



**COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA  
FIRE DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

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Thursday, May 7, 2026

*Commission on  
State Mandates*  
*Filed Date*  
*05/07/2026*

Juliana F. Gmur, Executive Director  
Commission on State Mandates  
980 9th Street, Suite 300  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re:** Written Comments in Support of Test Claim 25-TC-03  
Emergency Communications in Non-English Languages  
Government Code § 7299.7; Statutes of 2023, Chapter 587 (AB 1638)  
County of Sonoma, Claimant

Dear Executive Director Gmur:

The County of Santa Barbara ("County") respectfully submits these written comments in support of the Test Claim filed by the County of Sonoma (25-TC-03) regarding Government Code section 7299.7, enacted by AB 1638 (Statutes of 2023, Chapter 587). The County provides emergency response services, including law enforcement, fire, emergency management, and emergency medical services, and is directly subject to the requirements of this statute.

***Impact of AB 1638 on County of Santa Barbara***

The County serves a population of approximately 442,000 residents. Based on our analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data, we have identified that **Spanish** meets the 5% non-English language threshold established by Government Code section 7299.7(a). Approximately 14% of our Spanish-speaking population speaks English less than "very well." However, ACS data does not provide data breakdowns at the county level for many non-English languages, particularly indigenous Mexican languages such as Mixteco (an unwritten language that could not have been captured by a written survey). Available ACS data at the national level has historically been recognized as significantly underrepresenting indigenous language speakers. Additionally, the ACS would not capture our County's transient populations, such as international university students, tourists, and H-2A agricultural migrant workers, which can bring a temporary influx of individuals that primarily speak non-English languages.

With respect to indigenous languages, researchers and local advocacy organizations working directly with these communities estimate that between 20,000 and 25,000 indigenous language speakers live and work in Santa Barbara County. Because most of these individuals are Mixteco speakers, Mixteco may meet the 5% language threshold in the near future. Given that California is home to an estimated 170,000 indigenous language speakers, the County, along with other jurisdictions, relies on the data and expertise of organizations and advocates that have been serving these communities for decades.

Prior to the enactment of AB 1638, the County was not required to translate emergency communications into these specific languages. While the County is committed to serving all residents and providing critical, life-safety information in many forms, the new law imposes specific, measurable obligations that go beyond any prior state or federal requirements, including mandatory translation of all emergency information into qualifying languages; a requirement that translated information be equally comprehensive, actionable, and timely; data-driven language assessments using ACS data; and the recruitment of community members with cultural and linguistic competencies.

The County is leveraging existing efforts and undertaking new processes to reach and maintain compliance with AB 1638 requirements. This letter provides a summary of both incurred costs and anticipated future expenditures associated with delivering culturally informed, parity-based emergency information in threshold non-English languages. Like the County, jurisdictions across California should expect rising and additional costs driven by the growing frequency and complexity of natural and human-caused disasters, the incident-specific demands of emergency communications, and the likelihood that additional languages will meet statutory thresholds in the coming years.

### ***Costs Incurred and Anticipated***

**Translation and Interpretation Services.** Since AB 1638 went into effect on January 1, 2025, the County has incurred approximately \$3,300 in costs for translation and interpretation services related to Spanish language emergency communications. These costs include professional translation and interpreter contracts to support written products, recorded video content, and live interpretation services. The County has established multiple contracts with translation and interpretation services amounting to \$261,000 annually to support public day-to-day and emergency information needs.

Ongoing costs are estimated to be between \$3,000-\$20,000 annually, subject to frequency, nature, and duration of incidents, the populations impacted, and volume and complexity of information requiring translation.

**Technology and System Upgrades.** To support multilingual emergency alerts, the County anticipates costs of approximately \$800 annually for advanced AI-based software to generate phone voice message recordings. Estimates were calculated based on standard service subscription costs.

Existing text-to-speech capabilities that convert written messages into automated voice messages produce highly unintelligible Spanish voice messages. By contrast, recent testing of available AI voice solutions renders clear, high-quality Spanish messages. This technology is necessary in the event native Spanish-speaking staff are not available to record real-time emergency phone voice messages. Without such a solution, the County cannot achieve parity between English- and Spanish-language voice communications.

Note that the County does not intend to use this AI solution to translate content from English into Spanish; all written translations will continue to be performed and verified by qualified staff. Rather, the AI voice solution will be used solely to produce voice recordings of already manually translated content, using natural-sounding Spanish pronunciation and accent.

**Staffing and Personnel.** The County estimates annual staffing costs of \$60,000 associated with bilingual emergency response services staff, as well as staff development and provision of bilingual communication best practices, protocols, tools, and training. This estimate is calculated based on an average of 50 hours a month dedicated to AB 1638 compliance activities, across all bilingual County emergency response services staff, at an average rate of \$100/hour (fully burdened, including bilingual stipends and benefits).

**Supporting parity in the quality, timeliness, and actionability of emergency information in non-English languages requires substantial up-front and ongoing investments in research, development, and operational readiness.** Moreover, achieving parity requires a level of expertise and experience in language accessibility and translations practices that are still not typical within the public safety discipline. The Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management (“SBC OEM”) currently benefits from having two native Spanish-speaking staff, each with more than a decade of experience translating emergency communications across diverse incident types. These staff have collaborated extensively with one another and with professional translators on public information and education materials and possess a strong understanding of translation best practices and common challenges. **Notably, both bilingual staff are in grant-based temporary positions funded through June 30, 2027, with no ongoing funding source identified past this date.**

Through their work, these staff have demonstrated what it takes to produce high-quality translations that maintain fidelity to the original English message, are accessible to a broad Spanish-speaking audience, and are culturally informed. For instance, they routinely:

- Adapt emergency terminology and concepts into plain, actionable language (e.g., translating “shelter-in-place” into behavior-based instructions rather than a literal phrase).
- Account for regional and dialectical differences across Spanish-speaking populations. Drawing on their distinct cultural backgrounds, these staff bring heightened awareness of variations in vocabulary, tone, and usage based on

Hispanic nationality, and regularly consult with one another to reconcile differences and select terminology that is broadly understood by the local community. This ability to provide nuanced, locally informed translations is especially critical. In contrast, translations produced by large, non-local vendors are consistently not of the same quality. Based on previous experiences, these vendors generally lack familiarity with the specific language needs and cultural context of the County's population.

- Develop and regularly update translations of pre-scripted messages and information products for hazards prone to the County (e.g., wildfires, floods, extreme heat, hazardous materials incidents) and corresponding protective actions (e.g., Evacuation Warnings and Orders) to enable rapid deployment during emergencies without sacrificing clarity or accuracy. Each message requires multiple variations to support compatibility across delivery pathways with character/word length limitations (e.g., separate 90-character and 360-character messages for Wireless Emergency Alerts). In addition, message translations must often be modified to avoid use of Spanish-language special characters (e.g., ñ, ó) as some emergency alert systems do not support special characters and will reject these messages.
- As needed, translate real-time emergency information for emerging and rapid onset incidents, including translation of specific incident details for dissemination via emergency alerts, emergency zones maps, press releases, social media, and website methods. These activities may also include bilingual audio and video recordings for phone voice messages and for distribution through online, television, and radio methods. Recent incident examples requiring real-time translation support:
  - July 2025 Madre Fire
  - July 2025 countywide 9-1-1 outage
  - July 29-30 2025 Tsunami Advisory
  - August 2025 Gifford Fire
  - Multiple, year-round Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS)
  - Multiple shelter-in-place orders due to potentially dangerous suspects in the area and hazardous material incidents
  - Multiple evacuations and shelter-in-place orders for major storm events that posed debris flow, flooding, and landslide risks to local communities
- Train, coordinate, and maintain a Spanish translation team comprised of County staff and local agency partners, enhancing consistency in messaging and translations, scalability during incidents, and operational redundancy during extended or complex emergencies. While these efforts have significantly expanded the County's locally-driven translation capacity, they have also

highlighted a continuing need to formally assess and validate the translation skills of the broader bilingual workforce in order to tap into this resource appropriately. A standardized verification or certification process would be necessary to achieve this goal on a large scale, which would require additional resources and funding.

- Collaborate with professional translators, bilingual emergency response service personnel, and local language access and advocacy groups to review and refine messaging for quality assurance purposes.
- Adjust tone and framing of emergency information to reflect cultural context, trust considerations, and varying risk perceptions across communities.
- Monitor evolving state and federal policy as well as emerging research and best practices in emergency communications.
- As needed, evaluate, procure, and implement new tools and technologies that enhance translation quality and delivery speed.
- Incorporate lessons learned from past incidents to continuously improve languages access and translation processes.

Beyond SBC OEM, other County departments with emergency response service capabilities contribute to compliance efforts. The County Fire Department recently hired a Spanish-speaking Public Education Officer responsible for creating greater community awareness of wildfire readiness and resiliency, trust-building and outreach activities for hard-to-reach communities, and real-time translations of emergency information. The County Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center is also responsible for issuing emergency alerts to the community during rapid-onset emergencies. The Dispatch Center utilizes existing bilingual dispatch staff for any necessary translation of customized emergency alert messages and to record bilingual phone voice messages.

Within the County Department of Social Services, bilingual staff translate and verbally communicate information on emergency resources and assistance available to non-English-speaking clients. Many of these clients are families with children, individuals with disabilities, and older adults. These are populations that often face barriers to accessing emergency information and are disproportionately impacted by disasters. Public information staff within the County Public Works Department coordinate with professional translators to provide bilingual communications when emergencies result in hazardous conditions to roadways, areas near rivers and creeks, and other infrastructure within communities. Last, the County Health Department (which includes the Emergency Medical Services division) employs bilingual public information staff that develops, translates, and disseminates emergency information related to extreme heat and cold events, environmental incidents affecting drinking water and waterways, and other public health emergencies.

**Language Needs Assessment.** The County incurred approximately \$5,500 in costs conducting the initial language needs assessment required by Government Code section 7299.7(b), including analysis of ACS data to identify qualifying languages for

Santa Barbara County and at the city level, development of a AB 1638 Compliance Plan, and researching equitable data sources for other locally prevalent non-English languages not reflected at the county level in ACS data, such as Mixteco and Chinese. This cost is calculated based on 55 hours for two SBCOEM bilingual emergency services staff to complete this process, at an average rate of \$100/hour (fully burdened, including bilingual stipend and benefits). This assessment must be repeated every five years, resulting in ongoing costs.

It is important to highlight that authors of AB 1638 specifically cited the March 2023 Pajaro River levee failure and the critical lack of emergency information in Mixteco for this incident. **The County recognizes significant underrepresentation in data and studies of Mixteco-speaking and indigenous languages populations.** Without equivalent data sources and technical assistance to gather, synthesize, and interpret data, the County and other jurisdictions home to indigenous languages cannot adequately assess what segment of these populations speaks English less than “very well.” As a result, the County anticipates additional costs to engage cultural brokers, demographers, and data analysts to assess this population. Service delivery costs for Mixteco are also expected to be higher due to the limited availability of qualified interpreters and the fact that Mixteco is not a written language, therefore requiring audio and video recordings to convey emergency messages to individuals.

**Other Costs.** The County estimates an additional \$16,000 annually to include community outreach and engagement with Spanish-speaking populations to increase alert program enrollment and improve understanding of emergency terminology and official information sources; administrative program oversight and legal review of compliance obligations; and the provision of educational, protocol, and training materials for County bilingual staff and partner agencies. This cost is calculated based on 10 hours a month for outreach and engagement, at an average rate of \$100/hour (fully burdened, including bilingual stipend and benefits); 2 hours a month for administrative and legal-related tasks, at an average rate of \$140/hour (fully burdened); and \$600 for material costs.

Note that estimates provided in this letter do not reflect additional costs incurred by other county departments, incorporated cities or special districts that provide emergency response services within Santa Barbara County. As the County/Operational Area Alert Authority, SBC OEM issues emergency alerts at the request of and on behalf of these agencies. When pre-scripted bilingual messages cannot meet emergency information needs of an incident, these agencies are responsible for providing the English message and its translation into Spanish to SBC OEM, resulting in costs not accounted for here. SBC OEM also regularly supports public information and education needs on behalf of these agencies through the County’s website, the provision of printed materials, and community education and outreach initiatives and events.

**Total Estimated Annual Cost.** The County estimates its total annual cost of compliance with Government Code section 7299.7 to range from \$75,000 to \$95,000. The County has confidence that this is a conservative estimation. It is highly likely these costs will continue to grow over time due to a variety of factors, including but

not limited to the dynamic and increasingly complex nature of emergency and disaster response; the potential for additional non-English languages reaching the 5% threshold in the future; the challenges associated with competitively recruiting and retaining highly skilled bilingual emergency services staff; and the level of technical, linguistic, and cultural expertise necessary to meet the parity-based and cultural competence standards set by the statute. These costs are ongoing and will recur each year as the County maintains compliance with the statute's requirements. Additional reoccurring costs of approximately \$25,000 to \$35,000 are expected every 5 years to meet the required language needs reassessment that would include contracting for local language assessment to determine if Mixteco or any other locally spoken languages meet the 5% threshold.

***Absence of State or Federal Funding***

The County has not received any state or federal funding specifically designated to offset the costs of complying with Government Code section 7299.7.

***New Program or Higher Level of Service***

The requirements imposed by Government Code section 7299.7 constitute a new program or higher level of service within the meaning of Article XIII B, Section 6 of the California Constitution. Prior to AB 1638, no state law specifically required local agencies to translate emergency communications into non-English languages based on the 5% threshold; ensure that translated emergency information be equally comprehensive, actionable, and timely; conduct data-driven language assessments using ACS data; or recruit community members with specific cultural and linguistic competencies for emergency communication. These are new activities that the County was not previously required to perform and for which the state has not provided funding.

***Correction to Sonoma County Test Claim***


In Sonoma County's Test Claim documentation, specifically Attachment A, Section II under "Technology Workarounds for ASL and Accessibility", Sonoma County states that Santa Barbara County "implemented the Accessible Hazard Alert System (AHAS) for Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing accessibility..." This statement is inaccurate.

The County had previously engaged with the AHAS vendor to explore potential services, including American Sign Language (ASL) and Spanish-language translation support for emergency communications, and obtained cost proposals. However, the County ultimately did not enter into a contract for these services due to prohibitive costs and resource constraints. The County is aware that other jurisdictions in California, including Kern County, have implemented AHAS or similar systems to enhance emergency communication capabilities for vulnerable populations.

**Conclusion**

For the reasons set forth above, the County supports the Test Claim filed by the County of Sonoma and respectfully requests that the Commission on State Mandates find that Government Code section 7299.7, as enacted by AB 1638, constitutes a reimbursable state mandate. We urge the Commission to approve the Test Claim so that local agencies may receive reimbursement for the significant costs imposed by this statute.

Respectfully submitted,

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## DECLARATION

I, Kelly Hubbard, declare as follows:

1. I am the Director of the Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management. I am authorized to make this declaration on behalf of the County.
2. I have personal knowledge of the facts stated in the accompanying written comments, or have reviewed the records and documentation upon which the factual statements are based. If called as a witness, I could and would testify competently to the matters set forth herein.
3. The County provides emergency response services and is subject to the requirements of Government Code section 7299.7.
4. The factual statements regarding costs, operational impacts, and compliance activities described in the accompanying written comments are true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief, and are supported by the documentary evidence attached hereto.
5. The County has not received state or federal funding specifically designated to offset the costs of complying with Government Code section 7299.7.
6. Prior to the enactment of AB 1638, the County was not required by any state or federal law to perform the specific activities mandated by Government Code section 7299.7.

I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of California that the foregoing is true and correct.

Executed on Thursday, May 7, 2026, at Santa Barbara, California.

DocuSigned by:

*Kelly Hubbard*

07B3756B5CDB484...

Kelly Hubbard

Director

Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management

## DECLARATION OF SERVICE BY EMAIL

I, the undersigned, declare as follows:

I am a resident of the County of Sacramento and I am over the age of 18 years, and not a party to the within action. My place of employment is 980 Ninth Street, Suite 300, Sacramento, California 95814.

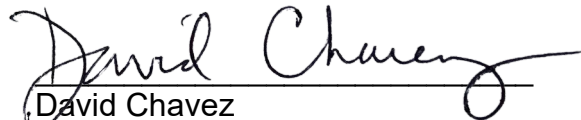
On May 7, 2026, I served the:

- **Current Mailing List dated May 7, 2026**
- **County of San Joaquin's Comments on the Test Claim filed May 7, 2026**
- **County of Santa Barbara's Written Comments in Support of Test Claim 25-TC-03 filed May 7, 2026**

*Emergency Communications in Non-English Languages, 25-TC-03*  
Government Code § 7299.7; Statutes of 2023, Chapter 587 (AB 1638); effective January 1, 2024 and operative January 1, 2025  
County of Sonoma, Claimant

by making it available on the Commission's website and providing notice of how to locate it to the email addresses provided on the attached mailing list.

I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of California that the foregoing is true and correct, and that this declaration was executed on May 7, 2026 at Sacramento, California.



David Chavez  
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# COMMISSION ON STATE MANDATES

## Mailing List

**Last Updated:** 5/7/26

**Claim Number:** 25-TC-03

**Matter:** Emergency Communications in Non-English Languages

**Claimant:** County of Sonoma

### TO ALL PARTIES, INTERESTED PARTIES, AND INTERESTED PERSONS:

Each commission mailing list is continuously updated as requests are received to include or remove any party or person on the mailing list. A current mailing list is provided with commission correspondence, and a copy of the current mailing list is available upon request at any time. Except as provided otherwise by commission rule, when a party or interested party files any written material with the commission concerning a claim, it shall simultaneously serve a copy of the written material on the parties and interested parties to the claim identified on the mailing list provided by the commission. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 1181.3.)

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