

# **Resilient Springfield Communication Strategy**

**City of Springfield**

June 16, 2021

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# Introduction

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## Project overview

The City of Springfield is working to build the City's resilience for the long-term impacts of climate change, like increasingly frequent and more severe weather events. The City is collaborating with community partners to build trust and share emergency preparation information effectively with climate-vulnerable residents, especially Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC).

As part of the Resilient Springfield initiative, the City has engaged Bloom Works to develop a communication plan to help achieve the project's goals. This document offers strategic and tactical recommendations for the City's communication with climate-vulnerable residents.

### Our goal

To develop a strategy to improve the City's communication with climate-vulnerable residents, especially Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC)

### Audience

The City of Springfield will be primarily responsible for implementing this communication plan. However, the City's success will depend on close collaboration with local organizations that are more closely connected to many residents on a daily basis.

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## Methods

We used a combination of primary and secondary research to complete our work. Because the focus of this project is how Springfield can improve communication with residents, we prioritized gathering insights from local residents and stakeholders.

### Resident Advisory Council

Much of our work was guided by insights from the Resident Advisory Council (RAC), a group of resident advisors recruited for the project by 3 grassroots organizations — Arise for Social Justice, Neighbor to Neighbor, and Way Finders. The monthly RAC meetings were organized by a leadership team from the City, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts.

The RAC participated in data collection and activities designed to provide us with key information, including:

- Conducting a survey of friends, family, and neighbors to find out how people get their local news and information
- Collecting examples of communications they've received from local groups — including the City — and giving feedback on what worked and didn't work about them
- Participating in a visioning exercise to picture and define a successful conclusion to this project

### Interviews

Over the course of 8 weeks, we conducted 26 interviews with:

- 6 residents
- 5 board members of neighborhood councils
- 7 staff at community partner agencies
- 8 City staff

### Areas of exploration

In these interviews, we:

- Gathered information about how the City currently communicates with residents
- Asked questions about how residents get information

- Explored themes that impact how residents respond to information from the City

We also attended a Neighbor to Neighbor meeting of volunteers to discuss these themes with attendees.

### **Other research**

In addition to talking with key stakeholders within the Springfield community, we:

- Reviewed literature and best practices related to communicating with vulnerable groups in emergencies
- Assessed the Springfield-ma.gov website as well as the City's social media

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## Defining vulnerability in Springfield

Vulnerability means different things to different people. It was important for us to develop a shared understanding of vulnerability in our conversations with stakeholders. We asked residents, City staff, neighborhood council members, and community partners to describe who they think of as vulnerable in Springfield.

We've organized the themes that emerged into 3 categories, based on a framework for communication-related vulnerability during emergencies:<sup>1</sup>

- **Individual** — These factors are specific to a person, and examples include disabilities, language barriers, and age.
- **Social-structural** — These factors are generally grounded in patterns of long-term social inequality, and include poverty, lack of access to resources, and distrust of people in authority and institutions.
- **Situational** — These are factors that may arise due to the emergency itself. For example, people may lose access to power, limiting their access to the latest information.

### Individual characteristics

- Not speaking English
- Having limited literacy skills
- Being homebound, due to age or disability
- Single parents

### Social-structural factors

- Pervasive poverty, which also makes people less likely to have smartphones, wifi access, and the capacity to plan ahead
- Disparities in Black and brown communities compared to white communities, including health, access to news and resources, and opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their neighborhoods

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<sup>1</sup> Sten Hansson, Kati Orru, Andra Siibak, Asta Bäck, Marco Krüger, Friedrich Gabel, Claudia Morsut, Communication-related vulnerability to disasters: A heuristic framework, International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, Volume 51, 2020, 101931, ISSN 2212-4209, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2020.101931>.

- The most socially vulnerable residents also live in the most geographically vulnerable areas<sup>2</sup> — this means that those who need to prepare for and act quickly during a weather emergency are the people with the fewest resources to do so
- Distrust of people in authority, including City staff

### Situational factors

- Climate change is creating weather events that residents in this area of the country aren't prepared for (e.g., residents of Western Massachusetts didn't expect to ever deal with a tornado)
- Several residential neighborhoods are in flood zones, including Brightwood, South End, Memorial Square, and Indian Orchard<sup>3</sup>
- Many residents turn to TV and the radio for information, which means that they're even more cut off from what's happening when they lose power

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pvpc.org/sites/default/files/SHJ\\_REPORT\\_FINAL\\_REV\\_2017.pdf](http://www.pvpc.org/sites/default/files/SHJ_REPORT_FINAL_REV_2017.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.pvpc.org/sites/default/files/SHJ\\_REPORT\\_FINAL\\_REV\\_2017.pdf](http://www.pvpc.org/sites/default/files/SHJ_REPORT_FINAL_REV_2017.pdf)



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## What would success look like?

We asked everyone we spoke with to tell us what they thought a successful project outcome would look like. People articulated big visions but emphasized incremental progress.

*"Success looks like steps towards better. I've worked here long enough to know that success doesn't happen in one fell swoop."*

— City staff

*"I'd like to understand how we can do things better so that we don't feel like we're constantly carrying buckets of water uphill."*

— City staff

*"I would just want to know that the City has a method of reaching vulnerable residents and those people have a method of reaching back. Whether it's by phone or something, as long as it's a way they're comfortable communicating. My guess is that they'd want things in writing and then be able to call somewhere to confirm and ask questions."*

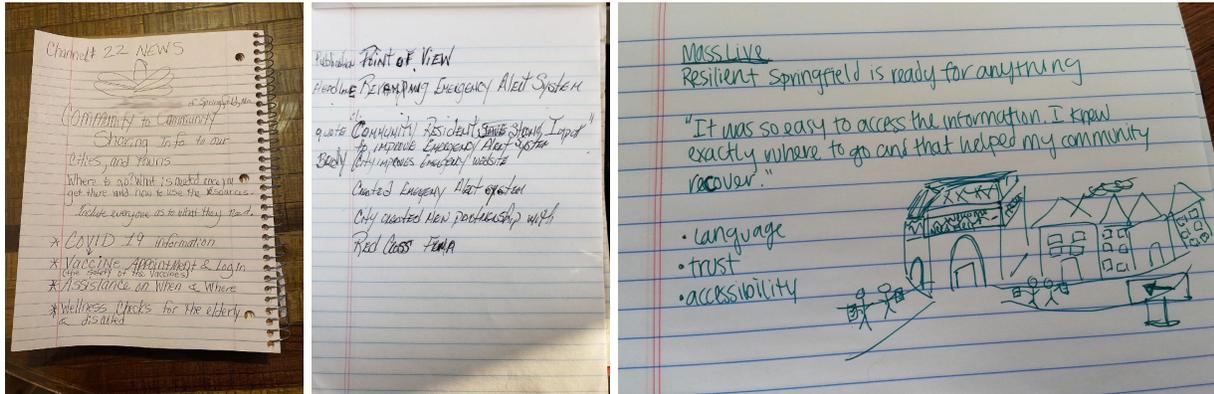
— Neighborhood council board member

### Headline from the Future

To help us picture successful outcomes, we gave the following prompt to the Resident Advisory Council:

"It's one year after the end of this project, and it was a huge success. Think about what's changed since the project ended. What actions has the City taken? What does success look like? Who and what contributed to the success?"

These images show a few of the ideas people came up with:



### Themes included:

- ➔ More resident-centered communication — the City prioritizes what residents need and then works backwards to fill those needs with a better website and more accessible information about the help that's available
- ➔ Residents helping residents — increased collaboration between neighborhoods, millennials helping seniors by doing chores like shoveling snow
- ➔ Better emergency alert systems — one that works similar to the Amber Alert system that's already in place and special emergency devices in the homes of older adults



# Findings

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*"Change happens at the speed of trust."*

— Steven Covey, author

*"When we are trying to be a part of something we want to be heard. All of us aren't right. But we have to have a place to meet and listen to one another's problems. And until that happens, I think that the communication is not going to be better."*

— Resident

In our research, we heard about some fundamental shifts needed in order to build a strong foundation for the work ahead.

We've divided our findings into 3 categories:

- Shifts in mindset
- City's internal communication and staffing
- Communication methods and information delivery

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## Shifts in mindset

***"When you're designing at the margins, everybody benefits, even the people closest to power — they'll have no issue. But when you're making decisions for the people closest to the power, it harms those farthest away. Always does. So flip it around."***

— Community partner

While these first changes aren't specific to communication, the status quo will stand in the way of true progress.

Before we delve into communication strategy, we need to look at how we can create an environment that fosters trust and makes better, 2-way communication possible.

**Effective public service requires transparent decision-making, accountability to residents, and customer service.**

***"...if you're serving the public, you have to answer to the public eventually. So being proactive about being at neighborhood council meetings, not when you want something or need something, but because you want to have a conversation, you want to be able to be visible to the neighborhood."***

— Neighborhood council board member

All of the City employees we spoke with were committed public servants, and many of them mentioned that communicating with residents is often an afterthought. While there's a clear system in place for putting out media announcements, there isn't a similar, consistent process for reaching members of the public.

At the same time, residents and stakeholders have clear expectations that the City government isn't meeting. Residents expect to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, and they want to understand how and why decisions are made.

**Trust in the City is low, but it's at the heart of reaching communities effectively.**

***[About getting info from the City] "I would have to look other places to see if this is really going on. I wouldn't want to take it for face value."*** — Resident

Residents aren't confident that the City works consistently on their behalf. They hear about decisions after the fact, and they're generally told what's going to happen instead of being asked for input. The lack of trust in the City means that residents are less likely to:

- Reach out for information
- Believe the information they receive
- Participate in efforts to gather their input

*"I'm not sure that the City has made trust a primary goal. Individual people from City staff have done that, but not the City government as a whole, even though that was one of the goals of the climate action plan."*

— Community partner

**To overcome barriers to better communication, it's essential to address racial and economic disparities.**

*"Far too many areas, it always seems to be the Black and brown areas, they either get the message LATE, or never get the message at all. They [the City] rely on the "good neighbor system" so that someone can inform them that they're doing this, at this time. It's troublesome...As long as I can think of, we've always gotten the short end of the stick."*

— Resident

Residents — particularly in Black and brown communities — experience disparities in how the City serves different communities and people. And those residents who could benefit the most from City programs and services are often the same residents who are the least likely to know about them.

*"When programs come up, the question always comes up -- how do you reach the people that actually need the help? Educated people with resources and money tend to search out things, while the people who really need the help...don't have resources to talk to a lot of people...they're not in the place to receive the information best."*

— Neighborhood council board member

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## Internal communication and staffing

City departments miss opportunities to improve communication with residents because they operate in isolation of each other.

*"The City's very siloed. And they don't talk to each other as much as they talk to others. So it's easy for us [as an outside agency] to know what they're doing, and they don't know what each other is doing."*

— Community partner

The City's communication and outreach is inconsistent because, for most departments, there's nobody whose job is to communicate with residents.

*"I have to say, as we're talking about this I feel like we don't have anyone who focuses on communication. At the end [of a project], it's like, omg we have to make sure people know. It's very ad hoc. We don't have a very well thought out strategy."*

— City staff

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## Communication methods and information delivery

The City's primary communication strategies (website, 311, public meetings) require residents to seek out information, which can make communication harder.

*"It's a tough deal. There's no magic wand to get that information out — you have to work at it. And as hard as we try to put it out, you also have to have people that want to come and listen."*

— City staff

Information is often presented in ways that are difficult for residents to access or understand.

*"Messaging to reach older adults has to be simple. Just put the key takeaway at the top. They're not going to want to read about all the whys."*

— Resident

*"They have to make it [the City website] more user friendly for searches to find basic information. It's better than it's been, but it's still really archaic. It shouldn't take you three or four minutes to find something. People give up."*

— Resident

The most reliable, effective ways to reach vulnerable residents are word of mouth, mailings, and flyers.

*"Word of mouth is big, and particularly in the Black and Latino communities, it's just big, it works. And so getting key folks to serve in that role intentionally — like your role is to spread this — was helpful."*

— Community partner

*"What I found effective was just word of mouth. To say, listen, if you're at this meeting, you know somebody on your street that could probably use this that may not be aware. So pick one person and call them."*

— Neighborhood council board member

The City relies heavily on neighborhood councils to represent their neighborhoods and to share City information effectively at the neighborhood level. However, there's a lot of variability in how well this works.

[About something like a snow emergency:] *"Sometimes we'll get a direct email. Otherwise, other times we have to go search it out. Like last Sunday we had to try to go search it out. And I think somebody saw it. I finally saw it on the news that in fact it was happening."*

— Neighborhood council board member

*"They used to meet with the council to let the councils know what's on the horizon, what they're planning on doing, so you know what's coming down the pipe. But that hadn't been the case, as of late."*

— Neighborhood council board member

# Recommendations

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*"I don't want this to be a project where we're just doing it to do it, and there's not any follow up action to make a change. A lot of times I notice organizations start an alliance or project, and then it's like, that was a waste of time because there's no change...it's been done before. So are we really trying to figure out a way to bring change, or are we just collecting data/info that's just going to sit away in that binder over there, and then we're going to go on to the next project?"*

— Resident

One thing we heard again and again — from all stakeholder groups — was that this effort has the capacity to either improve or cement perceptions of the City's ability and willingness to change. Residents have participated in previous engagement efforts, only to see reports collect dust after they're delivered. And City staff can point to accomplishments that developed out of previous reports, but residents aren't aware of them.

**For this project, public updates on progress will be just as important as progress itself.**

We've divided our recommendations into 5 areas:

1. Put yourself in the shoes of the people you serve.
2. Go where the people are.
3. Network with other departments, community agencies, and residents to reach people you don't.
4. Create and nurture a feedback loop to engage residents.
5. Share knowledge to build on what works and learn from what doesn't.

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## 1. Put yourself in the shoes of the people you serve.

### Clarify the audience and intention before writing the message.

Who needs to know the information you have? Why do they need it? What do you want them to do next? It's much easier to write a succinct, effective communication once you've addressed these questions.

### When developing information for the public, think like the residents you're trying to reach.

What do they need to know in order to act on the information or services you're providing? Cut the rest and tell them how they can learn more if they're interested. Similarly, understand where they're already looking for information and make sure your message gets there.

### When communicating with the public, write in simple, concise, jargon-free language.

If there's an action you want residents to take (attend a meeting, apply for a grant), provide a compelling reason. People have complex lives and multiple competing priorities — you have to show why they should care about this information. And always include contact information or a link for them to learn more or ask questions.

*"Simplicity is always good. The plan has to be simple, so that someone who's 5 or who's 105, will know what steps to take. A plan that is as simple as 911."*

— Resident

### Start a phased approach to improving [springfield-ma.gov](http://springfield-ma.gov).

The City needs a go-to hub for services and information. We heard from City staff and residents alike that the current site is hard to use.

*"They have to make it [the City website] more user friendly for searches to find basic information. It's better than it's been, but it's still really archaic. Trying to find stuff, it's too difficult. It shouldn't take you three or four minutes to find something. People give up."*

— Resident

**To improve reach and equity, invest in plain language Spanish translation.**

Forty-five percent of Springfield residents are Hispanic or Latinx.<sup>4</sup> By translating as much information as possible, you'll improve the accessibility of the content. Ideally, use translators who are experts in plain language, so that content is easy to understand and act on.

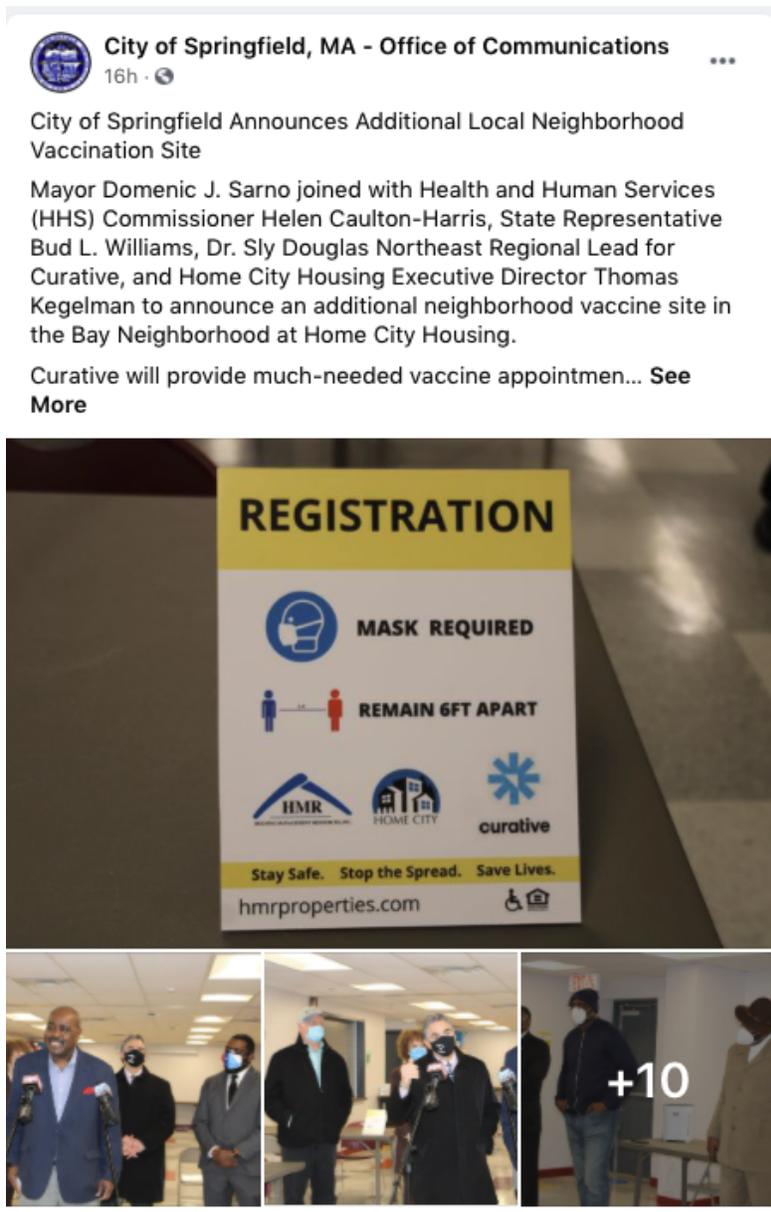
**Ready to get started on Recommendation 1? Check out these activities in the Quick Start Activities and Toolkit (Appendix A):**

- [Adopt a simple worksheet to identify the audience, required action, and need-to-know information for communicating with residents. \(Recs 1, 3, 4\)](#)
- [Review a section of the website and identify ways to improve it. \(Recs 1, 5\)](#)
- [Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing. \(Recs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\)](#)

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/springfieldcitymassachusetts,US/PST045219>

## Example of resident-focused communication



As a resident, I'd want to know where the new site is, when it's opening, and how I can get an appointment. This information is hard to find.

This is from <https://www.facebook.com/CityofSpringfieldMA/> and it's the first post on March 30, 2021.



City of Springfield, MA - Office of Communications

Yesterday at 9:00am · 🌐



**Great News for Bay Area Neighborhood Residents!**

You can now get the vaccine right near you. Not only that, you'll automatically get an appointment card if you live in the Bay neighborhood!

**Who:** Bay Area Neighborhood residents (Ward 4, Precinct D)

**Where:** Home City Housing on Oak Grove Ave

**When:** Starting March 30

**How:** You'll receive an appointment card in the mail

To find a vaccine center outside of the Bay Area — or if you have questions — call 311 to speak to a City employee.

[Read the press release](#) to learn more about how Springfield is working to bring the vaccine to you.

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · [Share](#)



## 2. Go where the people are.

*"I don't need to expend a lot of energy in telling people to be in a certain space, I'm just going to where they already are. And that's a lot easier... And it's a lot more efficient that way."*

— Community partner

**Use existing high-touch areas (places of worship, schools, bodegas, community centers) and community events to provide information where residents are already gathering.**

Word of mouth was frequently mentioned as the most effective way of sharing information. City staff don't need to be everywhere at once — they can leverage existing infrastructures and local gathering places to get the message out for them.

**When the City is present and responsive, trust increases.**

*"If department heads could be present and visible, that would go a long way. Every time we've had issues with the City and we had real conversations, fear went away, questions got answered, and trust developed. That's happened over and over again."*

— Neighborhood council board member

*"Trust is a continuous thing and it's something that you have to continue to build every single day. And it takes 2 sides in order to continue to strengthen that trust."*

— Community partner

**Ready to get started on Recommendation 2? Check out these activities in the Quick Start Activities and Toolkit (Appendix A):**

- [Create a central database of people and organizations that residents trust. Use that network to reach residents. \(Recs 2, 3, 5\)](#)
- [Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing. \(Recs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\)](#)

## Personas based on Springfield residents

### Meet Patricia, Mercedes, Luis, and Terry

The 4 personas on the next pages aren't real people. But they are meant to bring to life the pressing needs and challenges of vulnerable Springfield residents. We pulled the details of these personas directly from our interviews with residents.

Personas are a communication tool to help City staff picture what the harder-to-reach Springfield residents are dealing with day to day, and provide strategies for how to reach them. By understanding residents' needs, experiences, and behaviors, staff can create more effective, accessible information for the public.

## Patricia



Late-70's older adult with mobility issues

"I appreciate when someone checks in with me to see how I'm doing--it shows they care."

### BACKGROUND

Patricia is a retired school teacher who suffers from COPD. She lives alone in the Upper Hill neighborhood in a house that she owns. Her family lives nearby and visit her often. She has a landline and just started learning how to send text messages on her flip phone.

### CHALLENGES

- Isn't comfortable using the internet or computers
- Has difficulty walking/getting around
- Has become disconnected from her regular community since COVID

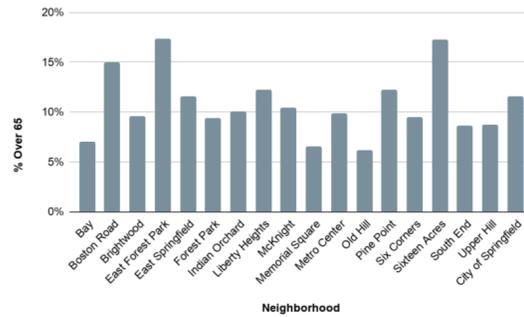
### WHERE SHE GETS HER NEWS

- Point of View newspaper
- Channel 22
- Word of mouth from family and her friends at the senior center

### ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HER

- Good Neighbors Program through Springfield College
- Church
- Meals on Wheels

### % OVER 65 YEARS OLD\*



\* Data from U.S. Census' 2012-2016 American Community Survey, pulled from "Springfield and its Neighborhoods" Springfield Planning and Economic Development, 2019.

## Mercedes



Early-30's single mom working multiple jobs

"I'm not even sure if my paychecks will cover food for the week, and you want me to think about something that might happen someday?"

### BACKGROUND

Mercedes is a single mom holding down 2 low-paying jobs while caring for her 6-year old son. They live in a low-income apartment building in the North End and both struggle with asthma. She does everything on her smartphone and is often in the car going from job to errands to picking up her son.

### CHALLENGES

- Always pressed for time and energy
- Has an unreliable car
- Relies on the food pantry at least once a month

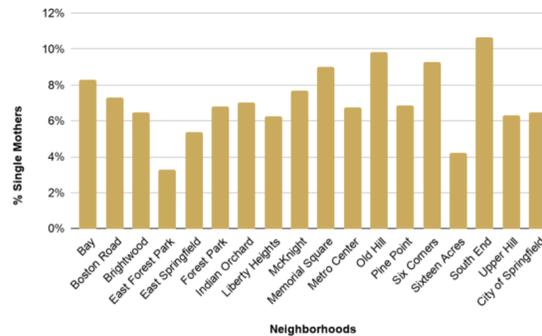
### WHERE SHE GET HER NEWS

- Facebook
- Radio - La Voz

### ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HER

- Church
- Grocery store
- Her son's school

### % SINGLE MOTHERS\*



\* Data from U.S. Census' 2012-2016 American Community Survey, pulled from "Springfield and its Neighborhoods" Springfield Planning and Economic Development, 2019.

## Luis



Mid-40's non-English speaking immigrant

*"Quiero hacerlo bien aquí, pero es difícil navegar por el sistema."*

### BACKGROUND

Luis recently immigrated from Mexico and rents a small apartment in Metro Center. His building is not well-maintained because of an absentee landlord. He works in a restaurant and lives frugally so that he can send most of his earnings back to his family. He doesn't have a landline and his old android phone has limited data.

### CHALLENGES

- Speaks very little English
- Limited literacy skills
- Doesn't own a car

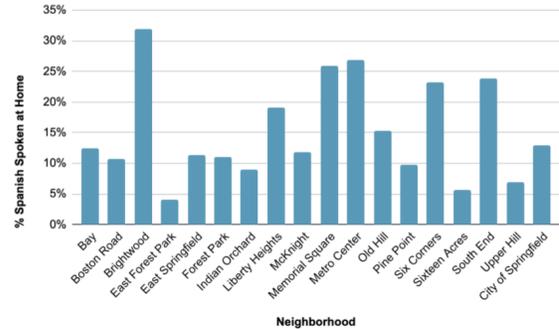
### WHERE HE GETS HIS NEWS

- Pueblo Latino
- Word of mouth
- WSPR

### ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HIM

- Bodegas
- At the restaurant where he works

### % SPANISH SPOKEN AT HOME



\* Data from U.S. Census' 2012-2016 American Community Survey, pulled from "Springfield and its Neighborhoods" Springfield Planning and Economic Development, 2019.

## Terry



Early-20's homeless LGBT youth

*"It just doesn't seem like the city cares about us."*

### BACKGROUND

Terry left a bad home environment and has experienced chronic homelessness for over 2 years. He struggles to get into shelters during bad weather and usually camps near the river. He avoids city officials because he's afraid they will make him move his tent.

### CHALLENGES

- Camps near the river and is at risk if there's flooding
- Has difficulty receiving mail and no regular access to phone or internet

### WHERE HE GETS HIS NEWS

- Word of mouth in the shelters or park
- Library to use the computer and wifi

### ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HIM

- Soup kitchens
- Arise for Social Justice

### HOMELESSNESS IN SPRINGFIELD

- As of 2017, HUD reported 2,311 people experiencing homelessness in Springfield
- Of these, 141 were youth under 25 years old

## Where residents look for local news and information

The information in this table was gathered from residents during interviews and through an informal survey conducted by the RAC.

TV	Internet or Smart Phone	Social Media	Newspapers & Magazines	Radio	Other
Channel 22 (WWLP)	MassLive	Facebook pages for news sites	Am-Af Point of View	NEPR (80.5)	City employee or councilor
Western Mass News (WWGB)	City website	Facebook	The Republican	WTCC (90.7) - community radio	Friends
Telemundo	News Break apps	Twitter	El Sol	YACM (1490) - Spanish radio	Family
*	WWLP online app	Next Door app	Pueblo Latino	WACM (1270) - oldies music	311
*	*	*	*	*	Emails from neighborhood council
*	*	*	*	*	Telephone
*	*	*	*	*	Church
*	*	*	*	*	Flyers

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### 3. Network with other departments, community agencies, and residents to reach people you don't.

Work across departments to reach people with relevant information.

*"Think about what goes together and what people are already getting. For example, if there's money to help someone fix their home, make sure that the code enforcement people know about it."*

— Community partner

**Establish a network of community partner organizations and key resident liaisons.**

If you share what you're offering, the benefits, and any drawbacks, they can amplify and distribute important information.

**Use community organizations to help you make information relevant to residents.**

Community organizations are more in touch with people in their communities than the City can be. As one community partner explained it to us, this means that they're able to connect the dots between the message and people's existing priorities.

**Ready to get started on Recommendation 3? Check out these activities in the Quick Start Activities and Toolkit (Appendix A):**

- [Adopt a simple worksheet to identify the audience, required action, and need-to-know information for communicating with residents. \(Recs 1, 3, 4\)](#)
- [Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing. \(Recs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\)](#)



## 4. To increase transparency and accountability, create and nurture a feedback loop to engage residents.

Give residents the opportunity to tell you what they need.

*"But when you want to build real trust with people you give people the opportunity to help themselves, and the City doesn't do that."*

— Resident

**Prioritize prompt communication with residents.**

And don't just prioritize it before an initiative — communicate during and after to provide updates. The City is missing opportunities to build trust by talking about successes.

**When you prepare to launch an initiative, plan right from the start how and when you'll keep the public updated.**

Updates don't need to be fancy or formal — often a Facebook post or Tweet will do. For the [Resilient Springfield project](#), there's already a web page that's kept up to date with meeting information. To keep people updated on progress, the Disaster Recovery program could celebrate an accomplishment on social media and then direct people to the web page for more details.

**Ready to get started on Recommendation 4? Check out these activities in the Quick Start Activities and Toolkit:**

- [Adopt a simple worksheet to identify the audience, required action, and need-to-know information for communicating with residents. \(Recs 1, 3, 4\)](#)
- [Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing. \(Recs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\)](#)

## Strategy in action

As part of this project, we've learned several things about what residents want in an emergency system. At the same time, Springfield has been working to get a new system.

### What we've heard from residents

<b>What they want</b>	A better emergency alert system that will reach everyone, including residents who are homebound or don't have a smartphone or internet connection
<b>Functionality</b>	Something similar to an Amber Alert that will interrupt all communications, including TV, radio, and smartphones
<b>Rollout</b>	They recommend testing the system as part of rolling it out so that people know what to expect

### What's happening

Springfield is getting a new emergency alert system some time in 2021.

### Communication planning

- Announce that there will be a new emergency alert system soon
- Point out the benefits of the system, particularly the ones that residents have expressed interest in
- Keep residents informed of the timeline
- Share a testing plan with residents
- Test the system
- Officially roll out the system
- Provide a way for people to ask questions and share feedback
- After the system is used, share how it worked and invite feedback

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## 5. Share knowledge to build on what works and learn from what doesn't.

### Convene a communication team with staff from all departments.

The lack of coordination forces City staff to reinvent the wheel every time they have something to share with the public. By working together, departments can share lessons learned and build on what works.

This communication team could double as the implementation body for the recommendations in this report. At the onset, the team could include senior department staff to prioritize action items, identify opportunities to pilot new strategies, and share responsibility for progress.

**To develop effective public information, the communication team will need a group of residents — like the Resilient Springfield Advisory Council — to provide regular input and feedback.**

### Ready to get started on Recommendation 5? Check out these activities in the Quick Start Activities and Toolkit (Appendix A):

- [Review a section of the website and identify ways to improve it. \(Recs 1, 5\)](#)
- [Create a central database of people and organizations that residents trust. Use that network to reach residents. \(Recs 2, 3, 5\)](#)
- [Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing. \(Recs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\)](#)

# Appendices

# Appendix A

## Quick Start Activities and Toolkit

For the Resilient Springfield  
Communication Strategy

**City of Springfield**

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[Choosing information delivery methods](#)

[Communication checklist](#)

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## Background

This Quick Start Guide and Toolkit supports the 5 recommendations we made in the Resilient Springfield Communication Strategy:

1. Put yourself in the shoes of the people you serve.
2. Go where the people are.
3. Network with other departments, community agencies, and residents to reach people you don't.
4. Create and nurture a feedback loop to engage residents.
5. Share knowledge to build on what works and learn from what doesn't.

## Quick start activity

Adopt a simple worksheet to identify the audience, required action, and need-to-know information for communicating with residents.

(Supports recs 1, 3, 4)

*"I usually try to massage the narrative so that it can be understood...So I need to start with the basics who, what, when, where but then get into the more technical legal stuff that has to stay. ...This is what it means so anyone looking to get more information, reach out to X."*

— City staff

*"Make it easy for people, especially the elderly. Show that 'I want you to be able to understand what I'm trying to tell you.'"*

— Resident

Clear and open communication is essential for building trust and increasing equity. As a City employee who knows the ins and outs of what you're communicating, it can be a challenge to identify the priority information. **Take a step back to think like a resident and ask yourself, "What's important to me here?"**

### Resources for implementation

→ [Message development worksheet](#)

Potential impact <b>High</b>	Effort to start <b>Low</b>	Effort to maintain <b>Low</b>	Budget needed <b>No</b>
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## Message development worksheet

Whether you're creating a press release, web page, or social media post, you'll need to start with a clear message. Use this worksheet to help you prepare the information that your audience will need. If you have more than one audience — like property owners and tenants — fill out a worksheet for each one.

**Topic:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Audience:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What do you want this audience to learn or do as a result of this communication?
2. Step back and think about the information you're sharing from the perspective of your audience. What questions will they have? Do a quick brainstorm here using the words your audience is likely to use.
3. Based on the brainstorm, write down what your audience needs in order of priority. For example, you'll want to tell people how a service could benefit them before telling them where to fill out an application.
4. Draft content that addresses all of the information needs you've identified. Keep it simple and limited to just the "need to know" information. This is what you'll share on the website, in a pamphlet, or in a press release.

5. Now create your short, promotional message. This message will help people decide whether the information is relevant for them. It will typically be 2-4 sentences and perfect for a social media post or flyer.

a. Who is the information for

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b. What is the topic or service

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c. Why is it important

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d. Where can they get more information

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**TIP**

Share your draft with a friend or family member to see if there are any gaps to fill or terms to clarify.

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## Quick start activity

Review a section of the website and identify ways to improve it.

(Supports recs 1, 4, 5)

*"They have to make it [the City website] more user friendly for searches to find basic information. It's better than it's been, but it's still really archaic. Trying to find stuff, it's too difficult. It shouldn't take you three or four minutes to find something. People give up."*

— Resident

There are incremental steps you can take now that will improve the website. By taking these steps and starting to develop new habits, your users will see immediate benefits and you'll make a future website redesign easier for everyone.

### Tools

- [8 tips on writing for the web](#)
- [How to start a writing guide](#)
- [Basic web page audit](#)

Potential impact	Effort to start	Effort to maintain	Budget needed
<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>No</b>



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## ⑧ tips on writing for the web

If you're writing for the City of Springfield website, it's time to bookmark [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov). This federal website has how-to information on how to write content people will read — and it has the rationale you'll need to convince any plain language doubters.

Here are just a few of the tips you'll find on [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov).

① **Write for your audience**

Focus on what they'll want to know, and use language that they're familiar with.

② **Organize content from most to least important**

If readers can't identify your main point right away, they'll move on.

③ **Choose your words carefully**

You're writing to communicate efficiently, not to impress. Use simple words, and avoid jargon. If you need to use a complex term, define it in words your audience will understand.

④ **Be concise**

People go to government sites to accomplish a specific task — not to browse. By keeping information short and direct, you respect people's time.

⑤ **Keep it conversational**

Use first person to refer to the City government ("we") and second person to address your users ("you"). Write in an active voice that clearly says who needs to do what.

⑥ **Design for reading**

If a page looks cluttered and hard to read, people will move on. Users skim web content, so use headings to communicate key information. Keep paragraphs short and use lists to break up text.

⑦ **Follow web standards**

Write informative links (no "click here"s). Limit content to what users need to know in order to understand a resource or use a service.

⑧ **Test your assumptions**

If you're writing content for the web, chances are good that you're an expert in your subject area. And this means that you're not an average user of the website — or an average resident. Get feedback from non-experts to make sure your content is relevant, understandable, and actionable.



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## How to start a writing guide for the website

Style guides don't have to be fancy or formal, and they're never "done." As soon as you decide to start updating content, get that Google doc started to capture examples, questions, and things to consider.

### Free resources to get you started:

- [Federal plain language guidelines](#) - This section of plainlanguage.gov offers specific tips on how to make your users' lives easier.
- [Sample style guide](#) - Bloom created this for another client, and we'd recommend you follow very similar guidelines.
- [Hemmingway Editor](#) — Paste in draft content and get suggestions for making it easier to read.

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## Basic web page audit

Websites work best for users when they're designed so that all of the pieces work together. For example, if a type of content already has a home, other pages can link to it rather than repeating it. And for government sites, users shouldn't need to understand the bureaucracy in order to find what they need.

Here's a sample audit you can use to check whether a department has the content users will want, is organized well, and takes advantage of the website as a whole.

Criteria	Examples and how-to info
<b>Does the page tell users who the content is for and why it's important?</b>	<b>Example:</b> The landing page of a section includes a brief explanation of what the department does.
<b>Is all of the content up to date?</b>	
<b>If it's a long page, does it include jump links at the top to help users get right to the section they're interested in?</b>	A jump link (aka anchor) is text that allows you to go directly to a header on the page.
<b>Is link text written to set context for users and to be accessible to screen readers?</b>	<b><a href="#">Use links effectively</a></b> — Good link text will set clear expectations for what people will find if they click. And it needs to contain enough information to be meaningful for users relying on screen readers.
<b>Are links formatted consistently so that they're easy to identify?</b>	<b><a href="#">Use color or underline to indicate links</a></b> — Right now, links on springfield-ma.gov are formatted in several different ways. Sometimes, the only way to be sure something is a link is to hover over it.
<b>Are headings meaningful and informative?</b>	<b><a href="#">Use meaningful headings</a></b> — Many users will just skim the headers to see if the content is relevant for them.
<b>Is there a better "home" for any of the content?</b>	<b>Example:</b> If there's a procurement announcement, does it link to the procurement section of the site or repeat all of the information?



Page audited:

Criteria	Examples and how-to info	Changes to make
<p><b>Does the page tell users who the content is for and why it's important?</b></p>	<p><b>Example:</b> The landing page of a section includes a brief explanation of what the department does.</p>	
<p><b>Is all of the content up to date?</b></p>		
<p><b>If it's a long page, does it include jump links at the top to help users get right to the section they're interested in?</b></p>	<p>A jump link (aka anchor) is text that allows you to go directly to a header on the page.</p>	
<p><b>Is link text written to set context for users and to be accessible to screen readers?</b></p>	<p><b><a href="#">Use links effectively</a></b> — Good link text will set clear expectations for what people will find if they click. And it needs to contain enough information to be meaningful for users relying on screen readers.</p>	
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<p><b>Are headings meaningful and informative?</b></p>	<p><b><a href="#">Use meaningful headings</a></b> — Many users will just skim the headers to see if the content is relevant for them.</p>	
<p><b>Is there a better "home" for any of the content?</b></p>	<p><b>Example:</b> If there's a procurement announcement, does it link to the procurement section of the site or repeat all of the information?</p>	

## Quick start activity

**Create a central database of people and organizations that residents trust. Use that network to reach residents.**

(Supports recs 2, 3, 5)

*"...we educate people on whatever we hear or whatever we're talking about. And it's hard for us, so I can just imagine in a system that people don't trust."*

— Community partner

*"Sometimes it's who's the messenger, and explaining to folks — in language that makes sense for them — why this is important."*

— Community partner

Right now, many City departments have little direct contact with residents. As we found in our research, even when City staff hold public meetings, attendance is generally low. By creating a database of organizations and people that are already trusted and in the communities talking to people, the City can build a network to get information out more effectively and efficiently.

### Tool

→ [Data collection form](#)

Potential impact <b>High</b>	Effort to start <b>Medium</b>	Effort to maintain <b>Low</b>	Budget needed <b>No</b>
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## Data collection for networking database

Here are some key fields to consider including in a networking database. Ideally, this database will be in a free, shared location that all departments can access and add to. We recommend setting up the database so that users can filter by:

- Neighborhood/s served
- Groups served
- Languages spoken

And here are a few free tools to consider using:

- [Google forms](#) are easy to set up for data collection, allow you to send a link for people to add their own information, and automatically export data into a Google sheet
  - [Airtable](#) allows you to set up a shared database (some features require a paid account)
  - [Google sheets](#) can be used to create a database
-

**Organization** \_\_\_\_\_

**Website** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone** ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_ — \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact person** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neighborhoods served (check all that apply)**

- All neighborhoods
- Atwater Park
- Bay
- Boston Road
- Brightwood
- East Forest Park
- East Springfield
- Forest Park
- Indian Orchard
- Liberty Heights
- McKnight
- Memorial Square
- Metro Center
- North End
- Old Hill
- Pine Point
- Six Corners
- Sixteen Acres

**Services provided** \_\_\_\_\_

**Groups served (check all that apply)**

- People with disabilities
- Very low income
- Homeless
- Single parents
- Older adults
- Non-English speaking
- LGBTQ+

**Languages spoken (check all that apply)**

- Spanish
- Vietnamese
- Rundi
- French
- Kiswahili
- Other

**Willing to post flyers of City events**     Yes     No

**Able to host a City-sponsored event**     Yes     No

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## Quick start activity

Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing

(Supports recs 2, 4)

*"Once I was out there giving out flyers, I realized some people would tell me, 'I don't know about letters, I don't know about English. Thank you for giving me this, but it doesn't help.' It was always the flyer, PLUS the one on one contact."*

— Community partner

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating with residents. And it's not possible for City staff to be everywhere at once. But by understanding where people get their information already, the City can leverage this understanding to share information more effectively.

### Tool

- [Choosing information delivery methods](#)
- [Communication checklist](#)

Potential impact <b>High</b>	Effort to start <b>Medium</b>	Effort to maintain <b>Medium</b>	Budget needed <b>No</b>
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# Choosing information delivery methods

Method	Best for	Barriers to access	Considerations
<b>Email</b>	Sharing information with departments and organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet access or smartphone</li> <li>• English literacy</li> </ul>	People get bombarded with emails and often get repeat information from more than one source. Unless you have an existing relationship with the person you're contacting, your email might not be read.
<b>Website</b>	Information necessary to take advantage of City services and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet access or smartphone</li> <li>• English literacy</li> </ul>	Users and staff find the current website difficult to search and use.
<b>Social media</b>	Short updates or promoting a resource or event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet access or smartphone</li> <li>• Some comfort with technology</li> <li>• English literacy</li> </ul>	For many topics, you'll need to have a place to send people for more details.
<b>News-papers</b>	Public relations — explanation of upcoming changes, information about political figures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasingly require internet access or smartphone</li> <li>• Cost</li> </ul>	Articles are generally for people who want detailed information.
<b>Public meetings</b>	Getting community input; building trust and relationships with residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Child care</li> </ul>	Attendance is likely to be low unless residents understand why the topic is important and how it affects them.
<b>Online meetings</b>	Getting community input; building trust and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet access or smartphone</li> </ul>	Attendance is likely to be low unless residents understand why the topic is important and how it affects them.

relationships with residents

- Some comfort with technology



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## Communication checklist

*"When you're designing at the margins, everybody benefits, even the people closest to power — they'll have no issue. But when you're making decisions for the people closest to the power, it harms those farthest away. Always does. So flip it around."*

— Community partner

To reduce disparities and increase trust, communicate clearly and use a combination of delivery methods to reach more residents. Before you send out information for the public, run through this short list to make sure you're ready.

- **Have you included the right information?**
  - Who the information/service/resource is for
  - The benefits and any drawbacks
  - Any need-to-know details like deadlines
  - How people can get more information
  
- **Is the message clear and free of non-essential details?**
  
- **Does your distribution list include a wide range of individuals and organizations that work closely with different groups of residents, including:**
  - Older adults
  - People with disabilities
  - People who are homeless
  - People who don't speak English

# Appendix B

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## Recommended reading

### Citizen engagement

- [Access and Functional Needs Toolkit: Integrating a Community Partner Network to Inform Risk Communication Strategies](#) — a toolkit from the CDC
- [Cities Are Looking to Get Better Community Engagement By Paying for It](#) — article from Next City, a nonprofit news organization focused on reporting strategies for creating more equitable cities
- [Cities of Service](#) — a nonprofit that helps city leaders engage their citizens to build stronger communities
- [Citizen Engagement Techniques](#) — guidance from Cities of Service
- Online feedback forms
  - [Customer satisfaction survey](#) — Pierce County, WA
- [Seattle Department of Neighborhoods](#) — has successfully engaged residents and used their input to guide required city budget cuts
- [What Do the World's Most Engaged Cities Have in Common?](#) — blog from Cities of Service

### Examples of effective city communication

- Lancaster, PA — [Spotlight on Lancaster: Communicating through Crisis](#) — blog from Cities of Service
- Multiple communities — [Local Approaches to Serving Vulnerable Populations](#) — video of a facilitated discussion on how city governments are meeting the immediate needs of their communities, with a focus on especially vulnerable residents during the COVID-19 outbreak
- Rochester, MN — [Cities Are Looking to Get Better Community Engagement By Paying for It](#)
- San Francisco, CA — has some good, plain language, action-oriented content, including [this page on how citizens can volunteer to help during emergencies](#)

- [Seattle Department of Neighborhoods](#) — has successfully engaged residents and used their input to guide required city budget cuts
- Worcester, MA — this web content is well organized and action oriented:
  - [Emergency communication](#)
  - [Emergency preparedness](#)

## Promising communication strategies

- [4 strategies that are defining the future of city communications](#) — blog post from Bloomberg Cities
- [Analysis of Risk Communication Strategies and Approaches with At-Risk Populations](#) — literature review
  - See A-9 for Promising Strategies for Public Health Emergency Risk Communication with Vulnerable Populations
- [Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication \(CERC\)](#) — page on cdc.gov
- [Disaster Planning and Risk Communication With Vulnerable Communities: Lessons From Hurricane Katrina](#) — journal article
- [Local Approaches to Serving Vulnerable Populations](#) — video of a facilitated discussion on how city governments are meeting the immediate needs of their communities, with a focus on especially vulnerable residents during the COVID-19 outbreak
- [Principles of Risk Communication: A Guide to Communicating with Socially Vulnerable Populations Across the Disaster Lifecycle](#) — guidance from the Natural Hazards Center
- [Reaching At-Risk Populations in an Emergency](#) — page on cdc.gov
- [Reaching Vulnerable Populations in Widespread Emergencies: Lessons Learned in Kentucky](#) — article written by a consultant for the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services Communication Office
- [Spotlight on Lancaster: Communicating through Crisis](#) — blog from Cities of Service

## Toolkits and how-to information

- [Access and Functional Needs Toolkit: Integrating a Community Partner Network to Inform Risk Communication Strategies](#) — a toolkit from the CDC
- [Citizen Engagement Techniques](#) — guidance from Cities of Service

- [Principles of Risk Communication: A Guide to Communicating with Socially Vulnerable Populations Across the Disaster Lifecycle](#) — guidance from the Natural Hazards Center

### Websites with curated resources

- [Cities of Service](#) — a nonprofit helping city leaders engage their citizens to build stronger communities
- [Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication \(CERC\)](#) — page on cdc.gov
- [Next City](#) — a nonprofit news organization focused on reporting strategies for creating more equitable cities; includes webinars and articles
- [Reaching At-Risk Populations in an Emergency](#) — page on cdc.gov

