Disaster Planning and Response: A Guide to Preparation for Homelessness Response Programs

August 2022

INTRODUCTION: This guide outlines questions that homelessness response programs should answer as they plan for and respond to natural disasters. The guide places a focus on the needs of people experiencing homelessness with serious mental illness (SMI), substance use disorder (SUD), or co-occurring disorders (CODs). It is not intended to capture all relevant details involved in planning for and responding to disasters that may occur in a community. Instead, it is a supplemental guide to account for the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Programs should use this document to guide planning efforts, drive conversation, and identify areas of concern within the following three areas:

1. Disaster Awareness and Disaster Plans
2. Staffing, Information, and Communication
3. Population and Needs

For more information on system-level disaster planning, response, and recovery, please review the materials developed by or included in the following resources:

→ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC) [HTML]

→ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Disaster Recovery Homelessness Toolkit [HTML]

→ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Preparedness and Response [HTML]

→ National Health Care for the Homeless Council [HTML]

Disaster Awareness and Disaster Plans

❑ **What type(s) of disasters are most likely to occur in your region? What challenges do you expect to face as a result?**

Every community is susceptible to certain types of disasters and less susceptible to others based on various factors such as weather. Based on the history and attributes of your community, consider which types of disaster you are likely to encounter. Common natural disasters include but are not limited to:

→ Earthquakes

→ Wildfires

→ Hurricanes or tropical cyclones

→ Blizzards

→ Tornadoes

→ Floods

→ Extreme heat or cold

→ Landslides

→ Volcanic activity

→ Tsunamis

→ Pandemics or outbreaks of infectious disease

→ Other disasters

Identifying the specific challenges posed by the disasters most likely to affect your community is a critical step in your program's disaster planning efforts. Consider each relevant disaster's expected impact on your community's infrastructure. For instance, disasters may affect your community's transportation network, power grid, or housing stock differently.

❑ **How do the types of disasters in your region and their specific challenges affect your planning process?**

Your program may require either one generally applicable disaster response plan or several individually tailored plans depending on the types of disasters your community could face. If multiple plans are needed, consider incorporating as many commonalities as possible into your program's disaster plans to minimize programmatic planning, logistical, and training burdens.

❑ **What disaster plans already exist in your community?**

Likely, your community has already developed plans for how the government will respond in the event of a disaster. Start by looking online or contacting relevant jurisdictions for your community to identify plans, including the following:

→ "Multi-hazard mitigation plan," a comprehensive disaster plan covering a wide range of mitigation efforts, including prevention and long-term mitigation strategies.

→ "Emergency Operations Plan" (EOP), covering the jurisdiction's immediate response plan in the event of a disaster.

Depending on the community, these disaster plans may go by different names, and some communities may be covered by more than one plan.

❑ What leads to disaster response plan implementation?

Consider what actions or events should prompt implementing your program's disaster response plan. Implementation of your plan could be automatically set into motion by an emergency proclamation by a local, state, or federal government unit or upon the instruction of your program's leadership. Consider the effects of communications-related challenges during a disaster, such as loss of phone service, and whether you can ensure that your program's leadership can communicate a decision to staff. If communication is limited, plan how or if the staff should automatically take specific steps without leadership's direction.

❑ What are your community's relevant disaster preparedness and response organizations or bodies? What role do you expect each to play in any disaster response?

In the event of a disaster, several relevant disaster preparedness and response organizations may operate in your community. Those organizations may be either governmental or non-governmental.

→ Governmental organizations may represent federal (e.g., the Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA]), state (e.g., the state emergency management office, National Guard), or local (e.g., local emergency management office, fire or police department) government.

→ Non-governmental organizations may include nonprofit (e.g., the Red Cross), faith-based, and other private organizations.

❑ How can your program(s) rely on other disaster preparedness organizations or bodies? What do you need to do yourself?

Review the existing disaster plans in your community to see how they consider the needs of people experiencing homelessness, particularly those with SMI, SUD, or CODs. These documents should provide insight into how your community plans to accommodate the needs of the populations served by your program(s). Where existing plans fail to adequately address the needs of the people you serve, develop strategies at an organizational and programmatic level to fill these gaps.

❑ How often will you update your program(s)'s disaster plans?

The frequency of updates to your disaster response plans will depend on the needs of your program and participants and changes in staff or other resources. Your disaster response plan should include provisions to ensure that it remains current.

Staffing, Training, and Communication

❑ **What do you expect your staff to do in a disaster?**

Any disaster response plan(s) developed by your program should clearly define staff expectations in a disaster, including providing detailed descriptions of all staff activities and responsibilities. Anticipating challenges staff members will face in carrying out those responsibilities will define overall training needs for your program and avoid confusion or burnout in the event of a disaster.

❑ **How will you address staff members' responsibilities to themselves, their friends, and their family members who may also be affected by the disaster?**

In addition to an individual's professional responsibilities in a disaster, keep in mind that staff members are part of the community affected by the disaster. Ensure that your planning and response efforts account for their obligations and the potential for burnout or turnover in a disaster. Consider developing plans to rotate staff frequently or rapidly increase staffing by using volunteers or other emergency personnel in a disaster.

❑ **What type of training is required for your staff and program participants?**

Assess training needs based on the scope of your programmatic activities in a disaster and each staff person's responsibilities. At a minimum, consider whether your program should:

→ Develop preparedness exercises that embed disaster response practices and train care coordinators, emergency managers, individuals and families experiencing homelessness, and anyone else who needs the information.

→ Develop training exercises to prepare staff to respond appropriately when a program participant's mental or physical health may impact disaster response. Consider how to respond to distinct experiences or concerns that may arise among program participants who are experiencing homelessness (e.g., distrust of authority).

→ Develop informational materials such as posters, flyers, emergency response cards, and other easy-to-use resources to keep your staff and program participants up to date on your disaster response plan.

To the extent possible, leverage your staff's existing knowledge, expertise, and experience to minimize additional training needs. For example, you may use existing outreach workers to conduct disaster-related outreach or existing emergency shelter staff to conduct intake or operate disaster shelters.

❑ Who will develop training materials, and how often do they need to be updated?

Identify which employees, committees, or managers bear responsibility for developing, maintaining, and updating all disaster-related training materials. They may or may not be the same individuals or committees responsible for delivering training to employees and program participants, though that may be advisable. Update materials as frequently as necessary to ensure they reflect current plans and practices. They should be updated at least as often as the disaster response plan is updated.

❑ Who will deliver the training, and how often will they do so?

In addition to identifying the people who will develop and update training materials, your program should identify employees, committees, or managers responsible for delivering the training and maintaining the training schedule. This may or may not be the same individual or committee responsible for developing and updating training materials, though that may be advisable. Facilitate trainings as frequently as necessary to ensure that all staff and program participants know their roles within the disaster response effort. At a minimum training should be conducted annually for incumbent staff and as part of new staff onboarding.

❑ What information will be needed immediately before or during a disaster? How might the disaster itself affect access to that information?

While your staff and program participants will receive training, they will still require access to information regarding their responsibilities during a disaster, especially if an emergency arises. Consider the type and format of information that all programmatic stakeholders may need in case anticipated challenges arise during a disaster (e.g., if you expect the power grid to be unstable, do not make information available primarily through electronic means). Ensure that all relevant stakeholders have access to the information they need to respond effectively to a disaster.

❑ How will you contact or communicate with your program participants and staff during a disaster? How do you expect that a disaster will affect your ability to communicate? How will you overcome any challenges?

If a disaster strikes your community, the ability to contact and communicate with both your program participants and staff will be crucial to an effective response. Your program(s) should ensure, in advance, that program participants and staff know where to access up-to-date instructions and information regarding this disaster. Your community's broader disaster communications plan must ensure that information is accessible to your program participants, addresses any language or other accessibility barriers, and is disseminated in as many forms as possible to ensure availability during a disaster.

Depending on your population served and program type/design, communication may be more difficult and, at the same time, more critical. For example, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness may

not have consistent access to phones or computers but are most at risk of severe injury or death in many disaster situations, such as floods or wildfires. Consider utilizing cell phones, text messages, landlines, email messages, television, and radio. Remember that you may require manual communication methods (flyers, posters, or messengers), especially if the disaster affects the power grid.

Population and Needs

❑ **Who are you charged with assisting during a disaster? What are their unique needs? What about family members of program participants or animals?**

In addition to any community-wide responsibilities your program may have during a disaster, your program's first responsibility will be to its participants. Depending on the type of services your program operates, your participants may have a diverse array of needs that you must plan to meet. Begin by using your knowledge of your participants, their feedback, and any data you have to predict their needs during a disaster. Consider how your program will continue to address those needs, given the challenges posed by a disaster.

In addition, your program participants may care for family members, friends, or animals (including pets and service animals). Carefully consider what assistance your program can provide for those individuals or animals and how your decisions will impact your program participants. Communicate clearly to program participants what you can and cannot do for them.

❑ **Where are program participants located? Are they in one place or widespread locations?**

If your program operates a shelter or project-based housing model, your participants may reside at a single location. Participants may be located throughout your community if your program operates scattered-site housing or serves an unsheltered population. Knowing where your program participants live or spend their time—and making this information accessible to relevant staff when needed—is critical for arranging effective communication and transportation, if necessary, in the event of a natural disaster.

❑ **How will you ensure program participants have access to appropriate transportation and evacuation options if needed?**

At a minimum, your program should review and integrate with existing community-level transportation and evacuation plans as part of a thorough disaster response planning and response process. Programs should establish necessary evacuation and transportation plans where existing plans are insufficient and confirm that they have adequate transportation available for all participants. Where existing transportation is limited, coordinate with the broader community to leverage mass transportation, taxis, rideshares, or another method of transportation, with particular consideration for potential accessibility

needs for program participants with physical health needs. This coordination will ensure multiple programs avoid overwhelming transportation resources during an evacuation. Consider providing funds or vouchers for fuel for program participants who can drive themselves.

Connect your program and its participants to an Evacuation Lead (a person or agency who will coordinate with emergency planners and service providers to ensure a comprehensive evacuation in advance). Develop or integrate information-sharing plans that address how the community will:

→ send evacuation messages to program participants and other service providers,

→ notify staff and participants about changes to the plan,

→ locate participants for evacuation, and

→ plan and manage other essential communication considerations.

Street outreach providers, in particular, may want to take specific steps to ensure that the plan includes strategies to locate, identify, and communicate with persons in unsheltered situations during a disaster. This may entail reviewing data, creating maps and lists of critical locations, establishing assembly locations, ensuring accessibility of transportation, and developing processes for tracking evacuation progress in advance.

❑ How will you ensure that program participants have access to appropriate clothing, food, and water?

FEMA and other disaster response agencies recommend that all people have access to at least a 3-day supply of food and water. Housing and shelter programs should ensure that all residents have this 3-day supply when sheltering in place for a disaster or a larger supply if advised by local authorities. When disasters damage electric capacity, programs may need to ensure participants have specific clothing to endure adverse weather without climate control. If an evacuation occurs, program staff should communicate with disaster shelter operators at the evacuation site(s) to ensure that food, water, and clothing are provided to shelter residents.

Special considerations may be necessary for programs that work with unsheltered populations. Food and water distribution locations that operate during non-emergencies (e.g., food pantries, soup kitchens) may be closed or have limited capacity during a disaster. Options for responding to these situations include setting up temporary food preparation sites near encampments or in temporary disaster shelters or distributing non-perishable food directly to unsheltered populations before a disaster event. In the event of an evacuation, you may consider creating temporary storage arrangements for people to store critical items such as sleeping bags and clothes to reduce property loss.

❑ What documentation do your program participants need to have or bring with them (e.g., driver's license, birth certificate, leases)?

It is essential to understand that all persons must document their residence in an affected area or

building to receive any insurance compensation or government benefits available after a disaster. Your program(s) should ensure that participants evacuated from a disaster area maintain access to vital legal documents (e.g., driver's license, birth certificates, leases, or rental agreements). Assist program participants in locating or obtaining these documents in advance and remind them to bring these with them in an evacuation. Make electronic versions of records, where possible. Consider creating temporary, safe storage arrangements for people to store documents to reduce property loss during an evacuation. If you plan to provide storage, you would also need to develop systems for your program participants to access those documents, particularly if they're required to obtain emergency resources, file insurance claims, or provide proof of residency.

❑ How will you ensure that your program participants have access to appropriate medications and health services?

Medication and health services planning should align with the needs of your program participants and the intensity of the services you provide. Staff should ensure that program participants who take medication have an adequate supply for the anticipated length of the disaster event, plus a buffer of an additional 7–10 days. Note that pharmacies may not dispense buffer amounts for controlled substances. In this case, programs must identify a backup strategy for obtaining medication refills. If an evacuation occurs, ensure there will be staff or providers at the evacuation site who can assist in managing medication and healthcare needs and that program participants have the appropriate documentation about their medication.

If your program(s) serve people with more advanced healthcare needs, such as physical impairments, chronic debilitating illnesses, or are in medication-assisted treatment, discuss your population's needs with local emergency response planners. You might work with other providers to amend the plan if you do not believe your local disaster response plans will adequately meet the healthcare needs of the people you serve. Consider a partnership with providers in neighboring areas so that you may support each other in the event of a disaster.

❑ How will you ensure that your program participants have access to appropriate shelter?

Programs that serve unsheltered populations should understand that extraordinary measures may need to be taken to shelter participants during some disaster events. These programs should plan to accommodate unsheltered participants in an indoor space until the danger passes or when access to more traditional emergency shelters or longer-term disaster shelters is established.

All programs should be aware of how they can locate disaster shelters in their geographic area or at evacuation sites. The American Red Cross operates shelters in the event of a disaster affecting the United States and maintains an index of active shelters [HTML]. As discussed previously, programs should be aware of the disaster response plans of their local and state governments, which may include detailed information about sheltering.

SAMHSA'S DISASTER DISTRESS HELPLINE

The Disaster Distress Helpline, 1-800-985-5990 (call or text), is a 24/7, 365-day-a-year national hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster. This toll-free, multilingual, and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its territories.

Additional Resources

For more information on system-level disaster planning, response, and recovery, please review the materials developed by or included in the following resources:

→ Citizen Participation and Equitable Engagement Toolkit [HTML] | HUD Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery

→ Disaster Behavioral Health Interventions Inventory [PDF] | SAMHSA DTAC

→ Disaster Behavioral Health Resources [HTML] | SAMHSA

→ Disaster Preparedness to Promote Community Resilience: Information and Tools for Homeless Service Providers and Disaster Professionals [PDF] | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, HHS, and HUD

→ Disaster Response for Homeless Individuals and Families: A Trauma-Informed Approach [PDF] | HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response

→ Disasters and People With Serious Mental Illness [PDF] | SAMHSA DTAC

→ Helping Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Obtain Identification Documents [HTML] | HHRC

→ Food and Water in an Emergency [PDF] | U.S. Department of Homeland Security Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

→ Key resources from HUD's Disaster Recovery Homelessness Toolkit [HTML]

    ↘ Find Your Local Disaster Plans [PDF]

    ↘ Assess Your Community's Disaster Plans [PDF]

    ↘ Ensure No One Is Left Out: Integrate the Needs of Homeless People in Your Disaster Plans [PDF]

    ↘ Warnings and Notifications to People Experiencing Homelessness | Preparedness Checklist [PDF] | Disaster Event Checklist [PDF]

    ↘ Evacuation and Transportation for People Experiencing Homelessness | Preparedness Checklist [PDF] | Disaster Event Checklist [PDF]

↘ Shelter and Services for People Experiencing Homelessness | Preparedness Checklist [PDF] | Disaster Event Checklist [PDF]

→ Policy Brief: Disasters and Substance Use: Implications for the Response to COVID-19 [PDF] | National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors

→ Prescriptions: Prepare Your Medicine Cabinet for an Emergency [HTML] | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

→ TAP 34: Disaster Planning Handbook for Behavioral Health Service Programs [HTML] | SAMHSA

Suggested Citation: Homeless and Housing Resource Center, *Disaster Planning and Response: A Guide to Preparation for Homelessness Response Programs*, August 2022, https://hhrctraining.org/knowledge-resources.

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Providing high-quality, no-cost training for health and housing professionals in evidence-based practices that contributes to housing stability, recovery, and an end to homelessness.

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