCC studied the technical feasibility of the expansion of WEA languages beyond English and Spanish since FCC Order 16-127? If so, what were the findings of any such studies? If not, does the FCC plan on directing the Communications

<sup>7</sup> Attorney General James Urges FCC and the U.S. Wireless Industry to Expand Language Accessibility for Severe Weather Warnings, Office of the New York State Attorney General (October 27, 2022) <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2022/attorney-general-james-urges-fcc-and-us-wireless-industry-expand-language>.

<sup>8</sup> Budiman et Ruiz, *supra* note 5.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolph et al, *supra* note 1 at 281, citing Jesdale, Morello-Frosch, and Cushing, “The Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Heat Risk–Related Land Cover in Relation to Residential Segregation.”

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*


<sup>11</sup> Lisa M. Fowlkes, *Emergency Alerts: A Critical Multilingual Outreach Tool*, Federal Communications Commission (April 8, 2021), <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/notes/2021/04/08/emergency-alerts-critical-multilingual-outreach-tool>.


<sup>12</sup> *Multilingual Alerting for the Emergency Alert System and Wireless Emergency Alerts*, Federal Communications Commission (September 28, 2022), [https://www.fcc.gov/MultilingualAlerting\\_EAS-WEA](https://www.fcc.gov/MultilingualAlerting_EAS-WEA).


- Security, Reliability, and Interoperability Council (CSRIC) to begin a study in the future?
3. What challenges did industry face implementing the Spanish language requirement for emergency alerts? What challenges would industry face implementing an additional language for emergency alerts, including languages that utilize a non-Roman alphabet?
  4. Has the FCC taken comments or done outreach to growing, non-English and non-Spanish speaking minority groups?

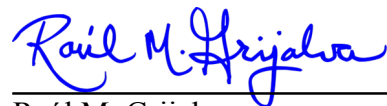
Thank you for your time and we look forward to working with you in this matter.

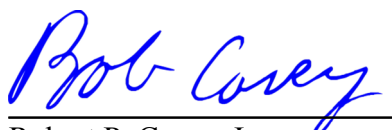
Sincerely,

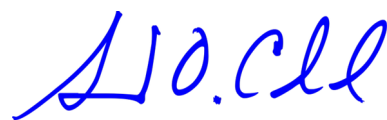
  
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United States Senator

  
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Dianne Feinstein  
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Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
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Salud Carbajal  
Member of Congress



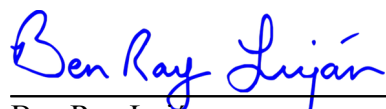
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Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator



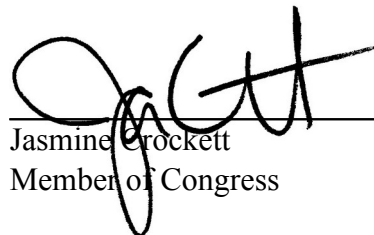
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Gregory W. Meeks  
Member of Congress



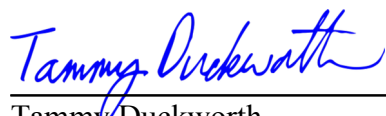
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Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator



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Tammy Duckworth  
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Member of Congress



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Alex Padilla  
United States Senator



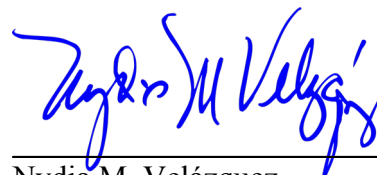
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Yvette D. Clarke  
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Robert Menendez  
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United States Senator



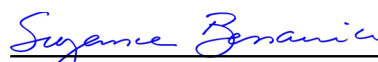
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Jerrold Nadler  
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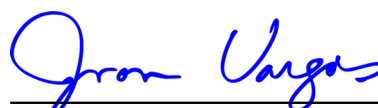
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Pramila Jayapal  
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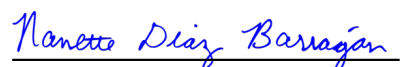


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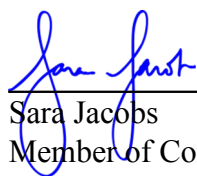
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Member of Congress



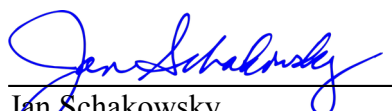
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MARK TAKANO  
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Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

*Andy Kim*

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Member of Congress

*Judy Chu*

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*Lizzie Fletcher*

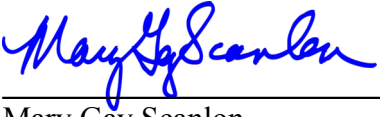
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Lizzie Fletcher  
Member of Congress

*Gerald E. Connolly*

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Member of Congress



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Mary Gay Scanlon  
Member of Congress