

Overcoming Communication Barriers in Emergency Situations: Some Basic Tools

By Harvey Pressman, Andrea Pietrzyk and Jenifer Schneider
Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc.

In emergency situations, communication breakdowns between those in need of help and caregivers can have dire consequences. They can, and often do, create huge barriers between first responders and people in need of immediate help. These communication breakdowns can be attributed to new and/or chronic speech and/or comprehension difficulties, medical problems, language barriers with non-native speakers, cultural barriers *etc.* People in these situations regularly report instances in which communication barriers result in feelings of anxiety, fear, frustration, untreated pain, and overall loss of control.

First responders face an especially critical need for communication. As the first to reach people in trouble, often under emergency conditions, first responders must be able to accurately assess a patient's need in order to administer the proper care in the field. With little access to interpreters, these hard-pressed heroes must rely on simple, low-tech products to enable them to give the best possible care to their patients.

Language boards are among the most helpful tools for communicating in the field. Whether a patient does not have a clear command of English, is too ill or traumatized to speak clearly, or has a chronic speech problem, language boards enable patients and first responders to communicate through words and pictures. Products such as the Kwik Point Medical Translator have boards aimed specifically at emergency situations. These boards include pain scales as well as picture sets to express nausea, dizziness, and other common symptoms. Although language boards are simple devices, they quickly provide paramedics and EMTs with the communication skills necessary to assess a patient's condition.

A variety of mobile phone and tablet apps that can be instantly referred to in the field are now also available, and in the list that follows we have included some that deal with communication issues, as well as some that can help communication vulnerable people become better prepared to cope in an emergency.

Although communication boards can be invaluable, nothing replaces the ability to speak directly to a patient. As the number of persons of limited-English proficiency rises in the United States, first responders have found it increasingly important to speak other languages, especially Spanish. Several organizations have risen to this challenge by developing language programs geared specifically toward first responder needs. SpanishOnPatrol *and* Spanish 4 Emergencies both offer online Spanish classes that focus on the phrases and vocabulary first responders are most likely to encounter while on duty. Spanish 4 Emergencies also offers a variety of products that serve as an easy reference while in the field. In addition, many materials originally developed for health care settings (such as Vidatak boards, see below) can also prove useful in emergency settings.

Listed below is a selection of some of the more common communication tools that can help first responder personnel facilitate communication while in the field.

I. Resources Easily Obtained:

Kwikpoint Medical Translators

Kwikpoint Medical Translators (<http://www.kwikpoint.com>) are laminated booklets designed to facilitate communication between hospital staff and non-English speaking patients. The cards includes pictures for basic medical-related topics and assistance phrases that patients can point at to express their needs. Translators are available in Spanish and French as well as for disaster assistance.

Emergencia! Emergency Translation Manual

by Lisa Maitland de Hernandez (<http://www.emergencystuff.com/0766836266.html>)

EMERGENCIA! Emergency Translation Manual is a language reference for English speaking medical caregivers who need to communicate effectively with Spanish speakers in emergency situations. Translations of a wide array of medical emergencies include phonetic pronunciations of words and phrases and relevant questions that require only "yes" or "no" answers. Diagrams of the human body labeled in Spanish and pages of commonly used words and phrases further facilitate communication and ultimately quicken response time.

Disaster Preparedness Tips for Emergency Management Personnel: Communication Access for People with Limited Speech

<http://aac-lerc.psu.edu/index-120.php.htm>

The Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center in Augmentative Communication has prepared materials for first responders/receivers to use with people who have complex communication needs. The site offers [a PDF of a free Emergency Communication Aid](#) for downloading and tips for emergency personnel who may not be adequately prepared to communicate with people who are unable to rely on their natural speech during an emergency. There is also [a webcast by Pamela Kennedy](#) (AAC-RERC Writers Brigade). It describes 7 steps for emergency preparation that are critical for all individuals with difficulty using speech.

Spanish on Patrol

www.SpanishOnPatrol.com

SpanishOnPatrol offers complete Spanish courses in public safety to help officials gain the language skills they need to respond in a safe and effective way. Online classes are offered for law enforcement, fire/EMS, 911 dispatch, park rangers, and corrections officials.

Critical Communicators

<http://www.alimed.com/Alimed/product/The-Critical-Communicator,14192,339.htm>

These communication boards assist staff in interacting with patients who cannot speak or who have limited English proficiency through the use of pictures. Content includes pain scale, pictures for immediate needs, and comfort among others. The Critical Communicator is available in 21 languages, and can be purchased for each language or as a single set of all 21 languages. [Another version of Critical Communicators](#) is created for use with children, and is available in English and Spanish.

Health Care Communications Board

<http://www.greenhousepub.com/hecacobo.html>

Designed originally for use in hospitals, rehab units, acute care, emergency rooms, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, clinics, hospice care and in the home, the Health Care Communications Board can provide an inexpensive alternative for communication in emergency situations (50 boards for \$14.00, or 200 boards for \$39.00). It includes (1) pain scale for determining where and scale for determining where and how bad one hurts (2) 68-clear, 4-color pictures depicting wants, needs, ailments, comforts, questions, emotions, etc., (3) easy to understand instructions for patient response alternatives, (4). Alphabet for spelling out words, and (5) numbers for numerical information.

Disaster and Emergency Planning for People with Disabilities and Activity Limitations

<http://www.jik.com/disaster-plan.html>

As the tired old adage insists, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” One way to overcome communication barriers in emergency situations is to be prepared. While disasters and emergencies come up unexpectedly, there are steps that patients, their caretakers and communities can take now to reduce the stress and obstacles that arise in those conditions. June Kailes, a disability policy consultant, has created this website with links to steps, best practices and organizational tools that people with communication needs can refer to now to become better prepared for disasters later.

Language Identification Flashcard

The Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, uses this **Language Identification Flashcard**, containing 38 languages, to help identify the language of their respondents. It can be used by first responders to determine the language of their patients. The card can be downloaded for free [here](#).

Vidatak Communication Boards

<http://www.vidatak.com/ezboards.html>

The EZ Board enables health care providers to communicate with patients with impaired communication. The board is intended for use with patients who cannot speak and with non-English patients. Boards are 17 x 11, two-sided, dry-erase boards with new research-based content and are available in 18 languages. The [EMS EZ Board](#) is specifically designed for EMTs and ER medical providers.

Communication Picture Board

http://tube-enterprises.com/page/1b7dk/Partner_Link_I/Sevission.html

The Communication Picture Board was designed initially to help bridge the communication gap between emergency first responders and people who are deaf. The picture board has proven also to effectively enhance the communications needs between first responders and non-English speaking populations, children, people with developmental disabilities, as well as those impacted by a traumatic event. It has also been used extensively in hospital settings. The Communication Boards contain pictures with a word describing the picture underneath in both English and Spanish. On the back of the board, a number of other languages are listed, so that (literate) non-English speakers can identify their language, if other than English or Spanish.

Tips for First Responders

<http://cdd.unm.edu/products/tipsforfirstresponders.htm>

Tips for First Responders is a 14-page, color-coded, laminated 4.5 x 5.5-inch field guide, incorporating “tip sheets” that provide information that first responders can use during emergencies as well as routine encounters. They are not meant to be comprehensive, but contain specific information that can be read quickly either before or while responding to an incident, and can be downloaded free or purchased in laminated field guide form. Tips are included for persons with a wide range of disabilities, as well as Seniors, People with Service Animals, People with Mobility Challenges, People with Mental Illness, Blind or Visually Impaired People, Deaf or Hard of Hearing People, People with Autism, People with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities, People with Cognitive Disabilities, and Childbearing Women and Newborns. May be purchased on the website, or downloaded for free as in PDF.

Autism & Law Enforcement On-Scene Response Cards

http://www.autismriskmanagement.com/autism_on-scene_response_cards.cfm

Autism Risk Safety Management provides training and education to law enforcement agencies and first responders on how to assist people with autism during an emergency. Founded by Dennis Debbaudt, a professional investigator and law enforcement trainer whose son is autistic, the group offers training sessions, videos and print resources on a variety of topics, from wandering to best practices to home safety. These Response Cards are specifically designed to inform law enforcement and first responders that they

are dealing with an autistic person, and what steps they can take to help in the situation. The front of the card gives general points on autistic behaviors, while the back gives tips on how to interact with the autistic person. The cards are inexpensive (100 small-sized cards for \$24.95, 100 large cards for \$34.95). Additionally, the website has free guides for emergency and legal response in PDF format.

Temporary Tattoo Kits

<http://tattooswithapurpose.com/orderkitshere.html>

Tattoos with a Purpose sells non-permanent tattoos that help identify a child when he or she becomes lost. Parents and/or caretakers put the tattoo (which lasts 3-5 days) on the child and write the child's name and contact number on the tattoo, so that passerby and/or law enforcement will have a way to contact the parents should the child get lost. The company produces a tattoo specifically for autistic children. The [tattoo can be purchased alone for \\$1.29 each](#), or as part of a kit (6 tattoos, plus a special marker, towelettes and alcohol wipes) for \$9.99.

First Responder Interaction Cards

<http://www.selectautismmerchandise.com/index.php?act=viewProd&productId=35>

Select Autism Merchandise caters to people with autism, their families, health care providers and first responders. These interaction cards include basic information on treating a person with autism, two sets of medical-related images and an alphabet board to help the responder and the patient communicate. The cards measure about 9"x7.5", and are laminated and double-sided. Each set costs \$9.99.

Street-Smart Spanish for First Responders

By Andres Zuniga (<http://www.emergencystuff.com/9781593701413.html>)

This 88-page book is a quick reference for first responders, listing the Spanish language vocabulary and phrases needed for determining a patient's condition and giving the proper treatment. It includes sections on body parts, diseases/illnesses, drugs and questions/commands; and it covers phonetics for pronunciation help. This book costs \$22.50 individually; if more than five are purchased, the price for each book is reduced to \$18.75

InterLingua Medical Point 2 Bilingual Materials

<http://www.medicalpoint2.com/>

This website offers bilingual resources for first responders in 17 different languages, including Spanish. The Medical Point 2 books (which can be purchased by the individual language for \$16.95, or in a 17-language book for \$79.95) provide vocabulary and questions/answers needed for finding out about a patient's medical history and for providing emergency medical care. [Mobile and audio lessons in Spanish](#) are available, as are Spanish-language medical cards for quick reference.

For Safekeeping: First Responders Autism Training Video

<http://www.autismalliance.org/video.htm#order>

The Autism Alliance of MetroWest has produced this 20-minute video for first responders on how to work with autistic patients. The topics covered include a general overview of autism, safety communication techniques, and initial contact tactics. The video has been used in training sessions for emergency personnel in Massachusetts, where it was developed with the collaboration of an autism expert and a member of the Massachusetts police force. The video is available in DVD form as well; both cost \$29.99 plus \$5.00 for shipping and handling.

Evacuation Procedures for People with Disabilities

<http://oep.berkeley.edu/emergencies/evacuating/index.html#2>

The University of California at Berkeley has prepared a list of emergency evacuation procedures for people with disabilities; the list includes general protocol and specific instructions for helping people who are

visually or mobility impaired or deaf or hard-of-hearing. The instructions are intended for bomb threats, earthquakes, fires, power outages and hazardous material releases.

Emergency Evacuation Preparedness: Taking Responsibility for Your Safety: A Guide For People With Disabilities and Other Activity Limitations

http://www.wvdhsem.gov/other_docs/emergency_evacuation.pdf

June Issacson Kailes wrote this manual to help people with disabilities and/or other activity limitations to prepare for emergency evacuations. It guides the reader through making an emergency evacuation plan – knowing his or her legal rights, assessing his or her needs and abilities, and considering available options. It also lists resources for emergency preparedness and tips on how to fill out medical contact and needs forms.

II. Mobile Apps for Communication in Emergency Situations:

Note: All prices are in US dollars.

Google Translate

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/google-translate/id414706506?mt=8#>

- What is it? An instant translator. Users can translate text between 57 languages. For 15 of those languages, the user can speak the phrase rather than type; for 23 languages, he or she can hear the translation played out loud. For non-Latin script languages like Japanese or Arabic, the user can choose to see a phonetic translation in Latin letters. The user can also create a “favorites” list for easy access.
- How much is it? Free
- Platforms: Android; iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.
- Reviews: One user calls this app “the closest thing to the Star Trek universal translator I’ve ever seen.” In general, reviews are positive, though some write that WiFi access is needed, and that users cannot copy and paste text on this app.

iTranslate

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/itranslate-universal-translator/id288113403?mt=8#>

- What is it? This app is a universal translator that translates into 52 different languages, including Arabic, Chinese (traditional and simplified), French, Spanish and Vietnamese. It operates as a text-to-speech device, so the user can type a word, sentence or phrase and have it played aloud in the target language. The voice speed can be changed as needed, and translated texts can be emailed.
- How much is it? Free
- Platforms: Android; iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.
- Reviews: Users describe iTranslate as “accurate” though several say that the translation takes too long.

Phrase Board

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/phrase-board/id380424676?mt=8#>

- What is it? This app is designed for patients with speech difficulties. Users indicate where and how much they hurt with scrollable lists and a chart of the human body. Phrase Board also lets users type custom messages, or even draw messages. The app is text-only.
- How much is it? Free
- Platforms: iPad. Requires iOS 3.2 or later.
- Reviews: Reviews have been favorable, especially since the app is free. One user said Phrase Board “has all of the basic functions needed for a patient’s communication needs when speaking is

not an option.” The main downside is the lack of a speech functions, but as one user noted, “what makes it worth looking at is the free hand 'draw' feature that lets you draw with your finger if you don't know a word.”

Medical Spanish – Audio (Emergency Medical Spanish Guide)

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/audio-medical-spanish-emsg/id297917901?mt=8#>

- What is it? Designed for non-Spanish speaking health care professionals, this app is a quick reference of medical phrases in Spanish. The vocabulary and phrases provided help health care workers to learn what Spanish-speaking patients need, as well as their medical histories. There are more than 250 questions and phrases, with the option of Yes/No format for easier communication. All of the phrases have audio.
- How much is it? \$6.99
- Platforms: Android; iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.
- Reviews: Many users say that the app is helpful, especially in a hospital setting. Others have found errors in translation.

Emergency Dial

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/emergency-dial/id373011011?mt=8#>

- What is it? A quick way to dial 911 with the click of a single button. The app calls 911 for the user through a red onscreen button. The single button is intended to help young children or incapacitated persons easily dial for help if they or another person needs it.
- How much is it? Free
- Platforms: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.1.3 or later.
- Reviews: A father with two young children says that this app makes calling for help easier and saves time in an emergency situation.

ICEcare

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/icecare/id314280329?mt=8>

- What is it? This app stores medical and contact information (e.g. allergies, medications, physician contact information); the app comes with an ID sticker alerting others that the user's medical information is on the device (and stored online). The app also provides information on how to prepare and react to emergencies -- resources include a list of what-to-pack items for an emergency survival kit and basic first aid tips.
- How much is it? Free
- Platforms: Android; iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.
- Reviews: Reviewers say that ICEcare is “the most comprehensive emergency app we've checked out so far.” However, it is important to note that the information can only be entered online, so internet access is required for the app.

Emergency Location

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/emergency-location/id327003429?mt=8#>

- What is it? This app sends a quick email to a pre-designated contact in case of an emergency. The user gives the name, email and phone number of a contact person; in the event of an emergency, the user presses a button to notify the contact. The contact then receives a map of the user's location.
- How much is it? \$0.99
- Platforms: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.
- Reviews: No reviews are available at this time.

Smart-ICE

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/smart-ice-in-case-of-emergency/id315171830?mt=8>

- What is it? This app calls EMS for the user and informs first responders of medical information if the patient is unable to speak. An alarm sounds every 2 minutes to help direct EMS to the patient. The app is exclusive to the phone, so that all personal data is protected.
- How much is it? \$1.99
- Platforms: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 4.2 or later.
- Reviews: The app gives users “peace of mind,” and its designers’ customer service branch is said to be very responsive. One user said that the note-writing option (for doctor’s notes, for example) is awkward and does not allow one to write much.

Emergency Preparation

<http://itunes.apple.com/app/emergency-preparation/id328145917?mt=8#>

- What is it? This app allows the user to download information on how to prepare for various emergencies, including earthquakes, fires, hurricanes and tsunamis.
- How much is it? \$2.99
- Platforms: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 2.0 or later.
- Reviews: No reviews are available at this time.

SOS! Emergency Preparedness

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/sos-emergency-preparedness/id327763514?mt=8>

- What is it? This app is a mobile resource for first aid, emergency/disaster preparedness tips and ICE (In Case of Emergency info). Users can store contact and medical information, and they can locate the nearest hospitals, veterinarians, and household repair and transportation services.
- How much is it? \$3.99
- Platforms: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.
- Reviews: Users find the app useful in emergency situations; one man wrote that it was a quick, convenient reference when his wife had a car accident. Another reviewer called it “a must-have.” However, another user mentioned problems with saving contact information.

Universal Doctor Speaker

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/universal-doctor-speaker-full/id389202856?mt=8#>

- What is it? This app is designed to help doctors communicate with patients who speak a different language. There are six language options (Chinese, English, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish) with more than 500 words and phrases for each. The app includes translations for sharing general medical information, accidents and common illnesses. There are two settings, one for the patient and one for the health care professional.
- How much is it? \$5.99
- Platforms: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad. Requires iOS 3.2 or later.
- Reviews: One user calls this app “a must have” that can be used for travel as well as emergencies.

SmallTalk Intensive Care

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/smalltalk-intensive-care/id403057381?mt=8#>

- What is it? An app to help patients with speaking difficulties (due to an impairment or an operation) express their needs to medical care providers in the ICU. Users choose from picture-based vocabulary to “speak” phrases like, “I am in pain,” or “I want to be comforted.” The pictures that match the words make this app useful for non-English speakers as well.
- How much is it? Free
- Platforms: iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch. Requires iOS 3.0 or later.

- Reviews: Reviewers found the app useful for the ICU, though one user said that the interface “was not great.” The pictures are self-explanatory and make the app a convenient tool for non-native English speakers.

Living Safely

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/visual-impact-living-safely/id396774523?mt=8#>

- What is it? This app provides 27 total visual safety guides specifically designed for people with cognitive, developmental or learning disabilities. 13 guides focus on home safety – what to do in case of a fire, how to safely handle electricity, or how to interact with strangers. The other 14 deal with personal safety – covering topics such as swimming, cold/hot weather, and pedestrian tips. The app uses a combination of visual and auditory tools to teach the concepts.
- How much is it? \$29.99
- Platforms: iPad. Requires iOS 3.2 or later.
- Reviews: There are no reviews available at this time.

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