
Resilient Springfield Communication Strategy

Key Findings and Recommendations

June 16, 2021





Project overview

The City of Springfield is working to build the City's resilience for the long-term impacts of climate change, like increasingly frequent and more severe weather events. The City is collaborating with community partners to build trust and share emergency preparation information effectively with climate-vulnerable residents, especially Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC).

As part of the Resilient Springfield initiative, the City has engaged Bloom Works to develop a communication plan to help achieve the project's goals. This document offers strategic and tactical recommendations for the City's communication with climate-vulnerable residents.



Methods

The team met monthly with a Resident Advisory Council (RAC), and interviewed 26 residents, neighborhood council board members, City staff, and community partners.

Audience

The City of Springfield will be primarily responsible for implementing this communication plan. However, the City's success will depend on close collaboration with local organizations that interact with residents on a daily basis.

Vision for success





Vision exercise with the Resident Advisory Council

It's one year after the end of this project, and it was a huge success. Think about what's changed since the project ended. What actions has the city taken? What does success look like? Who and what contributed to the success?

Themes included:

- **More resident-centered communication** — the City prioritizes what residents need and then works backwards to fill those needs with a better website and more accessible information about the help that's available
- **Residents helping residents** — increased collaboration between neighborhoods, millennials helping seniors by doing chores like shoveling snow
- **Better emergency alert system** — one that works similar to the Amber Alert system that's already in place and special emergency devices in the homes of older adults



Channel# 22 NEWS



at Springfield, MA

Community to Community

Sharing Info to our
Cities, and Towns

Where to go? What is needed once you
get there and how to use the Resources.

Include everyone as to what they need.

* COVID 19 information

* Vaccine Appointment & Login
(the safety of the vaccines)

* Assistance on When & Where

* Wellness Checks for the elderly
& disabled

Published Point of View

Headline REVAMPING Emergency Alert System

quote "Community Resident ~~State~~ Strong Impact"
to improve Emergency Alert System

Body City improves Emergency website

Created Emergency Alert system

City created New partnership with

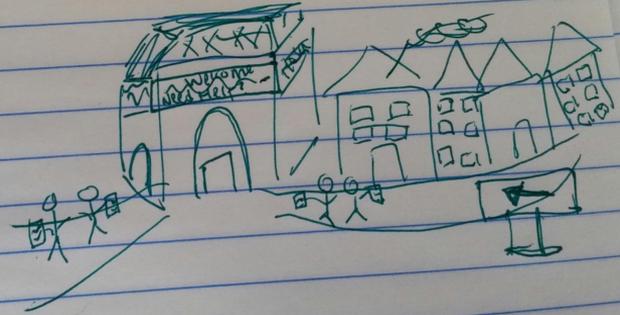
Red Cross FEMA

MassLive

Resilient Springfield is ready for anything

"It was so easy to access the information. I knew
exactly where to go and that helped my community
recover."

- language
- trust
- accessibility



“

Success looks like steps towards better. I've worked here long enough to know that success doesn't happen in one fell swoop."

City staff



I'd like to understand how we can do things better so that we don't feel like we're constantly carrying buckets of water uphill."



City staff



I would just want to know that the City has a method of reaching vulnerable residents and those people have a method of reaching back. Whether it's by phone or something, as long as it's a way they're comfortable communicating. My guess is that they'd want things in writing and then be able to call somewhere to confirm and ask questions."



Neighborhood council board member

Findings





Effective public service requires transparent decision-making, accountability to residents, and customer service.

"...if you're serving the public, you have to answer to the public eventually. So being proactive about being at neighborhood council meetings, not when you want something or need something, but because you want to have a conversation, you want to be able to be visible to the neighborhood."

- Neighborhood council board member



Trust in the City is low, but it's at the heart of reaching communities effectively.

"There's a trust factor of saying when I'm [a resident] not in the room, how can I ensure that you're still going to speak on my behalf? How can I feel confident that you're going to bring up the issues we've talked about in those closed door meetings that we cannot be invited to? Those are the things I think communities are concerned about."

- Community partner

"I'm not sure that the city has made trust a primary goal. Individual people from city staff have done that, but not the city government as a whole, even though that was one of the goals of the climate action plan."

- Community partner



To overcome barriers to better communication, it's essential to address racial and economic disparities.

"Far too many areas, it always seems to be the black and brown areas, they either get the message LATE, or never get the message at all. They [the City] rely on the "good neighbor system" so that someone can inform them that they're doing this, at this time. It's troublesome...As long as I can think of, we've always gotten the short end of the stick."

- Resident

"When programs come up, the question always comes up — how do you reach the people that actually need the help? Educated people with resources and money tend to search out things, while the people who really need the help...don't have resources to talk to a lot of people...they're not in the place to receive the information best."

- Neighborhood council board member



The City can improve its communication with residents in several ways.

- The City's primary communication strategies (website, 311, public meetings) require residents to seek out information, which can make communication harder.
- Information is often presented in ways that are difficult for residents to access or understand.
- The most reliable, effective ways to reach vulnerable residents are word of mouth, mailings, and flyers.
- The City relies heavily on neighborhood councils to represent their neighborhoods and to share City information effectively at the neighborhood level. However, there's a lot of variability in how well this works.



They have to make it [the city website] more user friendly for searches to find basic information. It's better than it's been, but it's still really archaic. Trying to find stuff, it's too difficult. It shouldn't take you three or four minutes to find something. People give up."



Resident

“

Word of mouth is big, and particularly in the Black and Latino communities, it's just big, it works. And so getting key folks to serve in that role intentionally — like your role is to spread this — was helpful.”

Community Partner

Recommendations





Recommendations at a glance

1. Put yourself in the shoes of the people you serve.
2. Go where the people are.
3. Network with other departments, community agencies, and residents to reach people you don't.
4. Create and nurture a feedback loop to engage residents.
5. Share knowledge to build on what works and learn from what doesn't.



1. Put yourself in the shoes of the people you serve.

- Clarify the audience and intention before writing the message.
- When developing information for the public, think like the residents you're trying to reach.
- When communicating with the public, write in simple, concise, jargon-free language.
- Start a phased approach to improving springfield-ma.gov.
- To improve reach and equity, invest in plain language Spanish translation.



City of Springfield Facebook post on March 30, 2021

What would a resident want to know about a new vaccine site?

- Where is it?
- When does it open?
- How do I get an appointment?



Example of a revised Post





Start here

- Adopt a simple worksheet to identify the audience, required action, and need-to-know information for communicating with residents.
- Review a section of the website and identify ways to improve it.



Message development worksheet

Whether you're creating a press release, web page, or social media post, you'll need to start with a clear message. Use this worksheet to help you prepare the information that your audience will need. If you have more than one audience — like property owners and tenants — fill out a worksheet for each one.

Topic: _____

Audience: _____

1. What do you want this audience to learn or do as a result of this communication?
2. Step back and think about the information you're sharing from the perspective of your audience. What questions will they have? Do a quick brainstorm here using the words your audience is likely to use.
3. Based on the brainstorm, write down what your audience needs in order of priority. For example, you'll want to tell people how a service could benefit them before telling them where to fill out an application.
4. Draft content that addresses all of the information needs you've identified. Keep it simple and limited to just the "need to know" information. This is what you'll share on the website, in a pamphlet, or in a press release.



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5. Now create your short, promotional message. This message will help people decide whether the information is relevant for them. It will typically be 2-4 sentences and perfect for a social media post or flyer.

a. Who is the information for

b. What is the topic or service

c. Why is it important

d. Where can they get more information

Tip: Share your draft with a friend or family member to see if there are any gaps to fill or terms to clarify.



8 tips on writing for the web

If you're writing for a government website, it's time to bookmark plainlanguage.gov. This federal website has how-to information on how to write content people will read — and it has the rationale you'll need to convince any plain-language-doubters.

Here are just a few of the tips you'll find on plainlanguage.gov.

① **Write for your audience**

Focus on what they'll want to know, and use language that they're familiar with.

② **Organize content from most to least important**

If readers can't identify your main point right away, they'll move on.

③ **Choose your words carefully**

You're writing to communicate efficiently, not to impress. Use simple words, and avoid jargon. If you need to use a complex term, define it in words your audience will understand.

④ **Be concise**

People go to government sites to accomplish a specific task — not to browse. By keeping information short and direct, you respect people's time.

⑤ **Keep it conversational**

Use first person to refer to the city government ("we") and second person to address your users ("you"). Write in an active voice that clearly says who needs to do what.

⑥ **Design for reading**

If a page looks cluttered and hard to read, people will move on. Users skim web content, so use headings to communicate key information. Keep paragraphs short and use lists to break up text.

⑦ **Follow web standards**

Write informative links (no "click here"s). Limit content to what users need to know in order to understand a resource or use a service.

⑧ **Test your assumptions**

If you're writing content for the web, chances are good that you're an expert in your subject area. And this means that you're not an average user of the website — or an average resident. Get feedback from non-experts to make sure your content is relevant, understandable, and actionable.



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Basic web page audit

Websites work best for users when they're designed so that all of the pieces work together. For example, if a type of content already has a home, other pages can link to it rather than repeating it. And for government sites, users shouldn't need to understand the bureaucracy in order to find what they need.

Here's a sample audit you can use to check whether a department has the content users will want, is organized well, and takes advantage of the website as a whole.

Criteria	Examples and how-to info
Does the page tell users who the content is for and why it's important?	Example: The landing page of a section includes a brief explanation of what the department does.
Is all of the content up to date?	
If it's a long page, does it include jump links at the top to help users get right to the section they're interested in?	A jump link (aka anchor) is text that allows you to go directly to a header on the page.
Is link text written to set context for users and to be accessible to screen readers?	Use links effectively — Good link text will set clear expectations for what people will find if they click. And it needs to contain enough information to be meaningful for users relying on screen readers.
Are links formatted consistently so that they're easy to identify?	Use color or underline to indicate links — Right now, links on springfield-ma.gov are formatted in several different ways. Sometimes, the only way to be sure something is a link is to hover over it.
Are headings meaningful and informative?	Use meaningful headings — Many users will just skim the headers to see if the content is relevant for them.
Is there a better "home" for any of the content?	Example: If there's a procurement announcement, does it link to the procurement section of the site or repeat all of the information?



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		Is there a better "home" for any of the content?	Example: If there's a procurement announcement, does it link to the procurement section of the site or repeat all of the information?



2. Go where the people are.

- Use existing high-touch areas (churches, schools, bodegas, community centers) and community events to provide information where residents are already gathering.
- When the City is present and responsive, trust increases.

“

I don't need to expend a lot of energy in telling people to be in a certain space, I'm just going to where they already are. And that's a lot easier... And it's a lot more efficient that way.”



Community partner



Trust is a continuous thing and it's something that you have to continue to build every single day. And it takes 2 sides in order to continue to strengthen that trust."



Community partner



Meet Patricia, Mercedes, Luis, and Terry

The 4 personas on the next slides aren't real people. But they are meant to bring to life the pressing needs and challenges of vulnerable Springfield residents. We pulled the details of these personas directly from our interviews with residents.

Personas are a communication tool to help City staff picture what the harder-to-reach Springfield residents are dealing with day to day, and provide strategies for how to reach them. By understanding residents' needs, experiences, and behaviors, staff can create more effective, accessible information for the public.



Patricia



Late-70's older adult with mobility issues

"I appreciate when someone checks in with me to see how I'm doing--it shows they care."

BACKGROUND

Patricia is a retired school teacher who suffers from COPD. She lives alone in the Upper Hill neighborhood in a house that she owns. Her family lives nearby and visit her often. She has a landline and just started learning how to send text messages on her flip phone.

CHALLENGES

- Isn't comfortable using the internet or computers
- Has difficulty walking/getting around
- Has become disconnected from her regular community since COVID

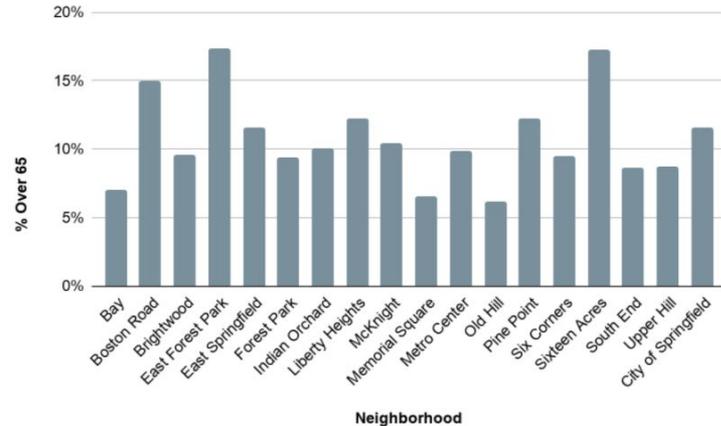
WHERE SHE GETS HER NEWS

- Point of View newspaper
- Channel 22
- Word of mouth from family and her friends at the senior center

ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HER

- Good Neighbors Program through Springfield College
- Church
- Meals on Wheels

% OVER 65 YEARS OLD*



* Data from U.S. Census' 2012-2016 American Community Survey, pulled from "Springfield and its Neighborhoods" Springfield Planning and Economic Development, 2019.



Mercedes



Early-30's single mom working multiple jobs

"I'm not even sure if my paychecks will cover food for the week, and you want me to think about something that might happen someday?"

BACKGROUND

Mercedes is a single mom holding down 2 low-paying jobs while caring for her 6-year old son. They live in a low-income apartment building in the North End and both struggle with asthma. She does everything on her smartphone and is often in the car going from job to errands to picking up her son.

CHALLENGES

- Always pressed for time and energy
- Has an unreliable car
- Relies on the food pantry at least once a month

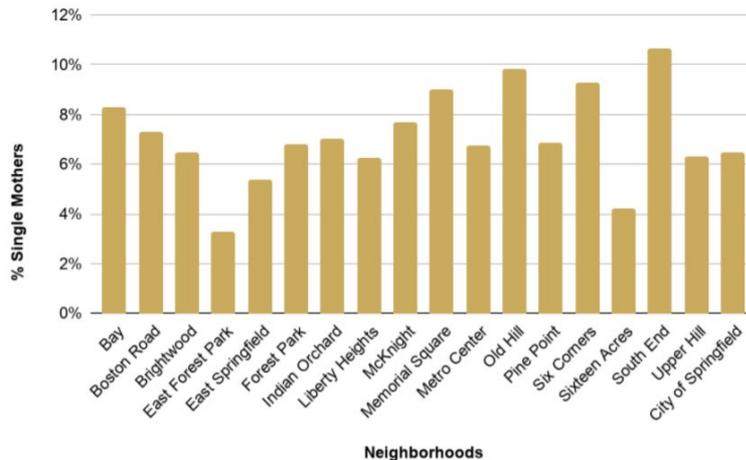
WHERE SHE GET HER NEWS

- Facebook
- Radio - La Voz

ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HER

- Church
- Grocery store
- Her son's school

% SINGLE MOTHERS*



* Data from U.S. Census' 2012-2016 American Community Survey, pulled from "Springfield and its Neighborhoods" Springfield Planning and Economic Development, 2019.



Luis



Mid-40's non-English speaking immigrant

"Quiero hacerlo bien aquí, pero es difícil navegar por el sistema."

BACKGROUND

Luis recently immigrated from Mexico and rents a small apartment in Metro Center. His building is not well-maintained because of an absentee landlord. He works in a restaurant and lives frugally so that he can send most of his earnings back to his family. He doesn't have a landline and his old android phone has limited data.

CHALLENGES

- Speaks very little English
- Limited literacy skills
- Doesn't own a car

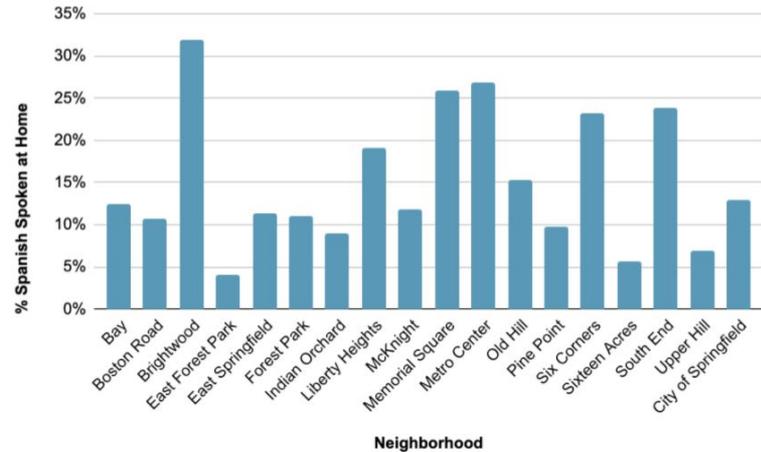
WHERE HE GETS HIS NEWS

- Pueblo Latino
- Word of mouth
- WSPR

ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HIM

- Bodegas
- At the restaurant where he works

% SPANISH SPOKEN AT HOME



* Data from U.S. Census' 2012-2016 American Community Survey, pulled from "Springfield and its Neighborhoods" Springfield Planning and Economic Development, 2019.



Terry



**Early-20's homeless
LGBT youth**

*"It just doesn't seem like
the city cares about us."*

BACKGROUND

Terry left a bad home environment and has experienced chronic homelessness for over 2 years. He struggles to get into shelters during bad weather and usually camps near the river. He avoids city officials because he's afraid they will make him move his tent.

CHALLENGES

- Camps near the river and is at risk if there's flooding
- Has difficulty receiving mail and no regular access to phone or internet

WHERE HE GETS HIS NEWS

- Word of mouth in the shelters or park
- Library to use the computer and wifi

ORGS/PLACES TO REACH HIM

- Soup kitchens
- Arise for Social Justice

HOMELESSNESS IN SPRINGFIELD

- As of 2017, HUD reported 2,311 people experiencing homelessness in Springfield
- Of these, 141 were youth under 25 years old



3. Network with other departments, community agencies, and residents to reach people you don't.

- Work across departments to reach people with relevant information.
- Establish a network of community partner organizations and key resident liaisons.
- Use community organizations to help you make information relevant to residents.

“

...we educate people on whatever we hear or whatever we're talking about. And it's hard for us, so I can just imagine in a system that people don't trust.”



Community partner



Sometimes it's who's the messenger, and explaining to folks — in language that makes sense for them — why this is important.”



Community partner



Start here

- Create a central database of people and organizations that residents trust. Use that network to reach residents.
- Use a combination of delivery methods to make sure that all residents have access to the information you're sharing.



Data collection for networking database

Here are some key fields to consider including in a networking database. Ideally, this database will be in a free, shared location that all departments can access and add to. We recommend setting up the database so that users can filter by:

- Neighborhood/s served
- Groups served
- Languages spoken

And here are a few free tools to consider using:

- [Google forms](#) are easy to set up for data collection, allow you to send a link for people to add their own information, and automatically export data into a Google sheet
 - [Airtable](#) allows you to set up a shared database (some features require a paid account)
 - [Google sheets](#) can be used to create a database
-



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Communication checklist

"When you're designing at the margins, everybody benefits, even the people closest to power - they'll have no issue. But when you're making decisions for the people closest to the power, it harms those farthest away, always does. So flip it around."

To reduce disparities and increase trust, communicate clearly and use a combination of delivery methods to reach more residents. Before you send out information for the public, run through this short list to make sure you're ready.

- **Have you included the right information?**
 - Who the information/service/resource is for
 - The benefits and any drawbacks
 - Any need-to-know details like deadlines
 - How people can get more information

- **Is the message clear and free of non-essential details?**

- **Does your distribution list include a wide range of individuals and organizations that work closely with different groups of residents, including:**
 - Older adults
 - People with disabilities
 - People who are homeless
 - People who don't speak English



Communication checklist



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4. Create and nurture a feedback loop to engage residents.

To increase City government's transparency and accountability:

- Give residents the opportunity to tell you what they need.
- Prioritize prompt communication with residents.
- When you prepare to launch an initiative, plan right from the start how and when you'll keep the public updated.



Strategy in action

As part of this project, we've learned several things about what residents want in an emergency system. At the same time, Springfield has been working to get a new system.

What we've heard from residents

What they want	A better emergency alert system that will reach everyone, including residents who are homebound or don't have a smartphone or internet connection
Functionality	Something similar to an Amber Alert that will interrupt all communications, including TV, radio, and smartphones
Rollout	They recommend testing the system as part of rolling it out so that people know what to expect

What's happening

Springfield is getting a new emergency alert system some time in 2021

Communication planning

- Announce that there will be a new emergency alert system soon
- Point out the benefits of the system, particularly the ones that residents have expressed interest in
- Keep residents informed of the timeline
- Share a testing plan with residents
- Test the system



CITY OF SPRINGFIELD, MA — 51

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- Point out the benefits of the system, particularly the ones that residents have expressed interest in
- Keep residents informed of the timeline
- Share a testing plan with residents
- Test the system
- Officially roll out the system
- Provide a way for people to ask questions and share feedback
- After the system is used, share how it worked and invite feedback



Choosing information delivery methods

Method	Best for	Barriers to access	Considerations
Email	Sharing information with departments and organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internet access or smartphone• English literacy	People get bombarded with emails and often get repeat information from more than one source. Unless you have an existing relationship with the person you're contacting, your email might not be read.
Website	Information necessary to take advantage of City services and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internet access or smartphone• English literacy	Users and staff find the current website difficult to search and use.
Social media	Short updates or promoting a resource or event	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internet access or smartphone• Some comfort with technology• English literacy	For many topics, you'll need to have a place to send people for more details.
Newspaper	Public relations — explanation of upcoming changes, information about political figures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasingly require internet access or smartphone• Cost	Articles are generally for people who want detailed information.



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5. Share knowledge to build on what works and learn from what doesn't.

Convene a communication team with staff from all departments.

The lack of coordination forces city staff to reinvent the wheel every time they have something to share with the public. By working together, departments can share lessons learned and build on what works.

This communication team could double as the implementation body for the recommendations in this report. At the onset, the team could include senior department staff to prioritize action items, identify opportunities to pilot new strategies, and share responsibility for progress.

To develop effective public information, the communication team will need a group of residents — **like the Resilient Springfield Advisory Council** — to provide regular input and feedback.



I don't want this to be a project where we're just doing it to do it, and there's not any follow up action to make a change. A lot of times I notice organizations start an alliance or project, and then it's like, that was a waste of time because there's no change...it's been done before, so are we really trying to figure out a way to bring change, or are we just collecting data/info that's just going to sit away in that binder over there, and then we're going to go onto the next project?"

Resident

“

This is a good first step in the right direction. If we can keep this dialogue going, people will feel much more confident on what the city has to offer. The confidence level is really low right now, when it comes to communities of color."

Resident

Thank you





The City of Springfield would like to thank all of our residents and partner organizations for their ongoing efforts to make our community stronger, including:

- **Arise for Social Justice**
- **Neighbor to Neighbor**
- **Pioneer Valley Planning Commission**
- **Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts**
- **Way Finders**