

REMARKS OF DAVID HONIG

**Executive Director
Minority Media and Telecommunications Council**

**EAS Summit
Hyatt Regency Capital Hill
Washington, D.C.
February 25, 2008**

(as drafted for presentation)

In an emergency, every person living within our nation's boundaries, regardless of his or her primary language, deserves to receive information on how to increase his or her chances of survival and safety. Certainly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the nation has embraced this principle. Yet three years later, three FCC orders later, and six rounds of pleadings later, the FCC still doesn't have a multilingual EAS program, and only one state broadcasting association – Florida's – has come most of the way toward designing a modern multilingual EAS system.

In 2006, the Commission's Independent Panel minced no words in addressing the disgraceful state of EAS, unanimously recommending that the Commission "[p]romptly find a mechanism to resolve any technical and financial hurdles in the current EAS to ensure that non-English speaking people . . . have access to public warnings, if readily achievable"; work with industry to publicize "best practices" for serving non-English-speaking people; and "[e]ncourage state and local government agencies who provide emergency information . . . to take steps to make critical emergency information accessible" to non-English-speaking Americans."

Close your eyes, go back three years, put yourselves in New Orleans, and remember that about 300,000 Latino and Vietnamese people had little to no advance warning that this country's worst natural disaster in recent history was at their doorstep. Finding medical facilities, shelter, food, and potable water was a matter of life and death for thousands of non-English speakers.

University of South Carolina Professor Susan Kuo has reminded me that Katrina wasn't the first emergency when official indifference to language barriers resulted in injuries or loss of life. In 1999, residents of Richmond, California received telephone emergency notifications when an explosion at the local plant sent massive amounts of smoke throughout the city. These English-language telephone warnings, advising residents to seek shelter and to shut windows and doors, provided thousands of non-English speakers little benefit. Members of Richmond's Laotian community did not understand the emergency messages and thus did not know to take safety measures. Many of these non-English speakers were injured when, concerned about the commotion, they stepped outside upon hearing warning sirens.

Another tragic example occurred in 1987, when a tornado destroyed half the town of Saragosa, Texas. Of the estimated 428 residents, 29 individuals were killed and 121 were injured. All but two families living in Saragosa were of Mexican descent. Although the English language television stations broadcast tornado warnings, emergency weather announcements were not relayed to the Spanish language television channel, to which many of the television sets in Saragosa were turned that night. Thus, many lives might have been saved had the weather warnings been transmitted to the Spanish language channel and onward to the people of Saragosa.

Today tens of millions of Americans are not fluent in English, and there are no stations broadcasting in their languages in many cities. In many cities, multilingual stations are so few in number that damage to one outlet would deprive the market of broadcast communications in one or more widely spoken languages.

To address this dilemma, the Independent Spanish Broadcasters Association, the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ and MMTC have developed a proposal we call "Multilingual Universal Emergency Broadcasting" or "UEB."

Our UEB proposal goes well beyond EAS and its underlying Part 11 regulations. On the rare occasions when it has been triggered, EAS has been vital in providing the public with urgent notice of imminent danger. However, people need much more information than the two memorable words that opened The Amityville Horror, “GET OUT!” People also need to know where to assemble to be taken out of town, where food, water and shelter can be found, how to locate missing loved ones, how to secure their property, how to protect their families’ health and safety, and how to be rescued. Our UEB proposal would cover all of that.

The stations that would be expected to be ready to provide information in languages other than English would be called “Designated Hitters” – following the model of the United States Army under which every soldier is expected to take up the position of a fellow soldier who becomes a casualty. A Designated Hitter would be defined as a station that has agreed in advance to provide emergency alerts and emergency information in a specific covered language when no station customarily broadcasting the majority of its programming in that language is on the air throughout the market in an emergency.

To be sure every station in a market knows when a Designated Hitter must begin providing information in a covered language, each market would have a UEB Plan. Each Plan would specify a UEB Coordinator who would be authorized to activate UEB in his community, even if the President or the Governor fails to do so. In this way, the system would respond directly to the needs of each community by being activated from the bottom up, rather than only from the top down like the current EAS plan.

There are many other attributes of our UEB proposal, including:

- What languages would be covered
- How a station that is not a Designated Hitter can participate in a UEB Plan
- Sources of on-air talent in covered languages who have journalistic expertise, good judgment and compassion

- How much emergency information stations would offer
- How stations would publicize the operation of a UEB Plan
- Sources of funds to pay for UEB operations.

I know that many of you are concerned about whether a UEB plan would be imposed on you by the FCC. Hopefully that wouldn't be necessary, but it would be up to you. If broadcasters in a community arrive voluntarily at a reasonable UEB Plan, the FCC could certify it and the Plan would take effect.

Multilingual emergency broadcasting isn't rocket science or inter-carrier comp, and it isn't expensive. For our part, MMTC will help you meet the challenge of multilingual emergency broadcasting. Just apply the same can-do spirit that the broadcasting industry has shown in efficiently transitioning to DTV, in avoiding indecency fines, and in preventing the FCC from proposing onerous localism regulations.

Oh wait.

* * * * *