



# Attorney General Raoul Calls On Federal Government To Expand Language For Severe Weather Emergency Alerts

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**CHICAGO** – Attorney General Kwame Raoul, alongside 15 attorneys general and New York City, today called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to expand language access for critical government alerts sent to cell phones, known as Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs).



In a comment letter, Raoul and the coalition acknowledge the important steps the FCC has taken to expand access to WEAs, but notes its proposal would require wireless companies to use machine translation rather than human translation for WEAs and would include translations for only 13 languages. Following multiple severe weather emergencies throughout Illinois and across the country, Raoul and the coalition urge the FCC to adopt its alternative proposal to use reliable human translators instead of machine translation, and to increase the number of available languages from 13 to at least 25.

“Earlier this month, severe storms caused significant damage when they swept across a number of Illinois communities. Now more than ever, emergency alerts are critical to the safety of people in our state and across the country,” Raoul said. “Whether it is a deadly tornado, severe thunderstorms or poor air quality, all residents should receive alerts in a language they will understand so they can quickly seek safety.”

The FCC proposes the use of machine translation applications on cell phones that would translate English WEAs to a user’s preferred language without any review by human translators. However, machine translations are not always reliable. A recent joint study by UCLA and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center found that the accuracy rate of machine translations from English varied widely for different languages, from 94% to as low as 55%.

During severe weather emergencies, which are increasingly fueled by climate change, current and accurate information can be critical to survival. Even a slim chance of error in translation could have severe consequences. Instead, Raoul and the coalition endorse the FCC’s alternative approach of using alert templates for various emergency situations. Those templates would be created by humans, pre-installed on cell phones, and activated when an English-language WEA is received by the phone.

If the FCC moves forward with its proposal to include only 13 languages, immigrant communities with high rates of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) would be excluded from WEAs. To reach more of these communities now and in the future, Raoul and the coalition recommend that WEAs be supported in all languages spoken by at least 300,000 people in the U.S. over five years old, with a total of more than 25 non-English languages. The coalition also urged the FCC to consider adding additional languages every few years based on the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data on spoken languages and LEP rates.

Joining Attorney General Raoul in filing these comments are the attorneys general of Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota,

New Jersey, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin and the city of New York.