AT-RISK POPULATIONS eTOOL
**To Define, Locate, and Reach
Special, Vulnerable, and At-risk Populations
in an Emergency**

Diversity in the United States

U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that the United States was more racially and ethnically diverse in the year 2000 than in 1990. Communities throughout the country have experienced an increase from approximately one-fourth to one-third in their diverse racial and ethnic groups and this trend is expected to continue.

Much more than race and ethnicity contribute to diversity in the United States. Geographic location, nationality, citizenship status, gender, education, literacy, age, sexual orientation, political affiliation, socio-economic status, disabilities (physical, mental, cognitive, or sensory), language, religious or spiritual beliefs, cultural values, and health practices are among the many factors that contribute to the diversity of a community. Sometimes these factors generate communication barriers that create at-risk populations.

The public sector recognizes that communicating with at-risk populations in emergencies is critical. Communicating in a crisis is different from communicating when there is not an emergency. In an emergency, the urgency of the situation doesn't leave room for exploring options for message content or delivery mechanisms. Those options must be in place before the crisis occurs.

The usual professional channels – officials to media, media to the public – don't work in crises as well as they once did. A seismic shift has taken place: many people simply don't trust authority any more, and certain populations do not trust government authority at all.

Effectively reaching diverse populations requires communication through multiple channels. These channels of communication are especially important if the crises occur in conjunction with prolonged periods without electrical power. These channels will depend on relationships developed over time that are already well-established when the crisis occurs. A (COIN), built from trusted communication sources and channels, can be the lifeline to carry messages across communication barriers and provide the safety net to ensure that public health messages will reach at-risk population groups.

You need a strong understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and other characteristics of these communities in order to better address the communication barriers and preparedness planning challenges faced by at-risk populations.