

# Multilingual Alerting for Emergency Alert System and Wireless Emergency Alerts

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With this handout, the Federal Communications Commission's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau offers information to aid authorized alert originators' efforts to provide multilingual alerting in their jurisdictions. This guidance applies to both the Emergency Alert System (EAS), which delivers critical warnings and information over radio and television, and Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) system, which delivers critical warnings and information to the public on their wireless devices.

## General Guidance

The FCC's Intergovernmental Advisory Committee (IAC) released a multilingual alerting report in 2019 that recommends best practices authorized alert originators can follow to support multilingual alerting using the EAS and WEA.<sup>1</sup> The IAC's recommendations include the following:

- **Identify language groups in your area.** The U.S. Census website, [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov), is an important source for understanding the alerting and educational needs of non-English speaking people in your area.
- **Prioritize alerting in the native languages of communities in your area that do not understand English.** Be mindful that data showing that a group's primary language is not English may not mean that the group does not understand English.
- **Develop community outreach programs.** Outreach should be an ongoing conversation that engages non-English speaking individuals and individuals with disabilities, educates them on EAS and WEA alerts, and gains their help in crafting alerts that they easily understand on platforms that they use. Aim to understand language, culture, and technology barriers that can prevent emergency alerts from being effective.
- **Develop secondary resources in priority languages.** Secondary resources (*e.g.*, websites, applications, PSAs, and templates) allow those who see an alert to have a trusted resource to get more information in a format that they can understand. The use of links in WEA messages can easily lead to these resources. Rich media should be accessible even if connectivity is limited or the network is congested.
- **Prioritize training for local alert originators.** Local alert originators tend to have greater cultural competency regarding the needs of individuals in their areas. They need access to and competency with all available alerting tools and procedures to ensure that emergency alerts effectively reach non-English speaking individuals and individuals with disabilities.

## Guidance for Specific Alerting Systems

### EAS

The EAS provides two methods for initiating alerts, both of which have capacity to distribute multilingual content, as described below.

**Legacy EAS:** EAS alerts initiated using the legacy, "over-the-air," EAS (which is the mechanism by which EAS alerts are distributed between and among broadcast stations, cable systems, and other

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<sup>1</sup> The full report is available at <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-360696A3.pdf>. Additional suggestions for enhancing access to multilingual EAS alerts can be gleaned from the Commission's 2019 Multilingual Emergency Alerting Workshop, available at <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/events/2019/06/multilingual-alerting-workshop>.

regulated entities subject to EAS obligations (hereafter “EAS Participants”)) can include a multilingual audio message, provided the length of that audio message in its entirety (*i.e.*, both the English and non-English portions) do not exceed roughly 90 seconds. The legacy EAS is incapable of distributing text.

- Any multilingual audio transmitted over legacy EAS will be distributed to all geographic location codes included in the alert, not just to non-native English speakers.

**Internet-based EAS:** EAS alerts initiated for distribution over the Internet using the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System have the capacity to relay alert messages in multiple languages.

- Alert originators may include up to 1,800 characters of English and non-English text in the enhanced text field for an Internet-based EAS alert’s video scroll.
- Internet-based EAS text will be scrolled only by EAS Participants that receive the internet-based version of the alert and provide video service.
- Internet-based EAS also supports multilingual audio, like legacy EAS.
- Internet-based EAS provides the capability to generate multilingual audio in languages other than English using Text-to-Speech (TTS) software. To utilize EAS Participants’ TTS software, the EAS Participant must have installed it in their EAS equipment and programmed it to generate audio in the selected language. The accuracy and reliability of TTS is variant and EAS Participants’ adoption of TTS software is limited.

Whether using legacy or Internet-based EAS, alert originators should consult with their State Emergency Communication Committee (SECC) to determine the geographic service areas of EAS Participants in their jurisdiction that support multilingual EAS.<sup>2</sup> This information can be helpful in mapping out potential pathways to getting multilingual alert content to the correct geographic areas.

## WEA

WEA supports alerting in English and Spanish. When initiating a WEA alert, an alert originator must generate a primary-language version of the alert message that contains a maximum of 90 characters for transmission over legacy networks. An alert originator may also generate a second primary-language version of the alert message of up to 360 characters for transmission on 4G-LTE and future networks. For each message length, an alert originator may also generate a Spanish-language version of their alert message. The Spanish-language versions of alerts will only be displayed to wireless subscribers whose device settings specify Spanish as the preferred language. WEA is not designed to support languages in addition to English and Spanish at this time, but alert originators have translated their alert messages into additional languages within in 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.

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<sup>2</sup> A list of SECC contacts for each state, territory, and the District of Columbia can be found here: <https://www.fcc.gov/public-safety-and-homeland-security/policy-and-licensing-division/alerting/general/state-eas-plans>.