

## Honda Introduces Bill Mitigating Language and Cultural Barriers to Disaster Relief

Written by Mike Honda  
Monday, 05 June 2006 19:00

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Rep. Honda introduced the bill, stating, “National disasters—such as the September 11th terrorist attacks, Hurricane Rita and Hurricane Katrina—exposed serious gaps in the delivery of public services to LEP communities. In fact, the lack of linguistic and culturally competent services within FEMA and related federal agencies prevented many LEP individuals from accessing critical disaster relief related services such as cash assistance, healthcare, mental healthcare, housing assistance, and small business loans. As a result, far too many LEP individuals in the United States suffered unnecessary hardship, undermining our nation’s overall security.”

The legislation would additionally require the President to communicate with state and local governments to identify LEP populations and include them in disaster preparedness planning, have available for activation a cadre of qualified interpreters and translators for emergency disaster response, develop a clearinghouse for model language assistance programs and best practices, ensure that these translated notices and documents are disseminated to organizations and neighborhood associates that serve LEP communities, and allocate \$1.5 million to conduct a study regarding best practices of providing disaster relief related services for LEP individuals.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure committee has also incorporated elements of Rep. Honda’s bill to HR 5316, the RESPOND Act of 2006. Congressman Honda’s amendment was accepted by a voice vote in the Manager’s Amendment.

In addition to original co-sponsors, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Chair, Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-CA), and Congressional Black Caucus Chair, Rep. Melvin L. Watt (D-NC), the bill is co-sponsored by the following Members of Congress: David Wu (D-OR), Neil Abercrombie (D-HI), Xavier Becerra (D-CA), Madeleine Z. Bordallo (D-GU), Ed Case (D-HI), Eni F.H. Faleomavaea (D-AS), Al Green (D-TX), Doris O. Matsui (D-CA), Robert C. Scott (D-VA).

### Selected Co-Sponsor Statements:

Rep. David Wu: “For more than 60 million Americans, English is a second language. Many of these Americans cannot effectively communicate with health and social service providers. I support Congressman Honda’s bill because it will help ensure equitable, efficient and meaningful access to disaster relief and preparedness services at the national, state and local level.”

Rep. Neil Abercrombie: “The number of non-English speaking residents in the United States continues to increase. Forty-seven million residents speak a language other than English at home and about 21 million people don’t have the English proficiency to effectively communicate with health and social service providers. We need to break down the language and cultural barriers to provide timely disaster relief services that will prevent the creation of even larger emergencies.”

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Del. Madeleine Z. Bordallo: "Currently, 21 million people, approximately 8% of the U.S. population, speak English with limited proficiency and cannot effectively communicate with health and social service providers to have their needs addressed. Congressman Honda's bill initiates a move toward a disaster relief and preparedness workforce environment most conducive to equitable, efficient and meaningful access to disaster relief and preparedness services at the national, state and local levels. It will go a long way towards mitigating language and cultural barriers with respect to disaster relief services."

Rep. Ed Case: "Our government's response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes has demonstrated anew that a large number of our fellow citizens and legal residents, especially our ethnic minorities, have and are being disadvantaged in their receipt of federal disaster assistance simply because English is not their first language. I fully support Congressman Honda's initiative to require that disaster preparedness and relief be equally available to all and that we dedicate specific resources to overcoming language-related obstacles."

Rep. Al Green: "It is essential to the safety of over 47 million non-English speaking residents of the United States that FEMA work with community organizations serving limited English proficiency (LEP) populations. Congress has recognized the need to eliminate cultural and language barriers with respect to disaster relief since Hurricane Camille struck in 1969. In spite of several efforts, many LEP communities continue to live under the threat of inequitable access to disaster relief and preparedness services. This bill will address the LEP problems and potentially save lives."

Rep. Robert C. Scott: "Congress has identified discrimination as a problem to be addressed in disaster assistance since Hurricane Camille struck in 1969. The Disaster Relief Act of 1970 included a non-discrimination section. Despite past actions, discrimination in disaster assistance remains a problem to be addressed."