

AB 1638: Providing Emergency Information in Non-English

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On October 8, 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill ("AB") 1638 into law. AB 1638, effective January 1, 2025, requires local agencies that provide emergency response services—such as police, fire, or emergency medical services—to provide information about the emergency in a non-English language spoken by more than 5% of its population.

AB 1638 defines an "emergency" as a "situation that calls for immediate action to respond to the threat of serious harm or mass casualties, including conditions of natural disaster or conditions posing extreme peril to the safety of persons and property in the territorial limits of the local agency."

AB 1638 requires local agencies to use data from the American Community Survey or other reliable sources to determine if more than 5% of the people in its jurisdiction speak English less than "very well" and speak a language other than English fluently.

Local agencies will have to ensure that the information provided about emergency response services is the same quality as the information provided to English-speakers. The law requires local agencies to endeavor to utilize community members with the cultural competencies and language skills necessary to effectively communicate with those that speak English less than "very well"—a term used by the American Community Survey.

Local agencies will be required to reassess their population every five years to ensure that the languages in which it provides emergency response services information is being disseminated appropriately. The Office of Planning and Research will also survey local agencies every three years starting in 2027 to determine how local agencies are complying with AB 1638.

AB 1638 was spurred by the mass shooting in Monterey Park, which has many Chinese immigrants and where more than 5% of the people in the City speak English less than "very well" as well as a broken levee in Monterey County that flooded Pajaro, where a large portion of the community only speaks Mixteco.

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