

Effective Communication with the MSAW Population During National Emergencies

About 2.5 million people work as Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers (MSAWs) across the U.S.¹ However, reaching this population during national emergencies can be a challenge. This resource informs health centers on the challenges faced by MSAWs during national emergencies, and how to initiate effective emergency communications with this population.

MSAWs and National Emergencies

MSAWs are a unique population due to the nature of their work. They face particular challenges during national emergencies that are compounded by the following:

- Workplace hazards such as exposure to the elements, pesticides, and dangerous equipment and machinery.
- Substandard living conditions including living in unsafe places (e.g., vehicles, outdoors, garages, etc.), crowded housing, poor climate control, unsafe drinking water, and mold exposure.²
- Social isolation due to lack of transportation, remote locations of housing, and potentially working for months out of the year away from family or friends.
- Low wages and lost work during an emergency that make affording emergency supplies or financially recovering extremely difficult.

Communication Challenges for MSAWs During Emergencies

Effective communication with this population before, during, and after an emergency event can help to buffer these hazards. However, emergency communications can be complicated by these same factors, especially in rural areas.



- Poor internet connectivity or cell phone service may limit accessibility to real-time media information.
- Limited transportation may make it difficult to reach shelters, healthcare, or resource distributions during an emergency.
- Migration patterns of agricultural workers may make it challenging to reach them and provide emergency information since they frequently move from one location to the next.

Creating High Quality Emergency Communications

[The Crisis and Emergency Response Communication \(CERC\) Rhythm](#) can help health centers create high-quality emergency communications with MSAWs that consider their specific needs. The CERC Rhythm is an effective tool developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to prepare messages before an emergency that will prompt action from your desired audience.

¹ US Farm Employment and Farm Workers. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/us-farm-employment-and-farm-workers>. Published June 24, 2020. Accessed May 9, 2022.

² Quandt, S. Kissam, E. Sadbeh, N. Ybarra-Vega, M. J. Farmworker Housing as a Social Determinant of Health. Presented via webinar on November 30, 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022. Available at: <https://housingmatters.urban.org/events/farmworker-housing-social-determinant-health>

CERC Rhythm

Preparation

Initial

Maintenance

Resolution

As you implement the CERC Rhythm at your health center, use these MSAW-specific tips to tailor it to your agricultural worker populations:

Preparation

Build a relationship with your patient population and invite leaders or representatives from the MSAW community to participate in your emergency planning. Your communication planning should occur before the emergency takes place and in partnership with your target population.

- **Draft and test messages** – Draft initial messages designed for each type of emergency you may face, using the tips below. Your initial message should be concise, with plain, simple language and active voice. Pilot-test your messaging to ensure it is delivered effectively to promote action among the MSAW population. Develop a team of MSAW leaders and invite them to review and provide feedback to your written, visual, and auditory communications.
- **Develop partnerships** – Engage MSAW community leaders, agricultural employers, and emergency response representatives to distribute your message. Anticipate response efforts per type of emergency, and coordinate with appropriate emergency response organizations.
- **Create plans** – Plan the channels you will use to reach your MSAW population, considering where this group already receives information, like radio, social media, and community workshops. See NCFH's [NCFH's Social Media and Radio tools](#) on how to best use these channels.

Initial

Your initial message to your desired population once an emergency begins will be the one they remember. You will need to act quickly, express empathy and explain the most urgent steps communities should take to reduce harm.

- **Express empathy** – Emergency messages are better received when you validate the population's feelings and build trust. Health center outreach staff or Community Health Workers (CHWs) who are familiar with the community they serve may understand the fears and feelings of this population to promote greater action.
- **Explain risks** – By explaining relevant risks, you let MSAWs know why they need to take the steps you are recommending. This population may experience additional risks. For example, any environmental disaster will affect MSAWs who work outside more severely due to their exposure to the elements.

Maintenance

Ensure community members recognize trusted sources of information such as the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#), public and private health organizations, universities, local health departments and peer reviewed research. Outreach staff, CHWs, and health providers are the first line of communications to ensure the community has access to accurate and up-to-date information.

Resolution

Once the emergency has passed, evaluate the effectiveness of your communication plans. Utilize your lessons learned to update your plans and be better prepared when this type of emergency occurs again.

- **Segment audiences** – MSAWs are a diverse population with many subgroups based on their language, gender, ethnicity, race, country of origin, and immigration status, to name a few. Therefore, it is important to adapt your emergency communications in a way that all these groups understand using visual, cultural, and age-appropriate messages.
- **Address rumors** – Identifying media and other communication channels MSAWs use to access information may help you address any fears, confusion, or misinformation. Use these channels to answer questions and clarify rumors related to the emergencies that affect this population.
- **Discuss lessons learned** – Did MSAWs face negative impacts despite your communication plans and recommendations? Were communications received poorly or did they miss their desired intent? Evaluating questions like these may reveal the areas for improvement for the next emergency and increase their cultural literacy and impact.
- **Revise plan** – Regroup community partners to revise your MSAW emergency response plan. Consider re-engaging agricultural employers if they were unwilling before the emergency. If their workers and operations were impacted in the emergency, you will have a shared interest in doing better to reach their workforce more quickly during an emergency and help keep them safe.

Implementing the CERC Rhythm with MSAW populations will help health centers identify communication challenges throughout national emergencies, involve MSAW members in the planning and development of innovative responses to these emergencies, and create a sense of community action in raising awareness towards preparing for future events.



Additional Resources on MSAWs and Emergency Preparedness Messaging:

- [NCFH Agricultural Worker Fact Sheet](#)
- [CDC Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication Hub](#)
- [CERC Messaging and Audiences Webinar](#)
- [CERC Messages and Audiences Guide](#)
- [Ready.gov Preparedness Videos](#)
- [CERC Templates and Tools](#)
- [Emergency Preparedness Toolkit for Community-Based Organizations](#)