

MEMORANDUM

To: Kathie Martin, SCV Water
From: Kearns & West
Re: SCV Water Communication and Engagement Gap Analysis
Research on Community Characteristics Assessment
Date: November 23, 2021

Introduction

SCV Water plays an essential role: providing water services to a population of 273,000 in the Santa Clarita Valley through 75,000 water service connections. By surveying the demographics and context of communities across the Service Area, the agency can continue to improve outreach and service to all customers.

This memo presents key findings from our community characteristic assessment as part of the Engagement and Communication Gap Analysis. This assessment is an important step in understanding potential barriers in, as well as opportunities to strengthen, communication and engagement between SCV Water and the residents of Santa Clarita Valley. Guidance from sources such as the American Water Works Association's *A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship* handbook and state agency guidance detailed in the "Existing Guidance and Practices" memo helped define what characteristics should be examined. As the AWWA handbook notes, "because communities are often organized around socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and language, understanding the locations of different groups of people can help a utility match communication and customer service resources to the right customers." The research summarized in this memo focuses on those characteristics, as well as age and access to the internet.

SCV Water knows that details matter. The research offered in this memo includes both 1) dispersed characteristics of all customers across the SCV Water Service Area as well as 2) concentrated characteristics visible on a smaller scale that could influence how individual neighborhoods, blocks, and households may access and engage with SCV Water. Data was reviewed and compiled from a wide array of scales, from county-wide (Los Angeles), to Census Tracts (each representing 1,000-8,000 people), down to Census Tract Block Groups (each representing 600-3,000 people).

This assessment aids the Communication and Engagement Gap Analysis by helping us 1) identify the information important in structuring community interviews, 2) highlight issues and opportunities to explore in conversation with community leaders, and 3) inform needs-finding conversations with SCV Water program managers. The findings described here, alongside insights from interviews, and research on the larger context of communication and engagement guidance and examples, will go on to inform the draft Board Resolution and outreach recommendations.

We focused on five main characteristics to better understand those served by SCV Water: Race and Ethnicity; Languages Spoken; Internet Access; Age; Disadvantaged Community Designation; Housing, and Socioeconomic Factors. These categories could influence the flow of communication between SCV Water and residents and are described in greater detail below.

Key Findings from the Assessment

Race and Ethnicity

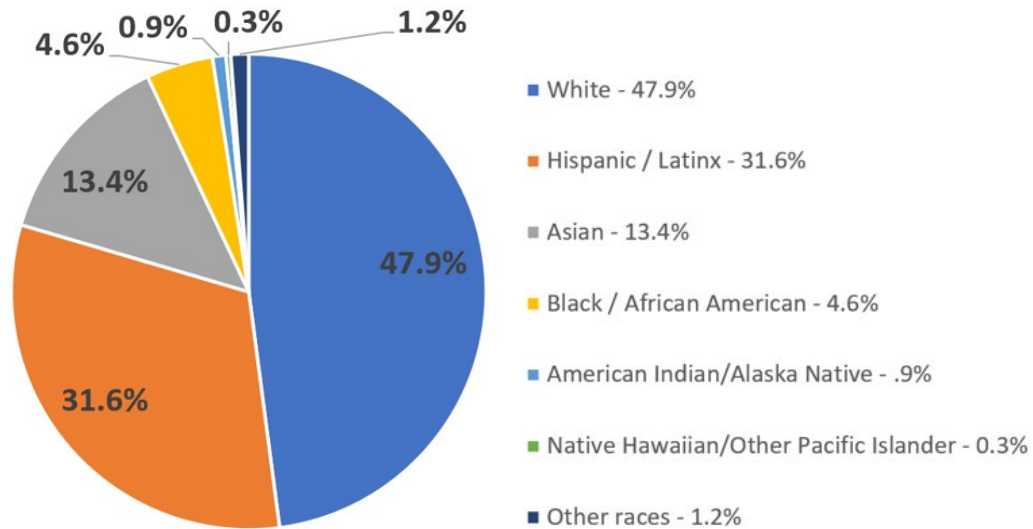
Over half of residents do not identify as white, signaling that there is a fair amount of diversity throughout the SCV Water Service Area.

The [California Water Board](#) found that race is the strongest predictor of water and sanitation access. Understanding the racial and ethnic make-up of the SCV Water Service Area is an important step in learning about the experiences of diverse customers.

The population in the SCV Water Service Area are racially diverse, even while being somewhat less diverse than surrounding areas. Customers come from a multitude of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The largest racial and ethnic group is white, reflecting about 47.9% of the population. This percentage of white to non-white residents in SCV Water is greater than the [California state average](#) (36%) and the Los Angeles County average (26%).

The second largest racial and ethnic group in SCV Water is Hispanic/Latinx, representing 31.6% of the population (compared to 39% for all of California and 49% for Los Angeles County). The third largest group is Asian, representing 13.4% of the population (compared to about 15% for both California and Los Angeles County). Details on other racial and ethnic groups are provided in the graph below.

Graph 1: SCV Residents by Race and Ethnicity



Racially diverse residents are found throughout the SCV Service Area, but some census tracts show that racial and ethnic groups are more concentrated. Indeed, there are seven census tracts in the Service Area where residents identifying as Hispanic and/or Latinx represent more than 50% of the total population. There are nine census tracts where residents identifying as Asian represent 20% or more of the population and there are eight census tracts where residents identifying as Black represent 7% or more of the population.

In the appendix are maps that show the racial and ethnic distribution of residents within each US Census Tract within the SCV Water Service Area.

Languages Spoken

A significant number of customers in the SCV Water Service Area speak Spanish and Asian / Pacific Islander languages.

According to [CalEPA](#) and the US Census Bureau, linguistic isolation (having at least some difficulty speaking English) among members of a community can limit access to information and public services and effective engagement in public processes. Understanding potential language barriers is an important factor for better understanding a community.

33% of all residents in the SCV Water Service Area speak languages other than, or in addition to, English. 5.5% of all 18+ residents do not speak English well or at all.

Spanish is the most widely spoken language, after English, in the SCV Water Service Area. 20% of all residents speak Spanish, making it a potential priority for increasing language access at SCV Water. About 20% of these Spanish speakers don't speak English well or at all.

After Spanish, Asian and Pacific Islander languages are the most widely spoken. 8% of all residents speak Asian and Pacific Islander languages. While this is a smaller percentage, it still represents a significant number of residents who may have more difficulty understanding materials in English. About 13% of these Asian and Pacific Islander language speakers don't speak English well or at all. The data available from the American Community Survey (Census Bureau) does not specify what these languages are; further community interviews will help identify what Asian and Pacific Islander languages are most prevalent.

5% of residents in the SCV Service Area speak Indo-European and other languages.

Internet Access

A fair number of SCV Water users do not have access to internet subscriptions, which could make online, web-based outreach more difficult and less accessible.

An estimated 5% of households do not have the internet at home (about 4,500 households), meaning that they have no access to an internet subscription (broadband or satellite) or a cell phone data plan. This severely limits how they may be able to access information about their water service and how they can engage with SCV Water.

An additional 6% of households only have access to the internet through their cellular data plans (about 4,900 households), which can put significant limits on how much residents of these households can view, download, stream, or otherwise access information online. Furthermore, an estimated 1% of households have access to the internet at home but not through a subscription, which may also pose limits to online access.

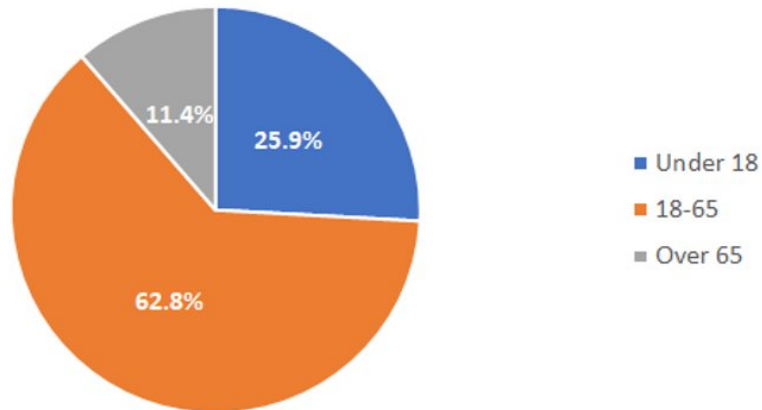
Age

There is a significant youth population in the SCV Water Service Area and a smaller elderly population.

Age is another factor that can shape a resident's potential vulnerability and that can influence what modes of communication are most effective in outreach. [The Center for Vulnerable Population Protection](#) identifies children and elders as more vulnerable due to their relative dependence on others for their care and services. Understanding the size of these populations can inform outreach.

About 63% of all residents in the SCV Water Service Area are between the ages of 18-65 years of age. About 26% of all residents are minors under 18. About 11% of all residents are over 65.

Graph 2: SCV Residents by Age



Some areas have a significant concentration of residents over 65 years of age, which may indicate that these are places to investigate further, particularly:

- Along the southern section of Highway 5 (34% of residents)
- Along Antelope Valley Freeway (33% of residents)
- Along Vasquez Canyon (20% of residents)
- Next to Central Park in Santa Clarita (20% of residents)

Disadvantaged community designation

Concentrated communities that meet the “Disadvantaged Community” designation are found in the SCV Water Service Area.

When looking at individual Census Block Groups, and the [DWR Disadvantaged Communities Mapping Tool](#), the SCV Water Service Area includes designated Disadvantaged Communities (Median Household Income between \$42,737 and \$56,982) and Severely Disadvantaged Communities (Median Household Income less than \$42,737). While the 2014 IRWMP update, [did not identify disadvantaged communities](#) in the Upper Santa Clara River IRWM, the latest iteration of the DWR Mapping Tool suggest that disadvantaged communities are indeed present in the SCV Water Service Area.

In the appendix is a map showing where these communities are located in the SCV Water Service Area. As one can note, there is significant overlap between these communities and those described above experiencing socioeconomic stressors.

Housing

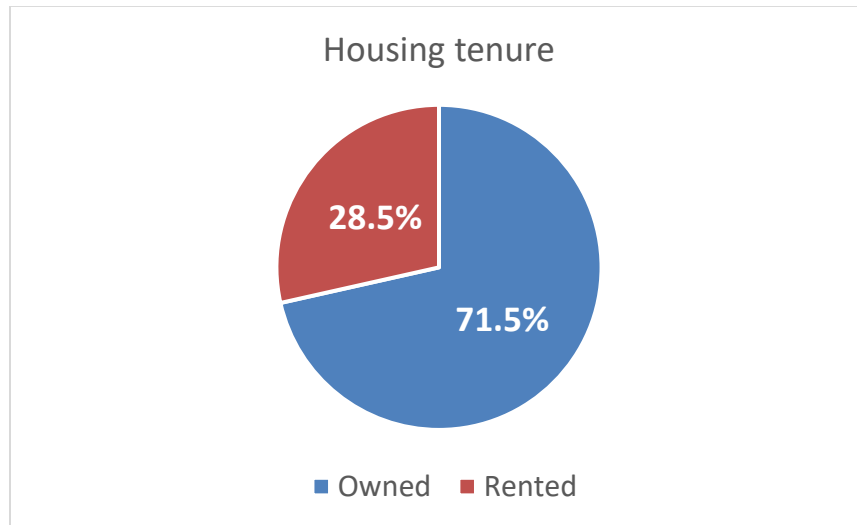
A majority of residents in the SCV Water Service Area live in owned, single-unit homes.

Understanding the housing experiences of residents provides a window into their lived realities and interactions with their water service delivery.

About 72% of households are owner-occupied in the SCV Water Service Area, while 21% of households are renter-occupied. Renters are more likely to be more distanced from their water service, as often their landlords are the direct water customers. Renter-occupied households make up 40% or more of all

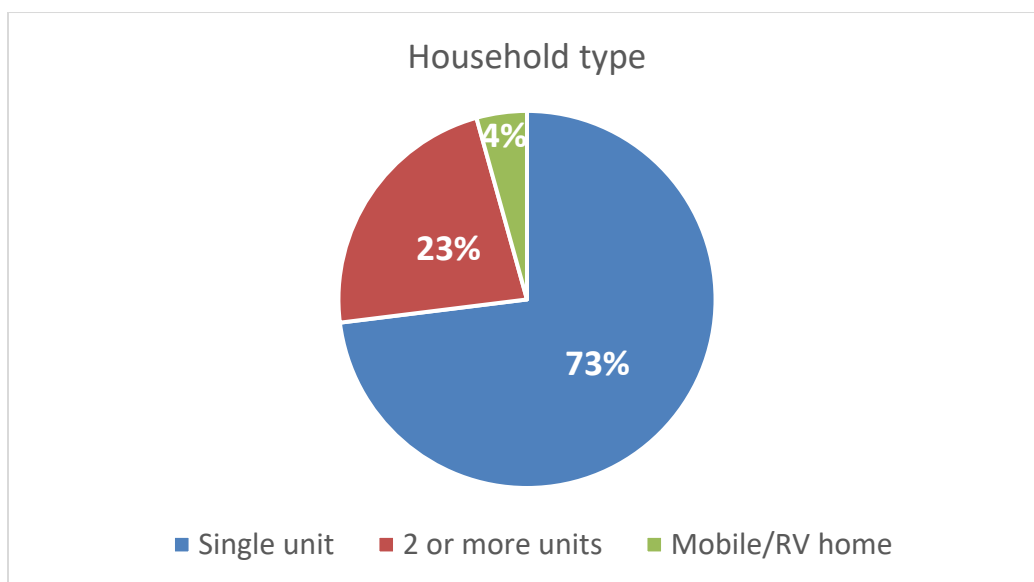
households in 14 census tracts, representing about 14,000 households. Renter-occupied households are especially concentrated around the following geographic areas:

- By Mint Canyon (73% of households)
- By downtown Newhall (72% of households)
- Between Soledad Canyon Rd, Sierra Hwy and Antelope Valley Fwy (69% of households)



73% of households are in single-unit homes, 23% are in homes within multi-unit structures (such as apartments, condos, or townhouses), and 4% are in mobile homes and other types of housing. In eleven census tracts, households in multi-unit structures make up 40% of all households. Households in multi-unit structures are especially prominent in some areas:

- Between Soledad Canyon Rd, Sierra Hwy and Antelope Valley Fwy (82% of households)
- By Mint Canyon (64% of households)
- By downtown Newhall (63% of households)
- By Valencia (56% of households)



Household size can greatly affect water bills. 34% of households in the SCV Water Service Area consist of four or more individuals living together. In some census tracts, this is as high as 57% of households:

- By Copper Hill and Entrada Norte (57% of households)
- By Val Verde (54% of households)
- By downtown Newhall (53% of households)

Overall, 8% of householders are over the age of 65 that live alone. Older individuals that live alone are often considered more vulnerable and harder-to-reach. In three census tracts, the percentage of householders over 65 living alone is greater than 20%:

- Between Golden Valley Rd and Sierra Hwy (34% of households)
- By Valencia and College of the Canyons (29% of households)
- Between Hwy 5 and Newhall Ave (20% of households)

Socioeconomic Factors

Residents in the SCV Water Service Area come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

The [CalEnviroScreen 4.0](#) from the CalEPA provides valuable data on socioeconomic factors across the state, such as poverty and unemployment, that greatly shape the experiences of communities, households, and individuals. Understanding these factors can help pinpoint opportunities to support these underserved residents through deeper outreach and help prioritize where and how outreach is conducted.

Poverty

About 18% of all residents in the SCV Water Service Area are impoverished, according to findings from the CalEnviroScreen 4.0. Impoverished is defined as those who live below two times (200%) the federal poverty level.¹ The 2021 [federal poverty level](#) is \$12,880 for an individual and \$26,500 for a family of four.

Residents experiencing poverty are particularly concentrated in some areas of the Service Area, especially:

- In downtown Newhall (57% of residents are experiencing poverty)
- Along Vasquez Canyon (50% of residents)
- Along Sierra Highway and Soledad Canyon Road (43% of residents)
- Along Newhall Creek (40% of residents)

Areas with a higher poverty concentration are notably also where residents are more likely to be non-white and Hispanic/Latino.

Housing burden

About 15% of households in the SCV Water Service Area are experiencing a housing burden. Housing burden is an important factor of community well-being as it indicates who may be more vulnerable to unanticipated changes such as utility cost increases and/or service disruptions. The number of households experiencing a housing burden is defined as the number of households making less than 80% of the Area Median Family Income and who pay more than 50% of their monthly income on housing costs.

Residents experiencing a housing burden, like those experiencing poverty, are particularly concentrated in some areas of the Service Area:

- Along Newhall Creek (30% of households)

¹ As a note: CalEnviroScreen 4.0 uses two times the federal poverty level as the threshold for their Poverty score given that 1) California's costs of living are higher than other parts of the county and 2) methods used to determine federal poverty thresholds are outdated.

- In downtown Newhall (29% of residents are experiencing poverty)
- Along Soledad Canyon Road (27% of residents)
- Along the northern section of the Sierra Highway (26% of residents)

Educational attainment

Overall, about 9% of residents over 25 years old have less than a high school education in the SCV Water Service Area. Educational attainment is an indicator of future earning potential and is associated with lower exposures to environmental pollutants, which can impact overall health and well-being.

In some areas of the Service Area, the percentage of residents with a lower educational attainment is much higher, particularly:

- In downtown Newhall (41% of qualifying residents)
- Along Newhall Creek (34% of qualifying residents)

Unemployment

About 5% of residents who are over 16 years old and are eligible to work are unemployed in the Service Area. This matches the California average for unemployment, which is also 5% of qualifying residents. The unemployment percentage does not include retirees, students, homemakers, institutionalized persons except prisoners, those not looking for work, and military personnel on active duty.

However, in some areas of the Service Area, residents are experiencing unemployment at very high rates compared to the rest of the state, particularly:

- Along the northern section of the Sierra Highway (14% of qualifying residents, which reflects a higher unemployment than 95% of all census tracts in California)
- Along the Santa Clara River and Soledad Canyon Road (6-12% of qualifying residents)
- Around downtown Newhall (6-8% of qualifying residents)

Next steps

The Community Characteristics Assessment outlines some of the potential factors that shape the lives and experiences of residents in the SCV Water Service Area. This information provides useful direction on potential geographic areas and relevant topics where we can focus during initial outreach and conversations. Kearns & West will next develop an interview guide to structure these conversations and compile a list of potential community leaders to speak with.

It will be important to speak with community leaders who can contextualize and “ground-truth” these characteristics, and others, to offer a more detailed window into community and resident experiences in SCV Water’s Service Area. These discussions help us better understand community needs, priorities, and interests and opportunities to strengthen communication and engagement between SCV Water and its customers.

Sources

Data Sources

We brought together an array of data sources to complete the community characteristic research. These resources are listed below by each Community Characteristic profiled in this assessment.

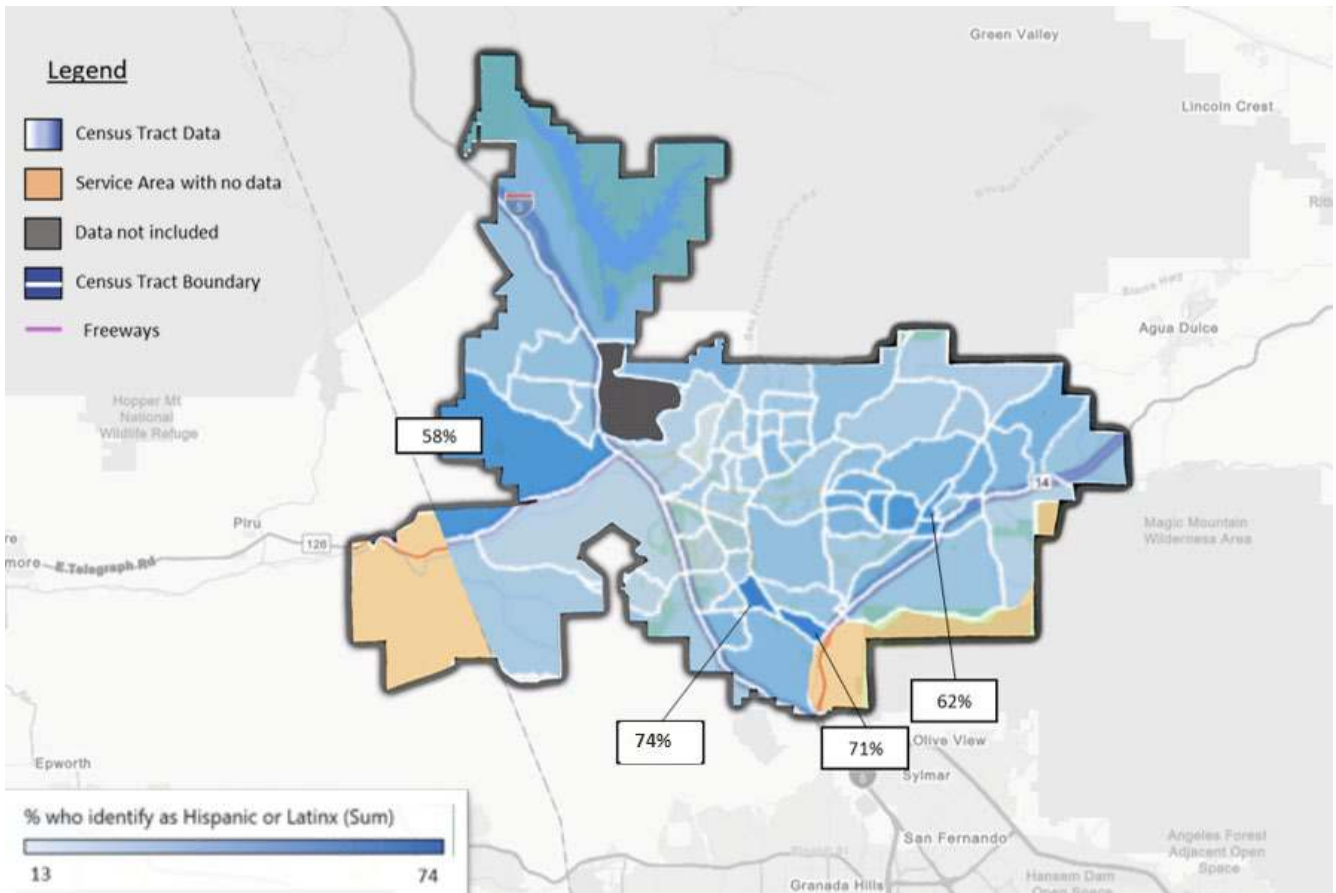
- *Race and Ethnicity*
 - [Hispanic or Latinx Data](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
 - [Race and Ethnicity Data](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
 - [Drinking Water Tool](#), Community Water Center
- Languages Spoken
 - [Languages Spoken at Home Data](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
- Internet and Computer Access
 - [Presence and Types of Internet Subscriptions in Household](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
 - [Internet and other stats report](#) by William Hart Unified School District
- Age
 - [Age and Sex](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
 - [Santa Clarita Data Assessment Report](#), SCAG
- Disadvantaged Community Status
 - [Disadvantaged Communities Mapping Tool](#) - DWR
- Housing Data
 - [Occupancy Characteristics](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
 - [Households and Families](#) – American Community Survey, US Census
- Socioeconomic Factors
 - [Map Tool; Report](#) – CalEnviroScreen 4.0, OEHHA CalEPA
 - [Drinking Water Tool](#), Community Water Center
 - [2021 Poverty Guidelines](#) - ASPE
 - *Weighted averages were used to calculate the overall percentage of residents/households experiencing each socioeconomic factor in the SCV Water Service Area*
- Additional references
 - [Santa Clarita General Plan](#)
 - [Santa Clarita Housing Element Update 2021-2029](#)
 - [Los Angeles County General Plan](#)
 - [Los Angeles County Community Action Plan](#)
 - [A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship](#)

Methodology

Overarching percentages for the SCV Water Service Area were developed using weighted averages by population from each Census Tract or Census Block Group.

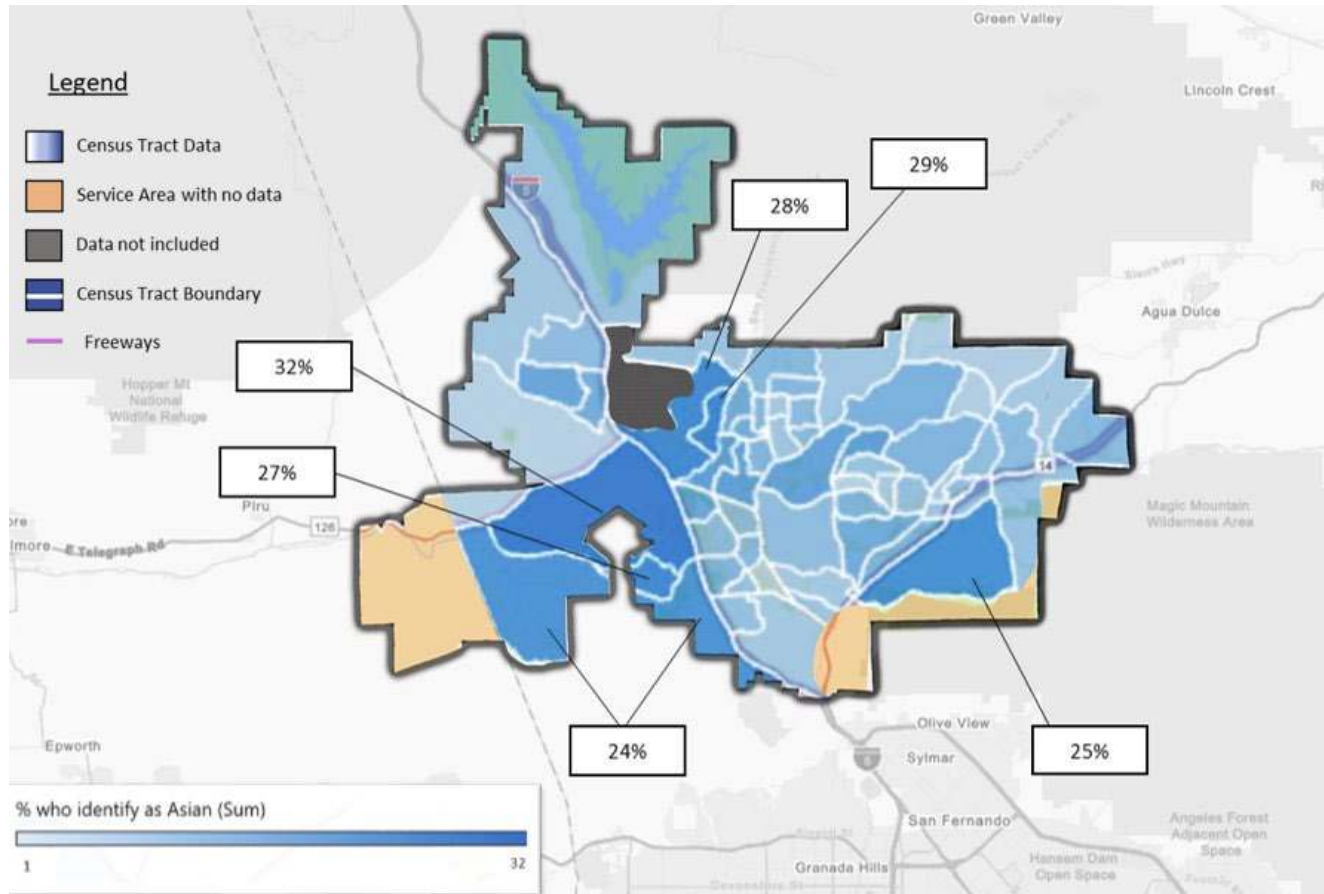
Appendix

RACE & ETHNICITY – HISPANIC/LATINX IDENTIFYING



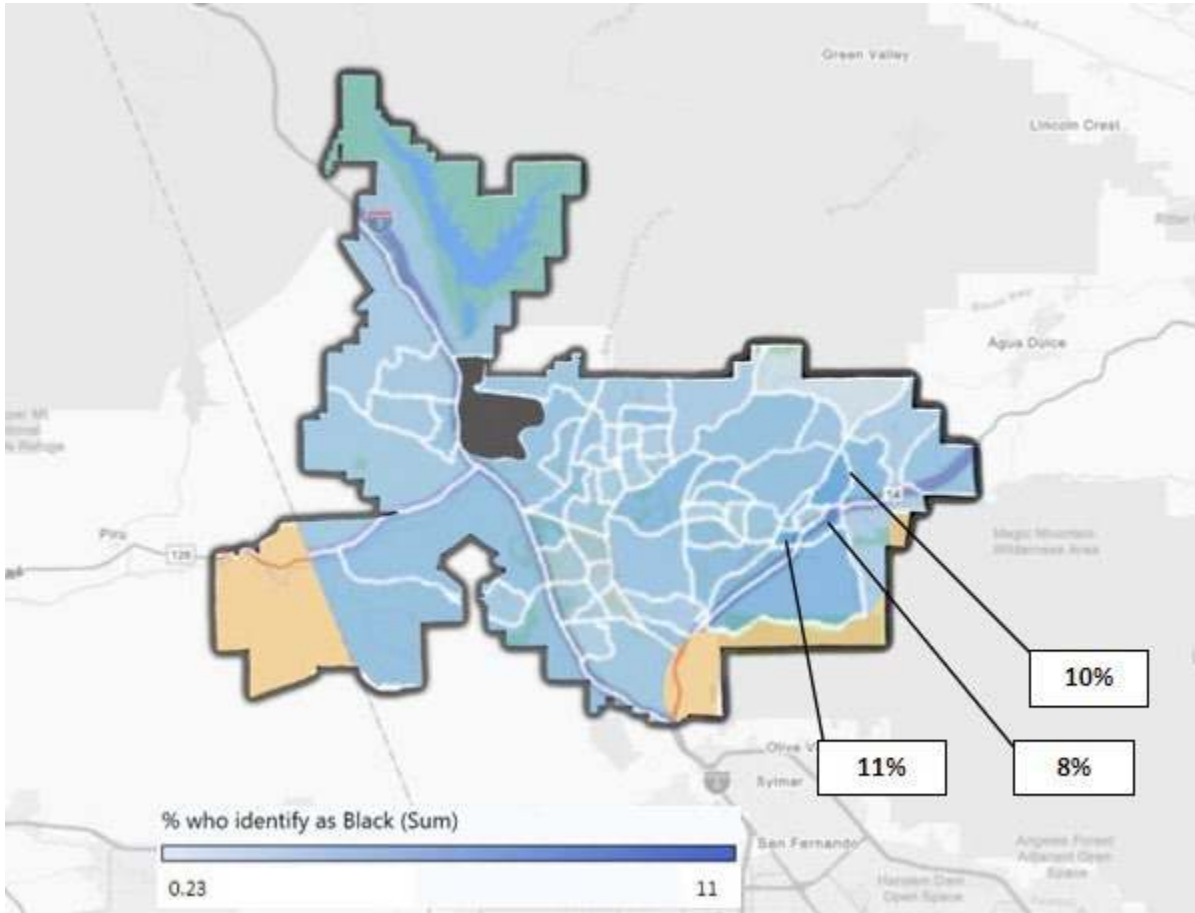
Census Tract	% of residents who identify as Hispanic/Latinx
920336	74%
920337	71%
920038	62%
920106	58%
920037	57%

RACE & ETHNICITY – ASIAN IDENTIFYING



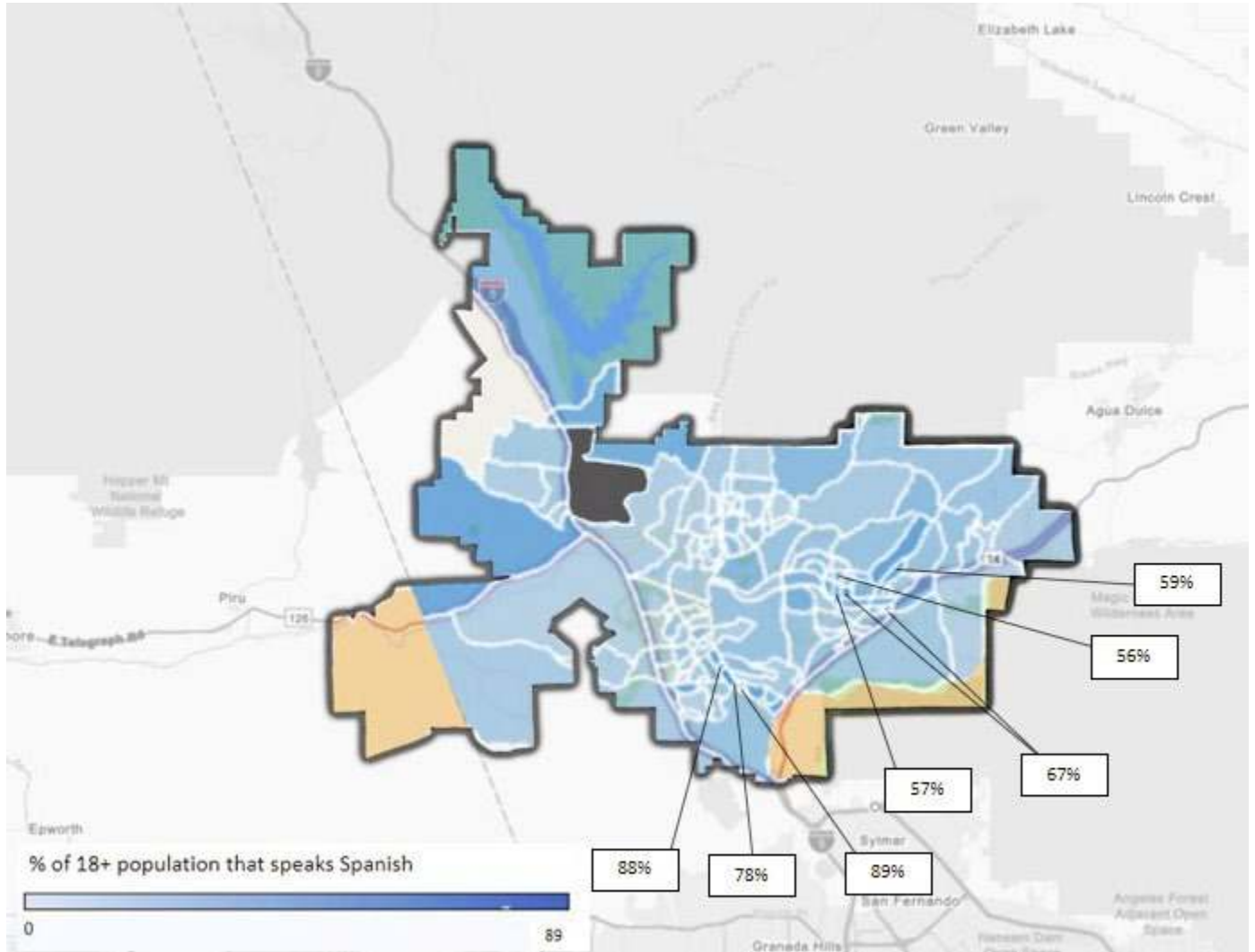
Census Tract	% of residents who identify as Asian
920339	32%
920108	29%
920107	27%
920338	27%
920043	25%

RACE & ETHNICITY – AFRICAN AMERICAN / BLACK IDENTIFYING



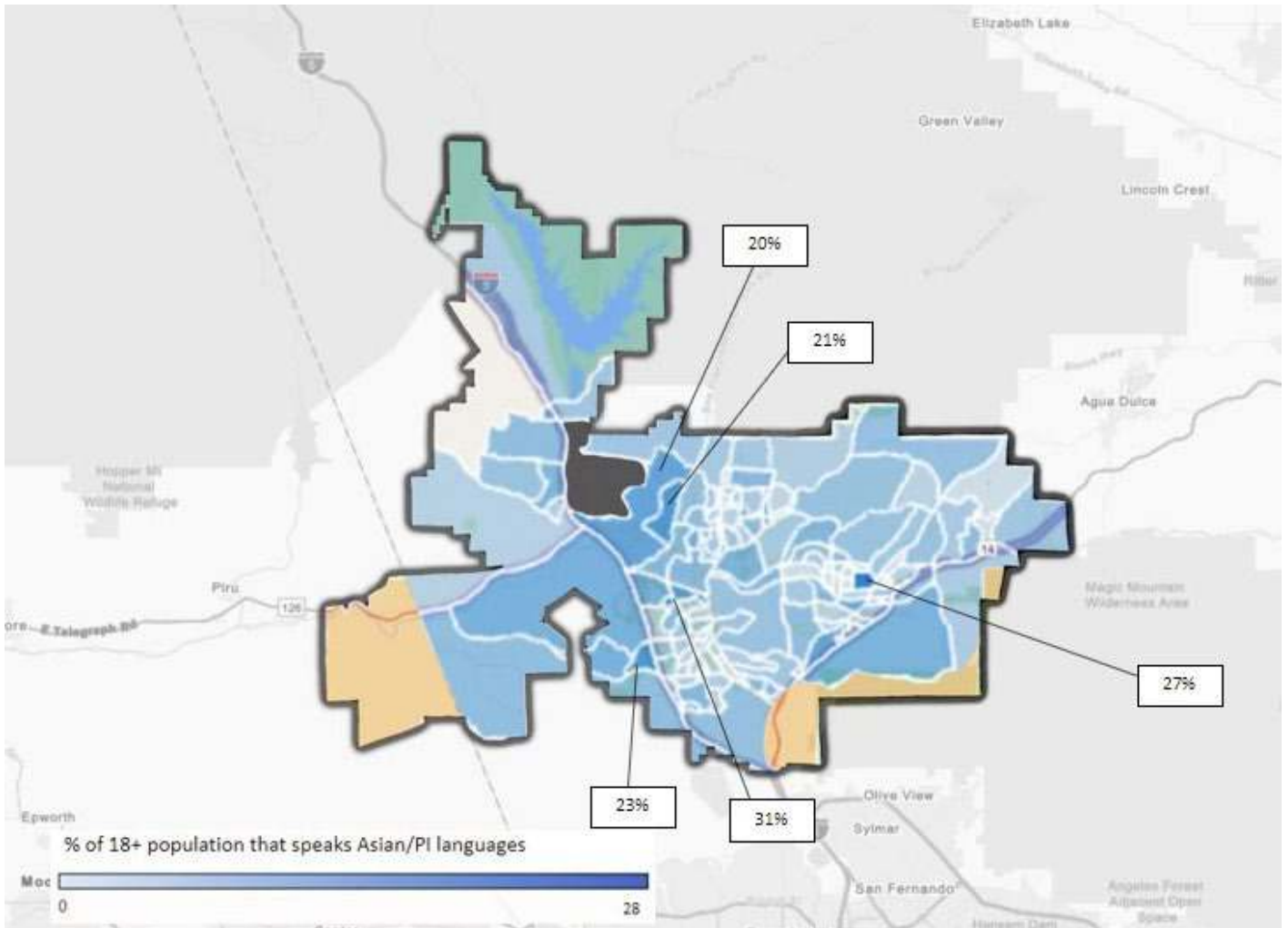
Census Tract	% of residents who identify as African American / Black
920037	11%
920040	10%
920041	8%
920042	7%
920043	7%

LANGUAGES SPOKEN – SPANISH SPEAKERS



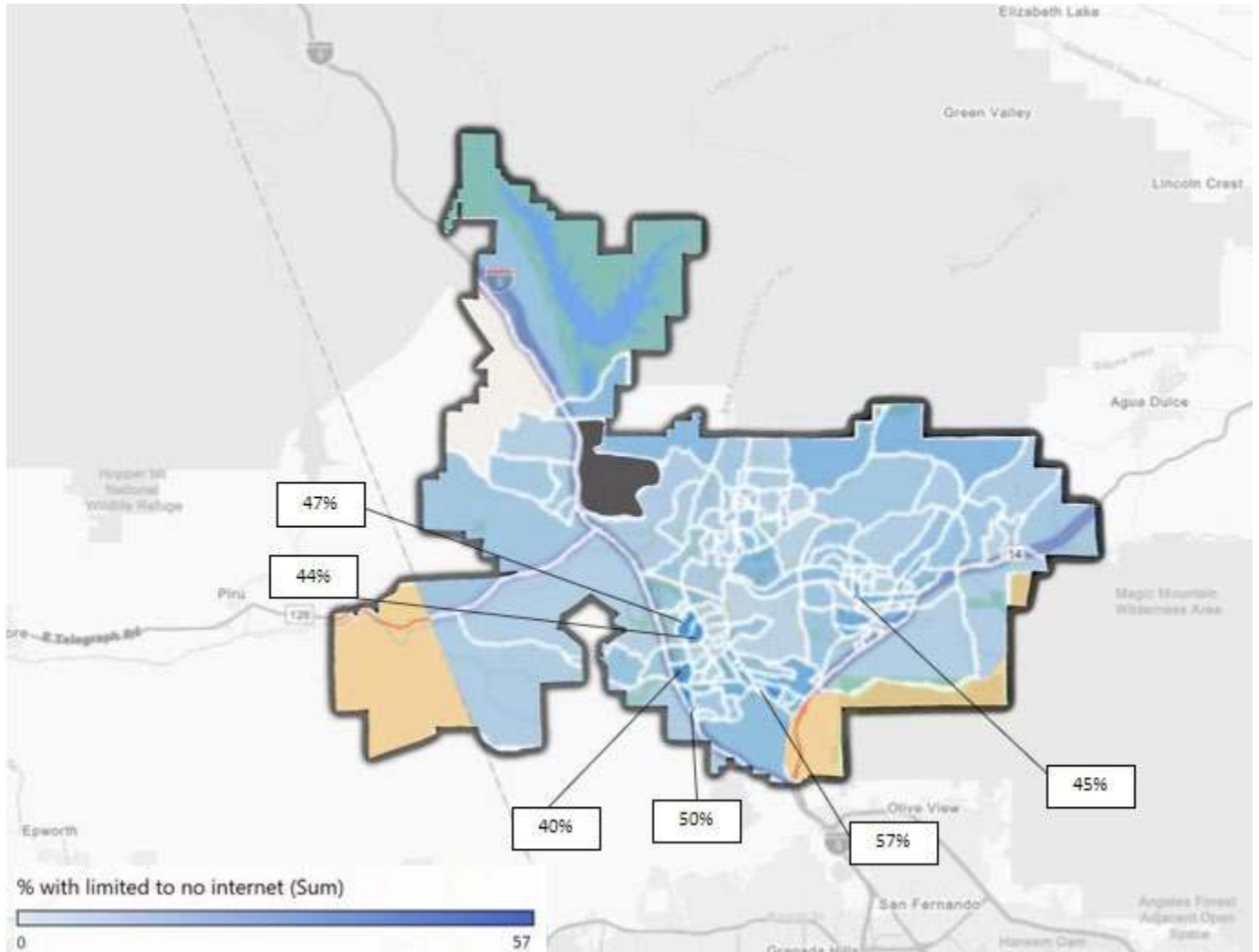
Block Groups	% of 18+ population that speaks Spanish
9203374	89%
9203363	88%
9203364	78%
9200372	67%
9200352	66%

LANGUAGES SPOKEN – ASIAN / PACIFIC ISLANDER LANGUAGE SPEAKERS



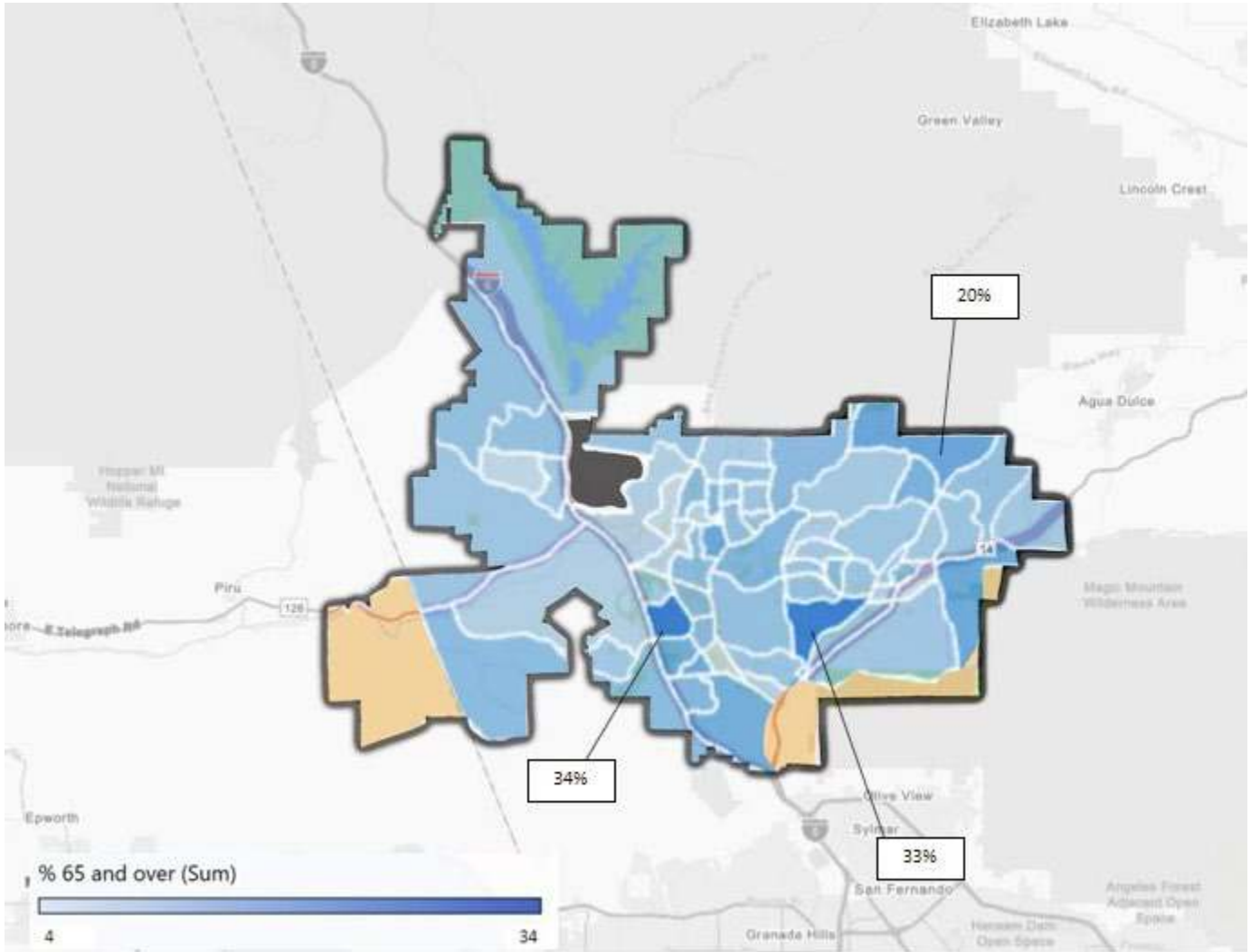
Census Block Groups	% of 18+ population that speaks Asian/PI Languages
9203301	38%
9200355	31%
9203261	23%
9201081	21%
9201071	20%

INTERNET ACCESS – LIMITED TO NO ACCESS



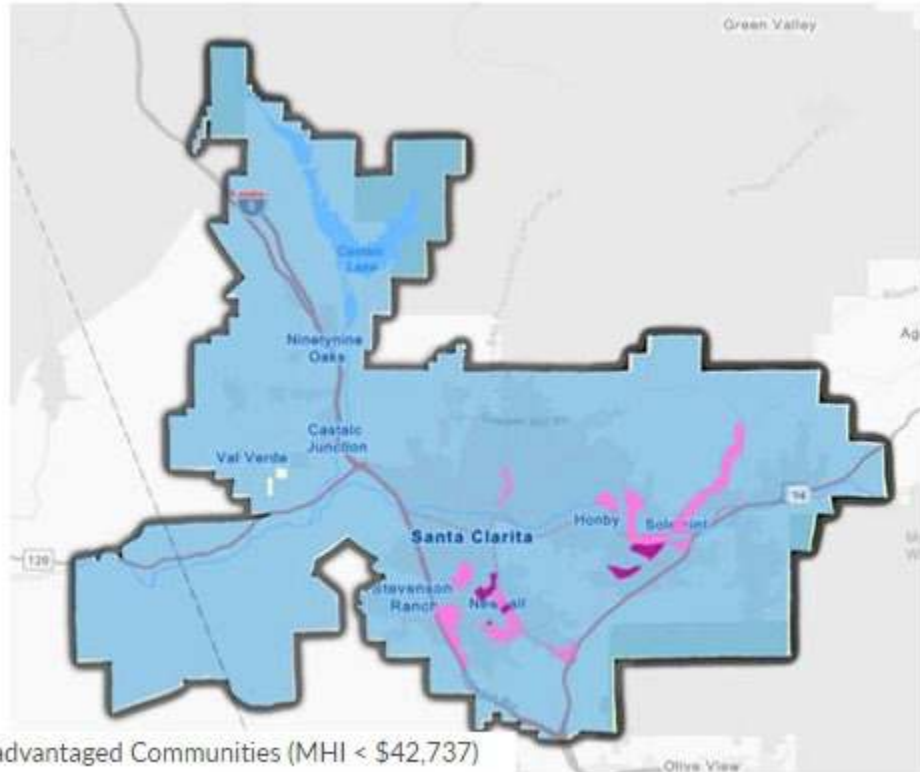
Census Block Groups	% households with limited subscriptions (no internet, limited, or just cell data)
9203374	57%
9203132	51%
9203303	47%
9200362	46%
9203304	44%

AGE – 65 AND OLDER



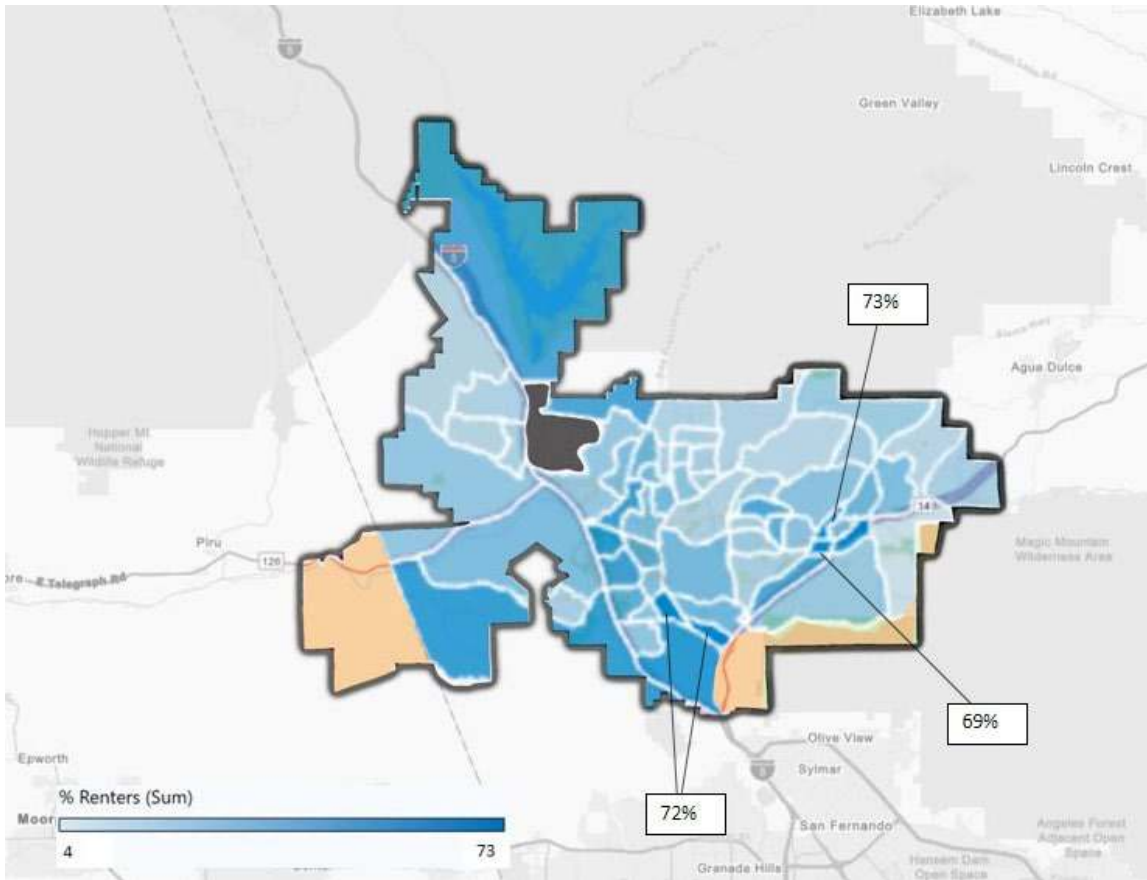
Census Tracts	% residents 65 and older
920330	34%
920031	33%
920026	20%
920112	20%
910809	19%

DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY DESIGNATION



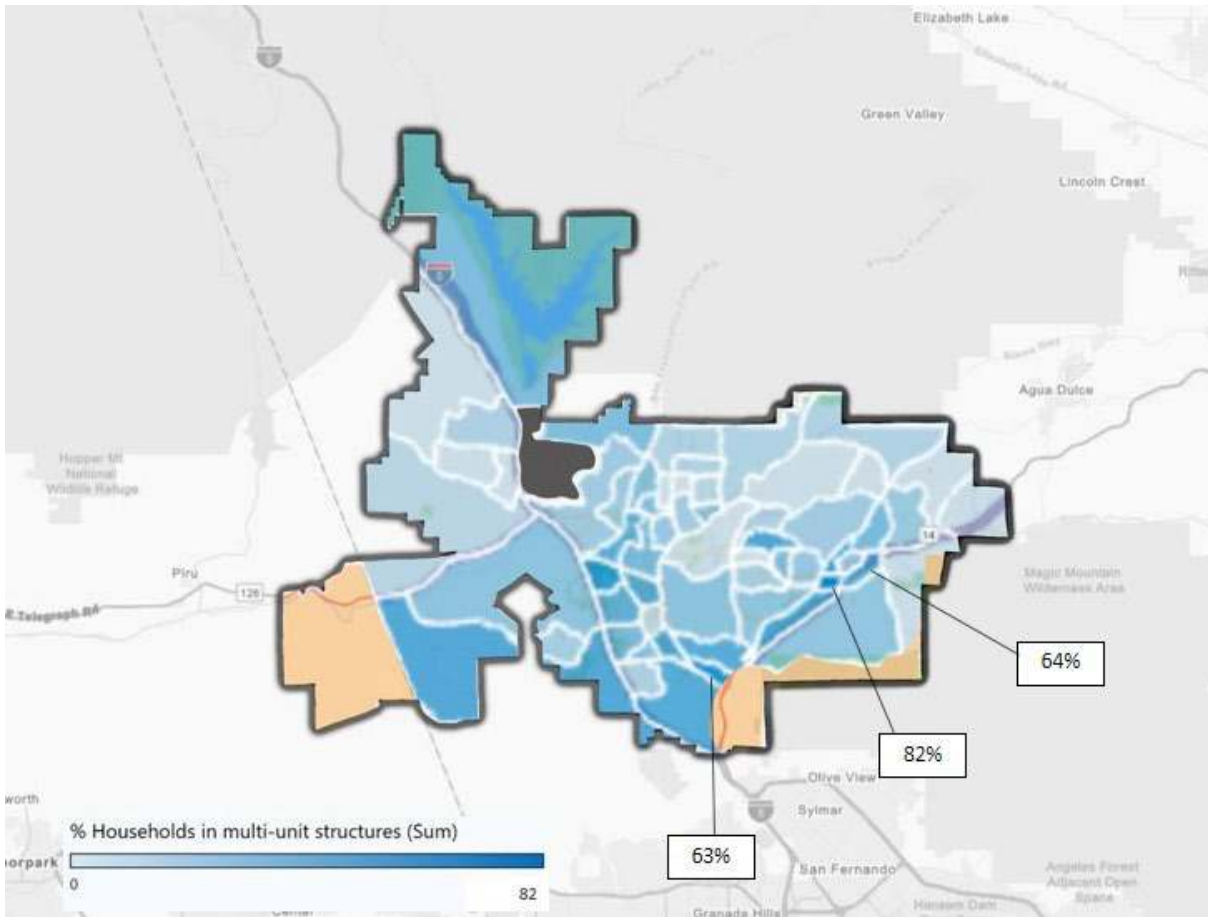
- Severely Disadvantaged Communities (MHI < \$42,737)
- Disadvantaged Communities ($\$42,737 \leq \text{MHI} < \$56,982$)

HOUSEHOLDS THAT ARE RENTED



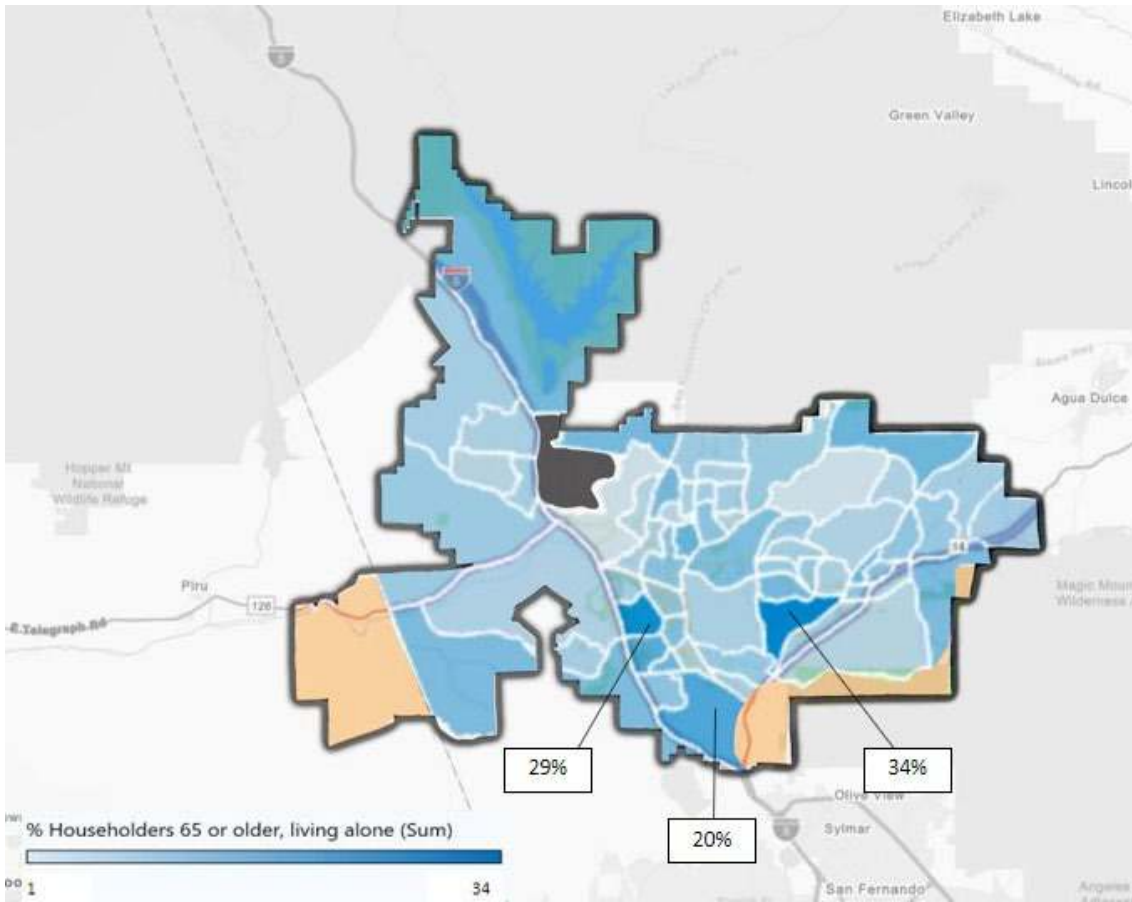
Census Tract	% of households that are rented
920038	73%
920337	72%
920336	72%
920037	69%
920041	60%

HOUSEHOLDS IN MULTI-UNIT STRUCTURES



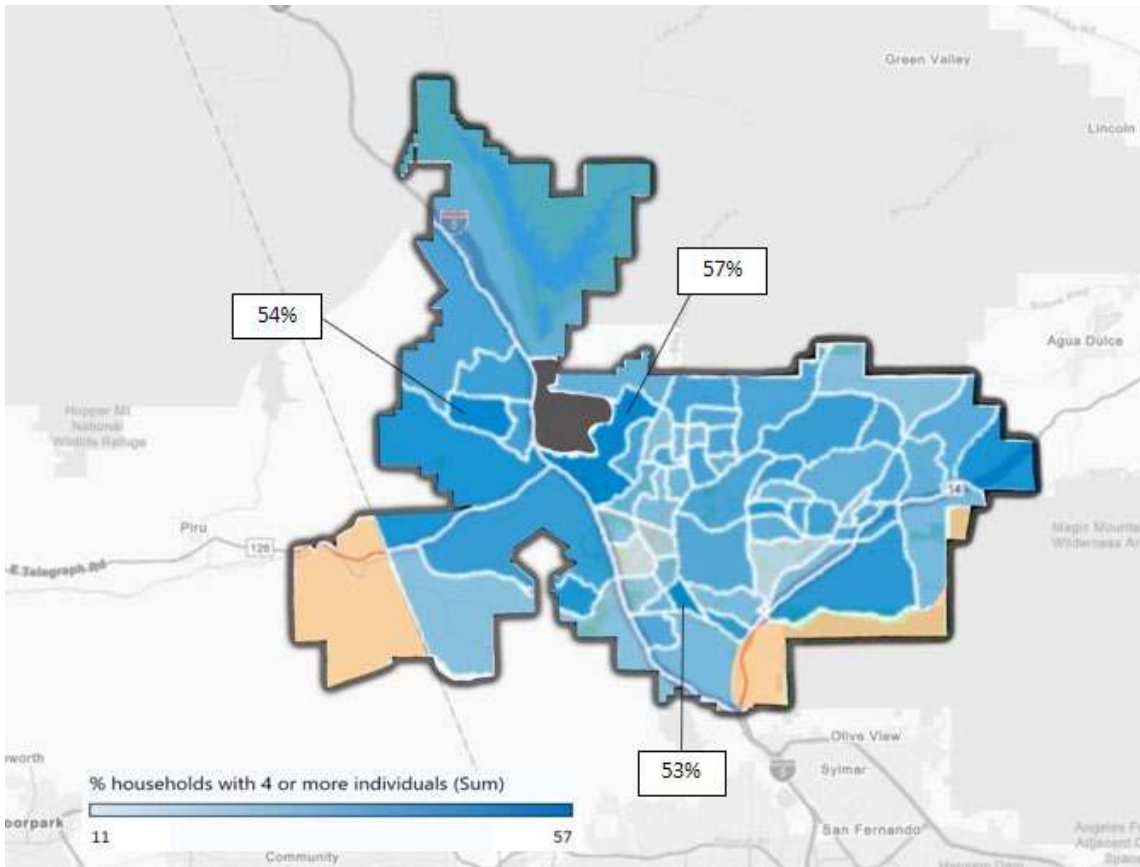
Census Tract	% of households in multi-unit structures
920037	82%
920038	64%
920337	63%
920328	56%
920042	48%

HOUSEHOLDERS 65 AND OLDER LIVING ALONE



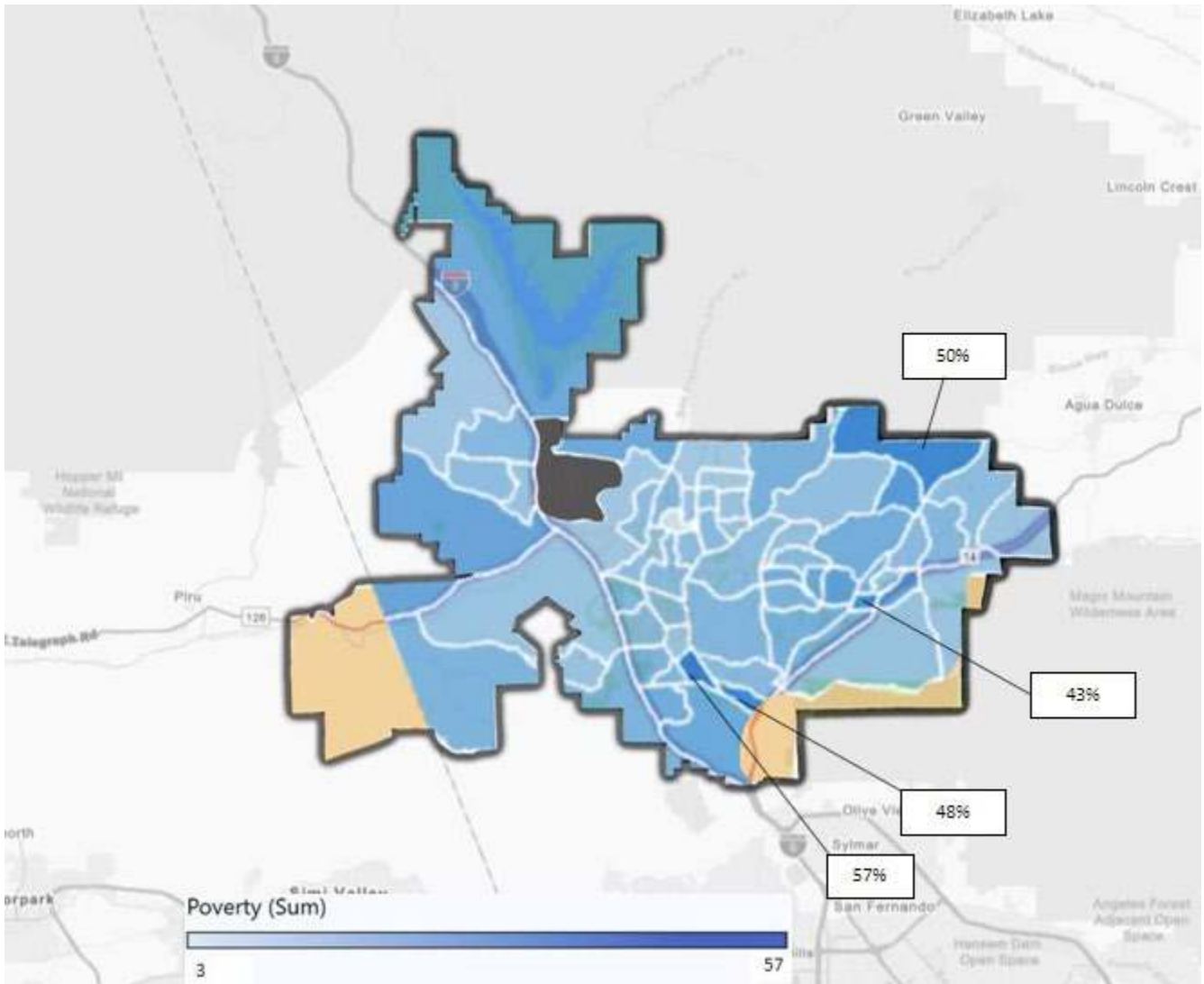
Census Tract	% of householders who are 65 and older living alone
920031	34%
920330	29%
920312	20%
920334	18%
920038	15%

HOUSEHOLDS WITH 4 OR MORE INDIVIDUALS



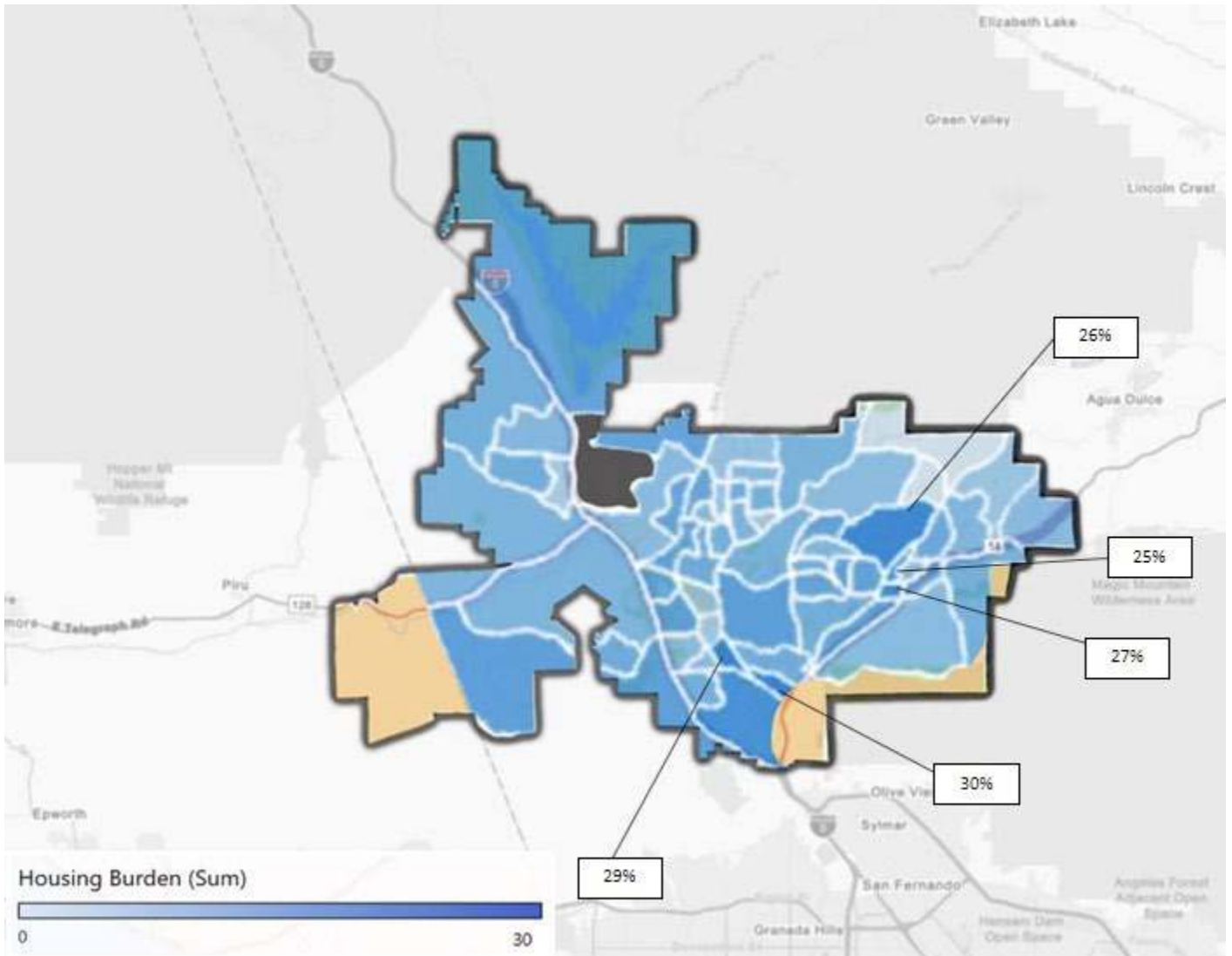
Census Tract	% of households with 4 or more individuals
920107	57%
920119	54%
920336	53%
910810	48%
920023	47%

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS: POVERTY



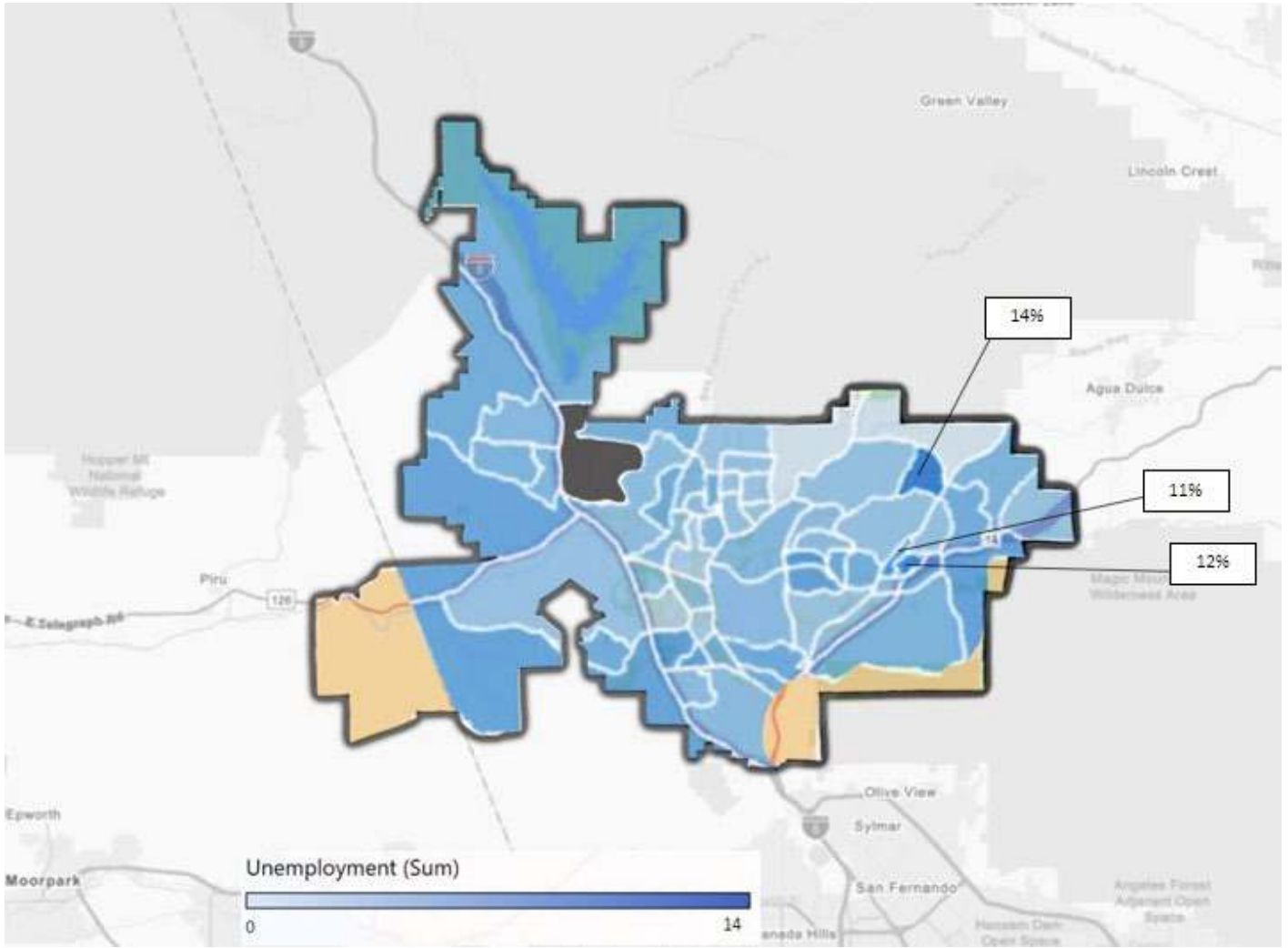
Census Tract	% of residents experiencing poverty
920336	57%
920026	50%
920337	48%
920037	43%
920033	35%

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS: HOUSING BURDEN



Census Tract	% of residents experiencing a housing burden
920337	30%
920336	29%
920037	27%
920034	26%
920038	25%

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS: UNEMPLOYMENT



Census Tract	% of residents experiencing unemployment
920033	14%
920039	12%
920038	11%
920023	9%

MEMORANDUM

To: Kathie Martin, SCV Water

From: Kearns & West

Re: SCV Water Communication and Engagement Gap Analysis – Research on Existing Guidance and Practices for Water Agency Communication and Engagement

Date: November 16, 2021

Introduction

Kearns & West is conducting an assessment to identify potential gaps in SCV Water's communication and engagement efforts with customers in the Santa Clarita Valley and identify additional communication strategies where needed. The results of this research will inform conversations with SCV Water staff members and local community leaders to identify potential gaps in communication and engagement and community needs, priorities, and interests. This memo documents the results of one of the initial assessment steps: conducting desk research to document examples of guidance and practices employed by other water agencies.

The research included reviewing:

- *Guidance from regulatory agencies, water agency member organizations, and planning documents, on communication, engagement, equitable service delivery, and the designation of specific communities.* This included sources such as Department of Water Resources (DWR) guidance for involving disadvantaged communities, State Water Resources Control Board (California Water Board) resolutions, Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) plans, and American Water Works Association (AWWA) documents on community stewardship.
- *Implementation examples and practices from other water agencies* for how they've approached communication, engagement, equitable service delivery, and work with their diverse communities. Research initially focused on Southern California water districts of similar size and demographic compositions as SCV Water. Some examples were found, but in order to find more illustrative and varied examples, the search was widened to examine other water agency practices outside of Southern California.

The guidance and examples presented in this memo should not be read as recommendations: they were taken from many different contexts, and all may not be appropriate for SCV Water. The next steps of the assessment are designed to learn more about the communities in SCV Water's service area and SCV Water's communication and engagement needs. Identifying areas of convergence between the local context the broader snapshot presented in this memo will be an important part of determining appropriate and feasible initial recommendations for communication and engagement actions.

Examples of guidance are organized around three categories of effective communication practices across diverse service areas:

1. **Understand the needs, priorities, and goals of diverse communities in the service area.**
2. **Increase community awareness of issues and opportunities that may affect their service**, especially with those communities that are more vulnerable and harder to reach.
3. **Meaningfully involve residents in agency decision-making around planning, management, and operations.**

1. Understanding the needs, priorities, and goals of diverse communities in the service area.

Communication and engagement efforts can help an agency better understand the needs, priorities, and interests of diverse communities in their service area.¹ By hearing from businesses and residential customers through direct feedback, surveys, in-person events, social media, relationships with community groups, and other mediums, an agency can learn more about its customers. Understanding more about residents will help an agency assess 1) factors that contribute to customer satisfaction, 2) potential co-benefits that new projects could provide, 3) negative project impacts that could be mitigated, and 4) any potential barriers to equitable service delivery.

It is especially valuable for agencies to understand the experiences of residents in communities of color, communities that speak languages other than English, low-income communities, Tribal Nations, and otherwise disadvantaged communities. According to [AWWA](#), these kinds of communities are more likely to be underrepresented in traditional agency outreach and are more likely to face barriers to equitable service delivery — all while bearing the brunt of historic discriminatory land use and zoning practices.² Across the state, the access and quality of water services residents receive are greatly predicted by their race, socioeconomic status, existing pollution burdens, and other compounding factors. Indeed, the [California Water Board](#) found that race is the strongest predictor of water and sanitation access; they call on water agencies to better understand the experiences of communities of color in their service area.³ More on how these communities are designated and defined is provided under guidance and in the Appendix.

SCV Water knows that the distinct voices, interests, and knowledge of its residents are important, and has employed methods of learning through stakeholder assessments and listening sessions about recycled water planning. Guidance further supports deepening communication and engagement so agencies can better understand and support diverse communities in their service area.

Guidance:

- **Understand community socio-demographics to better identify disadvantaged communities that may face service issues.** The [Department of Water Resources](#) (DWR) and [CalEPA](#) provide specific guidance on how to identify and define priority communities to work with. The term “disadvantaged community” is often used. These definitions are provided in the Appendix. DWR provides guidance on how to identify disadvantaged communities within IRWM Plans and work alongside representatives from these communities through the [Disadvantaged Community Involvement Program](#).⁴
- **Uncover racial inequities in service areas and then work to address these inequities.** The California Water Board’s [Racial Equity Resolution](#) specifically highlights the need to understand racial inequities in service

¹ American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

² American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

³ California Water Board, [Racial Equity Resolution](#), 2020

⁴ California DWR, [DAC Involvement Program](#), 2021; 2019 IRWM Grant Program Guidelines, 2019

delivery. The Board outlines actions it will take through funding and programmatic design to support efforts that address racial inequities in service delivery, it also calls on local water agencies to follow suit by identifying opportunities in their service areas to address inequitable service delivery with their residents.⁵

- **Conduct stakeholder assessments, invest in local relationships, and create more touch points to learn about customer needs in an ongoing way.** [AWWA](#) provides useful Assessment Checklists to help agencies account for the needs of communities, especially those that may be left out or left behind in traditional outreach, or in ongoing planning. These checklists can serve as guideposts to identify gaps in communication and engagement.⁶

Water Agency and District Examples:

- **Prioritize understanding, reaching, and engaging disadvantaged and otherwise underserved communities.** The Santa Clara Valley Water District developed an [Office of Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) to specifically support outreach and engagement with communities of color, disadvantaged communities, and others.⁷ This office has helped improve community relations and help the district better understand gaps experienced by residents in an ongoing, focused way.
- **Use engagement and relationships with local organizations to better understand resident experiences.** The Parajo Valley Water Management Agency [built a relationship](#) with the local stakeholder group, Community Water Dialogue, that later allowed them a critical access point to customers that had been hard to reach. Community Water Dialogue let the Agency participate in their regularly hosted community meetings, where they were able to learn about resident experiences directly, without an inconvenience to the residents (e.g., ask more of their time by asking them to share their experiences at a separately organized forum).⁸
- **Finding opportunities to work specifically with disadvantaged communities can unlock new funding opportunities.** New projects that specifically identify and address needs with disadvantaged communities may be eligible for funding support from the state and federal funding allocations, like the [Eastern Municipal Water District](#) that received \$3.5M in July 2021.⁹
- **Invest internally as an agency in culturally responsive, Diversity Equity and Inclusion staff training.** [East Bay Municipal Utility District](#) realized that understanding the needs of their customers also required that their staff had better empathy tools to engage with, and understand, equity and the discrimination that may affect their customers. Through their Racial Equity and Justice Project and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Strategic Plan, they are leading a training program and values alignment project with district managers and supervisors.¹⁰ Seattle Public Utilities has done similarly through their [Social Equity Program](#), where they provide ongoing training that help employees assess how utility policies that may create challenges for some residents and make community outreach more inclusive.¹¹

2. Increase community awareness of issues and opportunities that may affect their service

Agency communication can help residents be better prepared, informed, and satisfied water customers. Using

⁵ California Water Board, [Racial Equity Resolution](#), 2020

⁶ American Water Works Association, "[A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship](#)," 2019

⁷ Santa Clara Valley Water District, [Office of Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#), 2021

⁸ Community Water Center, "[SGMA Stakeholder Engagement](#)," 2015

⁹ Eastern Municipal Water District, "[Projects Receive Federal Funding](#)," 2021

¹⁰ East Bay MUD, "[Racial Equity and Justice Project and DEI Strategic Update](#)," 2021

¹¹ Seattle Public Utilities, [Service Equity Program](#), 2021 (and referenced in American Water Works Association, "[A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship](#)," 2019)

community meetings, PSAs, informational resources available online and mailed to households, trainings, and other means, an agency can share critical information to residents. Increasing community awareness through agency communications can help inform residents of 1) quality or supply disruptions, 2) assistance and customer programs that may benefit them, 3) water conservation efforts that may help them and their fellow water users, and 4) opportunities to reach the agency if they have concerns or questions.

Increasing community awareness is especially important for residents that are more vulnerable to service disruptions, are most likely to need customer programs, and are presently harder to reach. Outreach to harder-to-reach residents may require new modes of communication in order to meet them where they are (e.g., reaching elderly residents without internet access through in-person meetings at senior centers).

SCV Water is prioritizing opportunities to increase public awareness through its 5-Year Strategic Plan and is exploring ways to ensure customers are aware of its programs, up-to-date about water issues, and able to access materials in the languages they speak. Guidance from regulatory and planning bodies, as well as examples from other agencies, align with SCV Water’s existing work and offer new avenues that can deepen inclusive outreach.

Guidance:

- **Understand and identify hard-to-reach customers and develop reliable communication channels to them.** [California Public Utilities Commission](#) provides guidance on how to define hard-to-reach customers as those who do not have easy access to program information or generally do not participate in programs due to a combination of language, geography, income levels, housing types, and are designated by CalEPA as “disadvantaged.” Once these customers are identified, the Commission advises agencies to make additional efforts to reach these customers.
- **Develop quickly deployable public notification procedures in the languages used by residents.** The California Water Board developed the [Unsafe Water Notification Guidance](#), requiring that each public notice to residents in case of quality concerns must be available “in Spanish and in any language for each non-English speaking group that exceeds 1,000 residents or 10 percent of the residents in the community served, whichever is less.” Having resources available in languages that residents feel comfortable with, and sharing these far and wide, can help reduce language isolation and ensure more residents are aware of service disruptions.
- **Partner with social services and other utilities to reach more vulnerable residents.** The California Public Utilities Commission outlines action steps utilities can take to increase outreach and maximize the impact of customer programs in its updated [Environmental & Social Justice Action Plan](#). One action they advise utilities to take is to develop a Universal Application System to align on customer eligibility, streamline outreach, and increase program enrollment.¹² [AWWA](#) echoes this encouragement to water agencies, advising that they coordinate customer service programs with existing networks (e.g., social services) to help reduce confusion and better support communities that would benefit from these programs.¹³

Water Agency and District Examples:

- **Use communication forms that residents are most comfortable with; utilize existing networks into the community.** After residents, especially seniors and Spanish speakers, in the Turlock Irrigation District [received fake utility scam calls](#), the district sprang into action through a bilingual, multi-modal outreach program to notify residents of the issue. They reached out to senior organizations and the local Latino

¹² California Public Utilities Commission, “[Environmental & Social Justice Action Plan](#),” 2021

¹³ American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

Community Roundtable that hold vested, face-to-face relationships with residents to help with outreach. They also physically went to places where residents pay their bills like supermarkets and pharmacies to spread awareness. By going directly to residents, along with using traditional online communication tools (e.g., email, website notification, social media), the scam calls were quickly brought under control.¹⁴

- **Remove barriers for residents to access the agency and information the agency shares.** The Ramona Municipal Water District is [revising internal policies](#) to reach and inform residents with ease. They recently 1) moved meetings to after 6pm so working residents can attend to hear important updates and 2) delegated staff to build direct relationships with stakeholder groups that represent residents so information can be more easily shared (e.g., the school district, community planning group, chamber of commerce, and estates associate).¹⁵
- **Develop clear monitoring and evaluation metrics to track the effectiveness of outreach.** Santa Clara Valley Water District is [developing equitable engagement](#) strategies and has been asked by stakeholders to simultaneously develop clear metrics for how success will be monitored.¹⁶ The importance of ongoing monitoring is highlighted by [AWWA](#); one avenue to evaluate communication success is by disaggregating demographic and agency enrollment data to look for changes over time (e.g., to see how many residents in a given neighborhood are now enrolled in an assistance program after targeted communications on said program).¹⁷

3. Meaningfully engage residents in agency decision-making processes

[AWWA](#) defines community engagement as “the process of involving residents, businesses, and other stakeholders in decisions that have the potential to impact them.”¹⁸ Agencies can use communication and engagement to bring in voices that have been historically excluded from decision-making processes.

Meaningful involvement necessarily builds upon the first two goals of communication and engagement: an agency that 1) understands community needs, priorities, and interests and then 2) develops better pathways to communicate with communities will be better prepared to effectively engage communities in decision-making.

When residents are thoughtfully brought into agency decision-making it can help make service delivery more equitable. [AWWA](#) notes that when disadvantaged communities are closely involved in new projects, these projects are more likely to address persistent needs in this community and mitigate potential negative impacts that could affect them.¹⁹ While meaningful engagement often requires greater initial inputs of time and resources, this is paid back in long-term benefits to the agency and communities. Thoughtful community involvement can help 1) improve an agency’s planning, management, and operations, 2) build broader goodwill and support from community, and 3) reduce delays and costs caused by conflict.

More agencies are beginning to develop plans for *how* residents, especially those from disadvantaged and otherwise underserved communities, can be meaningfully involved in agency decision-making. This is led, in part, by [DWR](#) and the [California Water Board](#) calling on agencies to maximize the impact of stakeholder engagement.²⁰

SCV Water understands that meaningful community engagement can help shape programmatic work, like how the

¹⁴ Community Water Center, “[SGMA Stakeholder Engagement](#),” 2015

¹⁵ Ramona Municipal Water District, “[Improve transparency and community relations](#),” 2021

¹⁶ Santa Clara Valley Water District, [Public Meeting Notes](#), 2021

¹⁷ American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

¹⁸ American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

¹⁹ American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

²⁰ California DWR, “[Guidance Document on GSP Stakeholder Communication and Engagement](#),” 2018; Community Water Center, “,” 2015 [SGMA Stakeholder Engagement](#),” 2015

Disadvantaged Communities Involvement Program helped shape the [Upper Santa Clara River Watershed IRWM](#)²¹ and how disadvantaged communities were consulted in the [Santa Clarita Valley Groundwater Sustainability Plan](#). SCV Water has similarly seen the impact of community engagement as it prepared its Urban Water Master Plan, Water Shortage Contingency Plan, and Rate Case Planning. Guidance and examples below highlight opportunities to center designated communities in agency decision-making.

Guidance:

- **Develop relationships/partnerships with local groups and leaders to build trust and create inroads for communities to be involved in decision-making in an ongoing way.** [AWWA](#) highlights the importance of forming long-term, trusted relationships with local groups and leaders (e.g., social service agencies, environmental justice advocates, civic groups, etc.). Consistency is invaluable with such groups as this creates space for ongoing dialogue, deepens goodwill and trust, and can support better collaborative decision-making.²² When there are opportunities for local groups and leaders to be involved in decision-making, they will already be in the know and able to quickly and collectively jump in.
- **Create clear expectations for how decisions can be influenced by residents and the goals of engagement.** DWR, in its [Stakeholder Communication and Engagement Guidance](#), stresses that stakeholders must understand the role they are invested to play in an engagement well in advance.²³ Without this clarity, unmet expectations and misunderstandings could cause further tension. It encourages water agencies to reflect on the goals of engagement (i.e., to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower residents), communicate this clearly, and use appropriate techniques to help achieve these engagement goals.
- **Involve residents where it is the most mutually beneficial in agency functions.** There are targeted opportunities within each agency function where communities can be brought into decision-making. [AWWA](#) outlines community stewardship considerations for each agency function that could be starting places to involve communities in agency functions like “Project design” and “Construction and maintenance.”²⁴ See Table 1 in the Appendix for a complete list of these high-level opportunities.

Water Agency and District Examples:

- **Especially involve disadvantaged communities in new projects and capital improvement opportunities.** The [East Bay Municipal Utility District](#), through their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan, is working to understand equity issues in capital improvement projects and involve potentially impacted communities in new projects.²⁵ This work is helping ensure new projects specifically benefit, and do not negatively impact, already vulnerable communities.
- **Center leadership from disadvantaged communities in planning that will impact them and remove other barriers to access decision-making.** The County of Tulare [led a study](#) on the Tulare Lake Basin to inform a water quality and wastewater treatment program that would address ongoing needs of local disadvantaged communities. A 21-person Stakeholder Advisory Committee was formed with a provision that at least 8 of these members be from the affected, disadvantaged communities. To ensure more equitable participation on this Committee, outreach materials and meetings were offered in both English and Spanish and resources were shared online, in-person, and by phone. Members of the public can also attend the Committee meetings, creating greater decision-making accessibility.²⁶

²¹ USCR Watershed, [IRWM Plan](#), 2021

²² American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

²³ California DWR, “[Guidance Document for GSP Stakeholder Communication and Engagement](#),” 2018

²⁴ American Water Works Association, “[A Water Utility Manager’s Guide to Community Stewardship](#),” 2019

²⁵ East Bay MUD, [Board of Directors Meeting](#), 2021

²⁶ Community Water Center, “[SGMA Stakeholder Engagement](#),” 2015

- **Some agencies choose to formalize commitments to improving engagement, especially with disadvantaged communities.** The California Regional Water Quality Control Board, San Diego Region developed a [Community Outreach Strategy](#) in in 2016 with provisions specifically for working with disadvantaged communities. It provides guidance for the Board as they deepen community engagement through all aspects of their work.²⁷ Similar principles on environmental justice were brought into Santa Clara Valley Water District's planning and resident engagement efforts through new [Environmental Justice policies](#).²⁸ Such strategies and principles can be helpful organizing tools, foster new conversation with residents and local organizations, and help affirm a water agency's commitment to listening and improvement.
- **Compensate stakeholders for their involvement in decision-making processes.** In the development of OurCounty, Los Angeles' [Countywide Sustainability Plan](#), they compensated lead community-based organizations that served as anchors in each county district (\$20,000 each) as well as participation stipend for NGOs who were actively involved in the workshops. This compensation was offered with an understanding that asking stakeholders to review and provide feedback is time intensive and creates strain for already understaffed and under-resourced civil society groups.²⁹

²⁷ San Diego Water Board, "[Community Outreach Strategy](#)," 2016

²⁸ Santa Clara Valley Water District, "[Environmental Justice Policies](#)," 2018

²⁹ Los Angeles County, [OurCounty Stakeholder Engagement Summary](#), 2019

Terms

Terms below are often used by regulatory bodies when describing their communication and engagement work. These definitions helped inform what factors were examined in the Community Characteristics memo.

- Disadvantaged communities

- DWR, in the 2019 [Integrated Regional Water Management Grant Program Guidelines](#),³⁰ *a community with an annual median household income that is less than 80 percent of the Statewide annual median household income.*
- CalEPA has a separate definition for disadvantaged communities around climate adaptation that is more expansive than income. We include it here as well because other socioeconomic factors that CalEPA tracts through the CalEnviroScreen 4.0 can shape how equitable/inequitable service delivery is experienced by residents. Disadvantaged communities are defined by CalEPA to be those census tracts throughout California that:³¹
 1. *Score in the highest 25% from CalEnviroScreen 4.0*³²
 2. *Score in the top 5% of the Pollution Burden indicator but lack an overall CalEnviroScreen score due to unavailable or unreliable Population Characteristics indicator data*
 3. *Were identified as disadvantaged in CalEnviroScreen 3.0 but not in the highest scoring 25% census tracts in CalEnviroScreen 4.0*
 4. *Include areas within federally recognized Tribal boundaries in California*

- Underserved communities

- The California Public Utilities Commission in the [Environmental & Social Justice Action Plan](#) defines underserved communities in California as community that meets one of the following criteria:³³
 1. *Is a “disadvantaged community” as defined by subdivision (g) of Section 75005 of the Public Resources Code.*
 2. *Is included within the definition of “low-income communities” as defined by paragraph (2) of subdivision (d) of Section 39713 of Health and Safety Code.*
 3. *Is within an area identified as among the most disadvantaged 25% in the state according to CalEPA’s most recent CalEnviroScreen.*
 4. *Is a community in which at least 75 percent of public school students in the project area are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program.*
 5. *Is a community located on lands belonging to a federally recognized California Indian tribe.*

- Service equity / Equitable service

- AWWA in the [Guide to Community Stewardship](#) describes service equity as: *providing inclusive and equitable service to all customers, so that all customers have equitable opportunities, access and results. Some individuals or communities may need different levels of support to gain equitable service. Equitable service means applying a social equity lens to the utility’s services and programs to ensure that all customer needs are met. Equity (and equitable) is different than equality. Equality provides the same opportunities to everyone. Equity is focused on providing opportunity based on need.*

³⁰ DWR, [Integrated Regional Water Management Grant Program Guidelines](#), 2019

³¹ CalEPA, [Preliminary Designation of Disadvantaged Communities](#), 2021

³² CalEnviroScreen 4.0 develops a composite score based on both pollution burden (exposures and environmental effects) and population characteristics (sensitive populations, socioeconomic factors)

³³ CPUC, [Environmental & Social Justice Action Plan](#), 2021

Appendix

Table 1: A Menu for Integrating Community Stewardship into System Planning, Management, and Operations

This table from AWWA shows the kinds of stewardship opportunities available within each aspect of a water utility's work.³⁴ Many of the considerations and opportunities can be aided through communications and engagement with residents.

Utility Functions	Community Stewardship Considerations	Opportunities
A. Capital Planning	Evaluate how to eliminate disparities in access to service and service quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure access • Water quality • Disaster preparedness
B. Project Design	Consider how to reduce impacts of the project design on adjacent communities. Consider what positive co-benefits to integrate into the design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community benefits • Impact mitigation • Small business opportunities
C. Construction & Preventative Maintenance	Consider how to reduce construction impacts on adjacent communities. Consider what positive co-benefits to integrate into the construction process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact mitigation • Small business opportunities
D. Finance	Consider how to make services affordable to all residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer assistance programs • Implement water use efficiency programs
E. Contracting & Procurement	Consider how to increase contracting and procurement services with local, small, minority- and woman-owned businesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce development • Small business opportunities • Social impact bidding
F. Customer Service & Communications	Consider how to increase access to information and assistance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally relevant and accessible communications • Community engagement on utility services and conservation • Community liaisons
G. Environmental Stewardship	Consider how to increase opportunities for environmental stewardship and access to utility open space areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community benefits • Community education
H. Human Resources	Consider how the utility can promote a welcoming culture and increase diversity, equity and inclusion in hiring, promotion and tenure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive organizational culture • Organizational diversity, equity and inclusion • Workforce development

³⁴ American Water Works Association, "[A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship](#)," 2019

Resources

- AWWA, "[A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship](#)," 2019
- CalEPA, "[Preliminary Designation of Disadvantaged Communities](#)," 2021
- California DWR, "[DAC Involvement Program](#)," 2021; 2019 IRWM Grant Program Guidelines, 2019
- California DWR, "[Integrated Regional Water Management Grant Program Guidelines](#)," 2019
- California DWR, "[Guidance Document for GSP Stakeholder Communication and Engagement](#)," 2018
- California Public Utilities Commission, "[Environmental & Social Justice Action Plan](#)," 2021
- California Water Board, "[Racial Equity Resolution](#)," 2020
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- Ramona Municipal Water District, "[Improve transparency and community relations](#)," 2021
- San Diego Water Board, "[Community Outreach Strategy](#)," 2016
- Santa Clara Valley Water District, "[Environmental Justice Policies](#)," 2018
- Santa Clara Valley Water District, "[Public Meeting Notes](#)," 2021
- Santa Clara Valley Water District, "[Office of Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)," 2021
- Seattle Public Utilities, "[Service Equity Program](#)," 2021
- USCR Watershed, "[IRWM Plan](#)," 2021