



Response Guide for Local Jurisdictions: ADDRESSING PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN THE DISASTER RESPONSE EFFORT

Why This Guide is Important

Warnings and Notifications

- Preparedness Checklist
- Disaster Event Checklist

Evacuation and Transportation

- Preparedness Checklist
- Disaster Event Checklist

Shelter and Services

- Preparedness Checklist
- Disaster Event Checklist

Return to Community



Why this Guide is Important

The consequences of disasters for homeless and other vulnerable people are severe. People who lack shelter are already in crisis, and a disaster can multiply their difficulties while adversely affecting their ability to cope. If the emergency response system is not ready to serve them, the response changes from efficient support to inefficient – and in some cases, harmful – crisis management. If evacuation plans do not reach people experiencing homelessness, emergency responders will spend unnecessary time in remedial searches for them. If disaster plans do not account for existing emergency shelters, those populations will have to be housed by disaster shelters. If disaster shelters have untrained staff and turn away people with mental health issues, they can force a full blown mental health crisis, with attendant demands on the medical response system.

Lack of planning for the most vulnerable populations not only adversely affects those individuals, it has systemic implications affecting response and recovery capabilities and outcomes.

Yet, plans may not make accommodations for challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness. They may be overlooked in disaster communications, left out of evacuation plans, and find themselves unwelcome or their needs unable to be addressed in mass shelters. The [Planning Guide for Local Jurisdictions](#) helps communities address this gap.

This [Response Guide for Local Jurisdictions](#) instructs communities how to strengthen their entire disaster response effort by addressing the needs of its most vulnerable community members. Using the framework of Federal [Emergency Support Functions](#) (ESF), this guide provides advice and strategies for:

- **Warnings and Notifications.** Active outreach and accessible messages and messengers are needed to reach people experiencing homelessness before, during, and after the disaster.
- **Evacuation and Transportation.** Homeless families and individuals may need help and resources to respond to evacuation orders.
- **Shelter and Services.** Mass shelters may be ill equipped to address the varied needs of homeless individuals and families unless proper training, adequate procedures, and appropriate supports are implemented.

Failure to take the needs of all community members into account can mean:

- **Lives will be at risk.** Lack of attention to the safety and health of people experiencing homelessness may result in injuries, illnesses, and mental health crises and can lead to deaths.
- **The response system's resources will be unnecessarily strained.** When the response system is not ready to serve a population, it is forced into inefficient uses of resources. Just as preventive medicine avoids expensive emergency room visits, planning for vulnerable populations enables the response system work most efficiently.
- **People will lose ground.** People who were struggling to make ends meet may lose the margin of stability, increasing the need for services.



DISASTER RECOVERY Homelessness Toolkit



RESPONSE GUIDE

- **Return to Community.** As the community recovers, all community members should receive the assistance they need to return home. For people who were experiencing homelessness and those who were precariously housed before the disaster, additional supports will be necessary. This is an opportunity to help people achieve more stability than they had prior to the disaster.

As you read this guide, keep in mind that the needs of people experiencing homelessness are diverse. Homeless and vulnerable populations include individuals and families, young and old, able-bodied and disabled, working and unemployed. They include runaway youth, LGBTQ individuals, and veterans. They may have children, companions and pets for whom they are responsible and belongings they cannot lose. Some are healthy, while others suffer from chronic diseases (treated and untreated) or mental illness. They may be dependent on drugs or medication and may or may not have adequate supplies. Some may have had experiences with authorities and may be hesitant to come forward or engage. Many will be suffering from trauma, perhaps exacerbated by the disaster.



Warnings and Notifications

PROBLEM

Prior to and immediately after a disaster, the general public will experience a flurry of notifications about the imminent disaster, potential scenarios, how to prepare, and where to go for help. They will get these messages via radio and television, through local emergency text or email messaging services, through work, schools, and other outlets. However, **these messages may not reach people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable people**, for lack of access to phones, TVs, radio, computers, and services. Further, **those who do get the messages may be unable to respond** due to lack of transportation, resources, and other barriers.

EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

Outreach cannot be confined to the days immediately before an actual occurrence, because some disasters (such as earthquakes or blackouts) occur without warning. It needs to occur well before a disaster – ideally on a periodic or ongoing basis. The entire general public, including people experiencing homelessness, must have a solid understanding of the actions to take in the event of any disaster.

Use your service provider network. To reach vulnerable households, rely on people who know them best. Engage your CoC in the coordination, staffing, and creation of outreach teams, messages and materials.

Rely on trusted sources. Law enforcement may be a trusted source in many communities, but this may not be the case in all segments of the community, particularly the homeless community. In reaching out to people experiencing homelessness, build teams that include trusted sources, such as service providers, outreach workers and EMTs.

Make sure disaster notifications address the full range of circumstances. When developing disaster information, from disaster preparedness education to pre-disaster warnings and disaster notifications, consider the real scenarios faced by the people in your community and make sure that the communication methods can be effective for homeless populations, especially those who are unsheltered. Distrust of authorities and systemic barriers may inhibit certain messages from having the intended impact. People who live outside need specific information about what to do in a flood or earthquake. People experiencing homelessness who have cars will need to know the evacuation routes and may also need additional help getting the fuel and funds necessary to evacuate and return to the community. People in temporary shelters might be physically safe but could require provisions for extra medications. Messages must address these circumstances in practical terms and assist people to acquire life-sustaining supplies.

Make sure disaster notifications address people's concerns. Messages on what actions you want vulnerable populations to take must address common concerns such as care for belongings and pets and the duration of the emergency. Messages should also address concerns that law enforcement will use disaster shelters or other interactions to serve outstanding warrants or take other enforcement action.



Meet people where they are physically. Your outreach leading up to the disaster and during the response must reach the places where people experiencing homelessness reside. This means shelters, encampments, cars, motels and other locations known to your local service providers. In many communities, outreach teams are already engaging with people experiencing homelessness, in these places, face to face. Use those teams to tell them about shelter options. The disaster planning process can actually be an opportunity to strengthen outreach programs. Take advantage of technologies as well – 50 percent of people experiencing homelessness have cell phones and can receive texts but remember that they may turn them on only sporadically to save battery life – phones cannot substitute for in person alerts. Make sure that you have volunteers and providers who can give warnings and notifications in the languages spoken by the local community. These warnings should be simple enough for anyone to easily remember them (e.g., use known places like food pantries and shelter locations, not an address that someone has to look up in an emergency) and, if given in the form of a hand out, should be easy to carry and weather-resistant (e.g., laminated).

Persistence and consistency is key. Keep in mind that you will have to reach out several times and in diverse ways to get the message out. People experiencing homelessness might not receive or react to early warnings because of other life threatening concerns or barriers. Make sure to update messages to reflect growing urgency about what is happening and what individuals need to do. Messaging must be consistent throughout any evacuation and sheltering stages as well. Follow-up by trusted sources, like outreach workers known to the homeless individuals and families, can minimize confusion. People also need to be told when the disaster – and danger – has passed. [See [Return to Community](#)]

TOOLS

**Preparedness Checklist:
Warnings and Notifications**

A list of actions that the community should take to **prepare for** an inclusive disaster outreach effort

**Disaster Event Checklist:
Warnings and Notifications**

A list of actions that the community should **during the disaster** to ensure that warnings and notifications reach everyone in the community



Preparedness Checklist: Warnings and Notifications to People Experiencing Homelessness

It is important to ensure that disaster warnings and notifications reach people experiencing homelessness. One strategy is to designate a Communications Lead, a person (or agency) who will actively coordinate with the emergency planners and service providers to ensure that community outreach includes intentional effort and alternative approaches to reach people experiencing homelessness. (This lead may be the same person or agency coordinating transportation and evacuation and/or shelter and services.) The Communications Lead can use this checklist to ensure that the jurisdiction is prepared for warnings and notifications to reach everyone in the community, including the most vulnerable and hard to reach.¹ The Lead will also follow up during the disaster ensure that shelter and service providers are able to carry through with plans. See the [Disaster Checklist for Warnings and Notifications](#).

Know where to find people experiencing homelessness. This includes but is not limited to shelters, encampments, cars, and motels. Consider also areas where people experiencing homelessness congregate during the day such as libraries, social service programs and other public facilities.

- Work with **local service providers** to identify the places where people experiencing homelessness can be reached. Often street outreach programs and local law enforcement know where people experiencing homelessness spend time.
- Review community **data on homelessness**. (See the [Planning Guide](#)). When working with local service providers, ask them for detailed demographics on their client base to obtain a deeper knowledge of the local homeless population.
- Create a **map or list** of areas to be targeted in outreach. A GIS map showing known homeless programs and encampments can provide a visual representation of where outreach teams and messaging efforts should concentrate.
- Designate a responsible entity** for tracking and updating this information regularly and to disseminate it when needed.

¹ This checklist supports Emergency Support Functions (ESF) #5 (Planning) and #2 (Communications)



Make sure your outreach plans, messages, and messengers are culturally appropriate. Remember that common outreach strategies may not reach everyone in your community. Alternative approaches and messages are necessary.

- Materials should reflect **all languages** spoken in your community.
- Use **plain and simple language**. Use graphics where possible to highlight messages.
- Keep instructions simple and memorable** as people may have no place to store them. Use familiar places as evacuation pick up points, such as soup kitchens, libraries or other places identified by your service network.
- It is important to inform people being evacuated that they will not be arrested for seeking help. However, only law enforcement can ensure this. Therefore, in planning, local emergency managers, homeless service providers, and law enforcement should engage in discussions to **establish a policy for how misdemeanor and felony warrants will be managed**. Particularly with respect to immigration issues, they should consider the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). See [HUD guidance](#).
- Deploy appropriate messengers**. Your outreach workers should be people who are trusted by homeless and other vulnerable people. Keep in mind that some communities distrust law enforcement based on experiences with officers.
 - Use trained outreach workers, EMTs, and community members (including homeless peer leaders) as your messengers.
 - Use messengers appropriate for the audience. For example, youth service providers can reach youth experiencing homelessness while mental health service providers can best reach those suffering from mental illness.
 - If law enforcement officers are conducting outreach, they must be trained to communicate effectively with homeless and other vulnerable people.
 - Where possible, engage people who are currently experiencing or have previously experienced homelessness to participate in the outreach.
- Messages should **address additional challenges and concerns** that homeless and other vulnerable populations face. Communicate arrangements for storage of belongings, accommodation for families, shelter for pets, access to services, and other common concerns.
- Consider using the Point-in-Time Count and other ongoing outreach activities to distribute information cards.

For more information on culturally sensitive messages and outreach see [Send Red Not Blue](#), a document that provides recommendations, based on real-world experiences, on how to improve communication between local homeless services providers, disaster preparedness planners, and homeless residents themselves.



Build an outreach team. Staff and train a team that is prepared to go out into the community and find people leading up to and during a disaster. This may include homeless service providers, trained volunteers, people experiencing homelessness, local law enforcement, parks or forest service personnel, or others depending on the community.

- Identify staff** for the team by working with local service providers and public agencies. Involve street outreach program staff as well as people who are currently experiencing and those who have previously experienced homelessness.
- Establish the roles and responsibilities** of each individual and agency involved in the outreach effort.
- Develop written operating procedures** for activating and deploying the team.
- Maintain the team.** Update the list of team members at least annually, and add new team members as necessary to maintain a fully staffed team.
- Conduct regular team training** to ensure that all members, old and new, remain informed of their responsibilities.
- Execute MOUs** with organizations involved in the outreach team to clarify responsibilities and to ensure that these agencies can receive compensation from FEMA for their efforts during the disaster. (FEMA requires jurisdictions to execute MOUs with any non-profits or governmental organizations providing services in advance of the disaster. Without an MOU in place, it will be difficult for the jurisdiction to compensate the agencies with FEMA funds.)
- Identify funds** for the outreach effort. Remember that the agencies on the outreach team will incur additional costs staffing disaster outreach efforts.
- Use the Point-in-Time** outreach efforts to practice the outreach team roles and responsibilities.

Develop a communications plan for staffing the outreach effort. This can be as simple as a phone tree (but keep in mind that phone service can be disrupted so have backups including cell phones, text messaging, landlines, email, or radio announcements). The key is to identify the key contacts to be made in a disaster and how they will be contacted. This should be planned alongside the evacuation communication plan, so the two elements of the outreach and evacuation effort are coordinated.

- Develop a contact list** that will allow for rapid dissemination of warnings, notifications, and updates throughout your service network. Update this list regularly.
- The list should **include primary and backup contacts** at all relevant local entities, the CoC, and other key actors in outreach and response.
- Establish your primary means of communication.**
 - In small communities, a phone tree that assigns one to three calls to each person may be sufficient to reach all key actors within the jurisdiction and the CoC.
 - In larger communities, an electronic outreach system is ideal.
- Determine the information to be communicated to the outreach team** during the disaster. For example, you will communicate instructions for deployment, key messages relevant to the type of disaster, and have follow up messages to track the progress of the outreach effort and identify any unexpected challenges to the effort.



- Identify a coordinator** for the outreach effort. This may be the same person who is coordinating all communication for the disaster or it may be specific to the outreach team.
- Test the communication plan** on an annual basis in non-disaster times to acclimate local services providers to the procedures.
- Build in procedures to track your outreach effort** so that you can adjust your approach as needed during the disaster to respond to an evolving situation. For example, a shared document allows multiple approved individuals to enter information in real time.

Diversify your outreach method and materials. The homeless population is diverse, so there is no one-size-fits-all outreach method. Use a range of strategies including face-to-face contact, written notices, and electronic communication.

- Develop and distribute **warning cards** with key information about where to go in event of a disaster.
 - Cards should include shelter locations, evacuation pick up points, and emergency numbers.
 - Laminate the cards so that they are durable
 - Hand these cards out regularly at shelters, food pantries, and other places frequented by people experiencing homelessness.
- Develop **educational materials** on disaster preparedness for people experiencing homelessness.
 - Designate an entity or persons (ideally more than one) to write and send the messages.
 - Tailor existing disaster preparedness materials and curricula for people experiencing homelessness.
 - Include information about common threats for your area and how to respond.
 - Include conditions of higher risk to people experiencing homelessness such as freezes and heatwaves.
 - Consider how the response differs if a person is unsheltered or shelter insecure.
 - Work with service providers to share this information in appropriate ways. (For example, service providers can host information sessions for their clients. Providing food at such sessions can attract participation.)
 - Keep in mind principles of cultural sensitivity.
- Sign up people experiencing homelessness for **text notifications** on their cell phones.
 - Many people experiencing homelessness own a cell phone. However, people experiencing homelessness will often keep their phones turned off to save battery, so this cannot be the sole means of connection.
 - Consider providing cell phones to people experiencing homelessness who do not already have one. The Community Technology Alliance in San Jose, CA has such [a program](#).
 - Use your service provider network to promote [signing up for these alerts](#).
 - Post signup information at places frequented by people experiencing homelessness such as meal distribution centers, libraries and other public spaces, and overnight shelters.

For more information on effective outreach to homeless persons, consider these resources from the National Healthcare for Homeless Council

[Outreach guide](#). Provides promising strategies for outreach to people experiencing homelessness.

[Outreach Curriculum](#). Provides lessons and exercises to train outreach workers on how to communicate with and build bonds with people experiencing homelessness.



Disaster Event Checklist:

Warnings and Notifications to People Experiencing Homelessness

When disasters occur, the Communications Lead will ensure planned outreach occurs so that warnings and notifications reach homeless and other vulnerable people. This checklist provides a list of key actions to help warnings and notifications reach everyone in your community, including the most vulnerable and hard to reach. Ideally, the jurisdiction has prepared to do this outreach (See the [Preparedness Checklist](#)), but if not, adapt mainstream efforts as best possible to reach the more vulnerable people in the community.¹

Pre-Disaster Warnings

Some disasters, such as hurricanes and floods, allow for a few days warning. In those cases, take full advantage of these days to locate people experiencing homelessness and ensure they are informed of the impending disaster and the actions they should take. Use the systems you have established.

- Deploy the outreach team.** Coordinate with the designated outreach lead to send the outreach workers into the community to provide verbal and written warnings.
 - Send the team to pre-identified locations.
 - Track outreach to ensure that all key areas are covered.
 - Make adjustments to outreach strategies, as data on contacts made comes in.
- Distribute warning cards in local languages.** Ideally, you have developed these cards in advance.
 - Update the information if necessary.
 - Use your outreach team and local service providers.
 - *If you have not developed warning cards in advance*, quickly prepare a handout with key information about the nature and timing of the disaster, required actions, evacuation and shelter points, and emergency numbers.
- Send text messages.** Confirm that the designated person(s) are sending messages. Use the same warning messages you are sending to the general population, but consider if there is additional information that should be included for homeless and other vulnerable people. (See [Preparedness Checklist](#) for more details.)
- Track progress.** Maintain regular contact with outreach team members.
 - Confirm that they have covered all the geographic areas and are reaching the people that were in your outreach plan.
 - Identify and respond to any unexpected issues that arise.

If you have not prepared for outreach to homeless and other vulnerable people, reach out immediately to [your CoC](#) or homeless services provider network to provide full information to them about the evacuation and provide any support they need to reach their clients.

¹ This checklist supports Emergency Support Function (ESF) #2 (Communications).



During the Disaster

Regular and persistent outreach is necessary during the disaster to ensure that as conditions develop people experiencing homelessness remain informed of developments.

- Continue active outreach in the field.** At times throughout the disaster, your outreach team should go out into the community (making allowances for their safety) and to disaster shelters to ensure that people have not been overlooked.
- Make contact with facilities where people are sheltered.** Stay in touch with all shelters to confirm that their emergency plans are being implemented. This includes disaster shelters, emergency shelters, and other places that have been set up to take in people on an emergency basis.
 - Use your established contact list or phone tree.
 - Identify shelters with vacancies, those that are over capacity, and coordinate transfers where necessary.
- Track and communicate progress.** As conditions change on the ground, communicate through updates to your network.
 - Maintain regular contact with outreach teams, shelters, and service providers.
 - Continue to broadcast updates through all your communication media.
 - Hold regular meetings or calls, as possible, to create a cohesive message for providers serving those during a disaster.
 - Provide a real-time resource person for shelters to contact as they need medical or other basic assistance throughout the duration of the disaster and recovery.

Post-Disaster Communication

After the disaster, people experiencing homelessness need to know that it is safe to return to the area. Ideally, you and/or service providers should be providing them with information on continued options for shelter and services.

- Continue to deploy outreach team.** After the disaster, the outreach team should be in the field to ensure that people are aware of information on services. Maintain communication with the outreach lead.
- Reach out to shelters and service providers.** Let them know when the threat has passed and people can return to pre-disaster locations.
- Use the media to reach people who may have left the area.** Use TV, radio, and text messages to broadcast messages beyond your immediate community.
- Provide information about housing and shelter options, services available, and disaster recovery programs.** A critical part of helping all populations recover after a disaster is providing information about how the whole community can safely return. Services and disaster recovery programs should meet needs of all community members, including very low-income households.
 - When the threat has passed, work with disaster recovery teams to inform residents about how to return safely to their community and what services are available to support them.
 - It can be difficult to identify appropriate housing options, when housing stock is damaged by the disaster. Finding places and helping vulnerable people access them requires partnerships. The relationships you developed during the planning phase are helpful in this instance.



Evacuation and Transportation

PROBLEM

People experiencing homelessness may experience many of the same challenges in an evacuation scenario as other vulnerable populations such as elderly and disabled people. As discussed under “Warnings and Notifications,” they might not receive critical messages about when, where, and how to evacuate. While some may have access to cars, most will not and they **may have difficulty getting to evacuation points** because of health issues, mobility impairments, or lack of transportation. People may distrust authorities, have concerns about separation from their belongings, companions, and pets, or be worried about being allowed to return. These concerns are real and often based on prior experiences with authorities. Disasters are traumatic and trigger issues that can cause conflicts with emergency workers and other evacuees.

EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

Evacuation efforts should take into account the concerns of people experiencing homelessness and the barriers they may face.

Coordinate with shelters and housing and service providers. As part of ongoing emergency preparedness activities, confirm that all shelters, transitional housing, permanent housing, and service providers have plans for evacuating their clients. The jurisdiction should have plans in place to evacuate unsheltered people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations. Communities with comprehensive programs will have outreach staff that know where unsheltered people experiencing homelessness are likely to be staying. Using this knowledge, emergency staff can direct evacuation personnel to those sites. Other activities to incorporate shelter providers on include:

- **Stay in contact with the providers.** When a disaster occurs, the jurisdiction should contact all shelters and housing and service providers to ensure that their plan is proceeding and find out if additional support is needed. Ideally, use electronic communications to get regular reports from them, compile the reports, and provide updates to the providers. In the absence of an electronic system (i.e., if there is a power outage), use a simple phone tree with a set of pre-established questions. Make sure you have landlines listed as well as at least one cell phone number for each provider.
- **Make sure that unsheltered people experiencing homelessness are accounted for.** As evacuation proceeds, check encampments and areas where unsheltered people are known to congregate and ensure that inhabitants have vacated. Use intake procedures at evacuation pickup and delivery points to confirm that the expected people are participating in the evacuation.
- **Make arrangements for safe return.** As people are evacuated, establish communication systems so that the service providers are aware of their new locations, in and outside the jurisdiction. This is important so that evacuees can be reached when the time comes for return.



- **Plan to use disaster recovery funding** for housing that will make the situation better after the disaster than it was before.

Provide evacuation options. Evacuation is not a one-size-fits all scenario. Some people experiencing homelessness have access to transportation, while others have none but can get themselves to an evacuation site if it is easily identifiable. Others have limited mobility or limited access to transportation. The evacuation plan should account for all scenarios.

- **Establish assembly points for mass evacuation that take into account places where sheltered and unsheltered homeless reside or that they know how to find.** This may mean stops at emergency shelters, drop-in centers, and soup kitchens as well as areas known to be inhabited by unsheltered homeless individuals or families.
- **Make available alternatives to the assembly points for people who cannot get there.** Mobilize the same resources you use to help disabled and elderly citizens to find and transport homeless persons who cannot get to the assembly points and may need accessible vehicles or extra assistance.
- **Help people experiencing homelessness who have cars get out of harm's way.** Provide fuel or funds for fuel and guidance on appropriate destinations. Designate parking lots in safe areas where people can park or provide directions to nearby localities that are providing shelter and return to the community.

Engage qualified people in the evacuation effort. Everyone working on the evacuation should have some knowledge of special needs that may be present with people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations.

- **Put qualified case workers at assembly points and on the transportation.** Case workers who are familiar with people experiencing homelessness can help address logistical and behavioral issues at assembly points and on the buses and vans as they are trained to address the diversity of homeless populations (adults, unaccompanied youth, families) and their physical or behavioral health needs. Using case workers will require a pre-existing MOU with service providers both to establish responsibilities and to ensure that the services are eligible for reimbursement. Make sure those MOUs are in place.
- **Train all evacuation workers to respond appropriately to all evacuees' physical and emotional challenges.** Drivers, police, evacuation staff, and volunteers should be trained in common coping strategies for working with people who are frightened, experiencing trauma, or face other challenges to participating in the evacuation. Transportation plans unable to address behavioral or health issues are inadequate.

TOOLS

**Preparedness Checklist:
Evacuation and Transportation**

A list of actions that the community should take to **prepare for** an inclusive disaster evacuation process.

**Disaster Event Checklist:
Evacuation and Transportation**

A list of actions that the community should **during the disaster** to ensure that an evacuation is accessible everyone in the community



Preparedness Checklist:

Evacuation and Transportation for People Experiencing Homelessness

Effective evacuation plans address common barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness in a typical evacuation. This requires additional partners and new approaches. One strategy is to designate an Evacuation Lead, a person (or agency) who will coordinate with the emergency planners and service providers to ensure a comprehensive evacuation. (This lead may be the same person or agency coordinating warnings and notifications and/or shelter and services.) The Evacuation Lead can use this checklist to increase the coverage of evacuation plans for everyone in your community, including the vulnerable and hard to reach.¹ The Lead will also follow up during the disaster ensure that shelter and service providers are able to carry through with plans. See the [Disaster Checklist for Evacuation and Transportation](#).

Know where to find people experiencing homelessness. This includes, but is not limited to, shelters, encampments, cars, and motels. Consider areas where people experiencing homelessness congregate during the day such as libraries, day shelters, day labor sites, and public facilities.

- Work with **local service providers** to identify and document the places where people experiencing homelessness can be reached.
- Review community **data on homelessness**. (See the [Planning Guide](#)). When working with local service providers, ask them for detailed demographics on their client base to obtain a deeper knowledge of the local homeless population.
- Create a **map or list** of critical locations that must be targeted in outreach. A GIS map showing known homeless programs and encampments can provide a visual representation of where outreach teams and messaging efforts should concentrate.
- Designate a responsible entity** for tracking, updating, and disseminating this information to all partners involved in executing the evacuation plan.

¹ This checklist supports Emergency Service Function (ESF) #1 (Transportation).



Work with your service provider network to ensure that appropriate measures are put in place to ensure the accessibility of the evacuation effort for people experiencing homelessness.

- Designate a **liaison at each local service provider** to activate disaster response protocols and coordinate each local service provider's role in the evacuation.
- Develop an **evacuation communication plan** to facilitate information sharing with local service providers about evacuation progress before, during, and after the disaster. This plan should address:
 - How evacuation messages will be sent to service providers.
 - How service providers can share information related to evacuation progress.
 - How service disruptions (such as bus breakdowns or route obstructions) will be communicated and addressed, as well as the roles and responsibilities for communication.
 - What information data providers and the jurisdiction will be collecting during the evacuation to establish where individuals are sheltered and confirm that the evacuation is going as planned.
 - How providers and the jurisdiction will be sharing and reporting data to enhance the ability of response and recovery personnel to activate the correct resources to support the community.
 - This should be planned alongside the outreach communication plan, so the two elements of the outreach and evacuation effort are coordinated.
 - Discuss data sharing with local partners: CoCs, emergency managers, and Red Cross. During normal operations determine what data will and won't be shared. Execute formal agreements.
- Contact existing emergency shelters and homeless service organizations to ensure that they have **evacuation plans** in place, or help them establish one.
 - Confirm they have transportation available for all project participants.
 - If a shelter does not have sufficient transportation available, can the jurisdiction leverage mass transportation, taxi, ridesharing (e.g., Uber), or another method of transportation in a cost effective manner?
 - Coordinate with partners (e.g., local government agencies, the CoC, homeless service providers) on transportation resource planning to ensure that any existing plans are not using the same resources – rather, they should complement each other if possible – and that everyone knows the plan for evacuating shelters.
 - Designate shelters as pickup points for the evacuation, if appropriate.
- Establish **assembly points** for unsheltered homeless people that are familiar and accessible.
 - Make sure these are communicated to target populations (See [Warnings and Notification checklist](#)).
 - Establish alternatives to assembly points for people who cannot get to those locations or if those locations are affected by the disaster.
 - Provide adequate transportation to and from the assembly points.



- Ensure that transportation for the evacuation will be **accessible** to people experiencing homelessness.
 - Drivers should be trained to accept all people, including those with different types of disabilities, and to follow specific procedures if an individual presents a danger to others and cannot be accommodated. Provide this training, or help coordinate to make sure it happens.
 - Outreach workers can be placed at pickup points and on evacuation vehicles to provide expertise and professional support to drivers.
 - Make sure transportation methods take into account that the evacuation involves people, potentially pets, and often times a large amount of belongings. This may limit transportation options.
 - Execute MOUs with local transportation entities, including public transportation, bus and taxi companies, school buses, and ride services.
- Confirm that **destinations**, such as disaster shelters, hotels, and public facilities, are prepared to receive people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations. Provide training to these groups if needed. Consider placing project staff at hotels during arrival to allay concerns of survivors and property managers (See the [Shelter and Services Checklist](#)).
- It is important to inform people being evacuated that they will not be arrested for seeking help. However, only law enforcement can ensure this. Therefore, in planning, local emergency managers, homeless service providers, and law enforcement should engage in discussions to **establish a policy for how misdemeanor and felony warrants will be managed**. Particularly with respect to immigration issues, they should consider the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (See [HUD guidance](#)).
- Establish **alternative evacuation arrangements** for those who can use them. Some people experiencing homelessness have cars but may lack a place to go or money for fuel. Work with providers to:
 - Provide funds or vouchers for fuel, and a system for people to obtain these (and to determine who can receive the funds/vouchers). Make sure to communicate how and where eligible people can access the funds/vouchers when a disaster strikes.
 - Provide directions to disaster shelters.
 - Provide transportation vouchers to people who have a place to stay but have no means to get there.
- Coordinate with [family reunification systems](#) to **document the destination of evacuees to enable family and friends to determine status**, and train providers on this system. Use this system to communicate with evacuees post disaster to inform them that it is safe to come home.
- Partner with local animal rescue groups to help homeless individuals and others with pets ensure their pets' safety so they may be evacuated. Coordinate how the actual evacuation will occur and how pets will be returned afterwards. You might also want to talk with people experiencing homelessness who have pets to prepare them for the possibility that they might have to be separated from their pet if a disaster occurs.
- Consider creating temporary storage arrangements for people to store critical items (sleeping bags, clothing, documents), to reduce the loss of property during the evacuation.



Disaster Event Checklist:

Evacuation and Transportation for People Experiencing Homelessness

When disasters occur, and evacuation orders take effect homeless and other vulnerable people may not be able to access transportation if they are not properly notified and if the planned transportation is not accessible. Ideally, you have prepared for an evacuation that includes all people in your community, even the most difficult to reach (See [Preparedness Checklist](#)). If you have not, you will need to immediately contact your CoC to engage their expertise in planning comprehensive evacuations.¹ The checklist below offers a number of actions to enhance your evacuation plan by increasing accessibility for everyone in the community, including the most vulnerable and hard to reach.

Pre-disaster

Some disasters, such as hurricanes and floods, may allow for a few days warning. In those cases, take full advantage of these days to activate your evacuation teams and locate people experiencing homelessness to ensure they know about the evacuation. Use the systems you have established.

- Reach out to the designated Communications lead to confirm that outreach teams are connecting with homeless and other vulnerable people to provide evacuation information (See the [Warnings and Notifications Checklist](#)).
- Contact emergency shelters to confirm that they are ready to implement their evacuation plans.
- Contact the person(s) designated to send text messages and distribute materials with evacuation details to confirm that they are doing this.
- Contact disaster shelters to confirm that they are prepared to receive homeless and other vulnerable people, they have enough copies of the one-page handouts you provided, and they are training volunteers. Provide a short training to volunteers if needed.
- In accordance with the plan you established and communicated, provide cash or vouchers to eligible households with cars so they can buy gas to evacuate. Provide directions to recommended locations for evacuation and information about how to return to the area after the disaster.
- Contact animal rescue groups to assist with evacuation of those with pets.
- Implement temporary storage solutions so that people don't lose belongings critical to their daily life, such as sleeping bags and legal documents.

¹ This checklist supports Emergency Service Function (ESF) #1 (Transportation).



During the Evacuation

Make sure all the elements of your evacuation plan are implemented. Stay apprised of developments so that you can address any problems as they arise.

- Stay in contact with outreach and evacuation teams to check on how the evacuation is going – if any unforeseen circumstances have arisen, contact the appropriate partners and address the needs.
- Call service providers to ensure staff have deployed as planned – e.g., case managers are deployed at pick up points and on transport to ensure that homeless and other vulnerable people can access the transportation. You may need a representative to go to these locations to ensure that things are happening as planned.
- Contact – or better yet, go onsite to – disaster shelters to confirm that people are arriving at and being accepted into shelters. Deploy additional resources if necessary (See [Shelter and Services Checklist](#)).
- Continue to provide funds for fuel to those who have cars but lack the resources to evacuate, in accordance with the plan.

Post Evacuation

After the evacuation, help people get back home. People without access to transportation before the disaster will not have it after. You may need to investigate if arrangements are being made to help people return to the community and find decent and safe housing.

- Provide transportation back to the community for those who left the area and need help to get back.
 - This could mean providing rides through buses, vans, taxis, and ride share service as well as funds or vouchers for public transportation.
 - Remember that transportation back must be sufficient to transport people, pets, and belongings.
- Conduct active outreach to known evacuation locations to ensure that all residents – renters, homeowners, homeless, and facility based households – are informed of transportation options to come home.
- Implement measures to ensure that returnees have safe shelter to move into. It may take some time to find housing in the home community – in fact, in areas with a great deal of damage to the housing stock, it can be quite difficult. Work with FEMA, HUD, and other federal partners to help identify housing options – both short-term and long-term for people affected by the disaster (See the [Shelter and Services Checklist](#)).



Shelter and Services

PROBLEM

During response and recovery, established emergency shelters and new disaster shelters often operate at and beyond capacity. Existing **shelters may experience disruptions** in their services. Disaster shelters might be able to increase capacity but **will fail if they lack support services for vulnerable populations**. Shelters **must accommodate a diverse population** of formerly and newly people experiencing homelessness including single adults, families, runaway youth, LGBTQ persons, and other households. Supportive services **must address the broad needs** of displaced people, including physical, cognitive or behavioral issues, many of which will be exacerbated by the trauma of the disaster and the displacement. Excluding people from shelters in a disaster can have life threatening consequences for the individual and simply places greater burdens on other aspects of the response system such as emergency medical responders.

EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

An effective response requires sufficient capacity and an array of appropriate services.

Maximize your shelter capacity. Provide resources and support needed to keep existing emergency shelters open. This may mean providing backup power, additional staff, and extra food, water, and medicine. To ensure preparedness, you should execute memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with providers that codify responsibilities. Establish disaster shelters as needed but consider alternatives such as hotel and motel vouchers, shelters in surrounding communities, and vacancies in public housing. As the need for disaster shelters wanes and people who can return home do, allow homeless and vulnerable individuals and families to stay longer in existing shelters while volunteers and community members work to identify housing solutions for them.

Engage service providers in the shelter plan. Disaster shelters will need to provide a full range of services, from basics like food service to social services, including counseling and medical care, to family support like child care and even schooling for children. Existing homeless service providers can support the disaster shelters with qualified staff as well as food and supplies. Case managers can coordinate the delivery of services and meet acute psychological and medical needs including trauma-induced episodes, substance abuse issues and drug or alcohol withdrawal.

Make disaster shelters accessible to all. The law forbids discrimination in disaster shelters. Ensure that shelter managers understand that all people are to be admitted. Provide written information on the law and how all volunteers and workers in the shelters should apply the law in practice. Consider establishing in advance a support team that can be deployed to help address various situations that arise. Train managers and intake specialists to recognize and respond appropriately to people with special needs including homeless adults, unaccompanied youth, and families with children.



Stay in touch with your shelters. As the recovery progresses, conditions in shelters will evolve and new needs will emerge such as shortages in supplies, people who need to be moved, and medical emergencies. Designate a shelter coordinator who checks in regularly with the shelters to identify and address issues.

TOOLS

**Preparedness Checklist:
Shelter and Services**

A list of actions that the community should take to **prepare for** an inclusive disaster shelter response

**Disaster Event Checklist:
Shelter and Services**

A list of actions that the community should take **during the disaster** to ensure that everyone has access to the shelter and services they need



Preparedness Checklist: Shelter and Services for People Experiencing Homelessness

People experiencing homelessness may need additional support and services when sheltered during a disaster. One strategy is to designate a Shelter Lead, a person (or agency) who coordinates with emergency planners and the service provider community to ensure that the planning for shelter and services addresses the needs and concerns of people experiencing homelessness. (This lead may be the same person or agency coordinating Warnings and Notifications and/or Transportation and Evacuation.) The lead can use this checklist to coordinate stakeholders in the community to prepare for the disaster.¹ The lead will also follow up during the disaster ensure that shelter and service providers are able to carry through with plans. See the [Disaster Checklist for Shelter and Services](#).

Building the resiliency of existing shelters and services can increase the likelihood of maintaining operations during the disaster. Even when a community has shelter and services in place, they may be disrupted during a disaster. Good planning and preparedness can minimize these disruptions and ensure that people experiencing homelessness can stay in their existing locations.

- Confirm that existing emergency shelters have emergency plans** to ensure continuity of operations in a disaster. If the answer is “no” to any of the questions below, you should assist the shelter in addressing the deficiency.
 - Do they have written emergency plans?
 - Have shelter staff been trained on disaster response and how to implement the plan?
 - Do they know the circumstances under which they would need to evacuate (as opposed to shelter in place) and the plans/locations for evacuation?
 - Have they stocked food, water, supplies and medicines?
 - Do they have generators?
 - Do they have the capacity to expand temporarily for the disaster? For example, do they have additional cots, adequate supplies, as well as infrastructure (plumbing, heating/cooling) to safely accommodate more people?

¹ This checklist supports Emergency Support Function (ESF) #6 Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing, Human Services.



- Be prepared to **provide resources and support to existing emergency shelters** to help them stay open during a disaster.
 - Execute **Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)** that codify the responsibilities of the shelter and the responsibilities of the community, including emergency response authorities, political leadership, fire and rescue teams, and other partners in disaster response.
 - Make arrangements to fund and provide extra staff to emergency shelters to meet surge needs and substitutes for staff who cannot come to work due to the disaster. Options can include a list of trained volunteers or an agreement with a neighboring community.
 - Establish communication channels for shelters to make urgent requests for food, water, supplies, and power.
- Visit shelters on a regular basis** (e.g. semi-annually) to reinforce the importance of disaster preparedness and review their procedures to assure that they are complementary to community-wide planning efforts.
- Meet with shelter and service providers on a regular basis** to review procedures and confirm that they are confident of the procedures during an actual event.

Confirm that plans for disaster shelters have the capacity and services to meet likely needs. Local disaster plans should have provisions for disaster shelter, but do those plans account for the influx of previously and newly homeless persons? Meet with disaster planners to ensure they are cognizant of the demographics and needs of the local homeless community.

- Discuss capacity needs.** The disaster shelter system must have sufficient capacity to shelter anyone who is impacted by the disaster and cannot find safe shelter. Disaster planners may underestimate the need for shelter if they do not consider people who are experiencing homelessness prior to the disaster, as well as people who are precariously housed and lose their last option for shelter due to the disaster.
- Identify services** that must be available in disaster shelters. Immediate deployment of all services may not be possible; however, over time all shelters should support residents with various needs:
 - At a minimum, all shelters should have medical services, food, water, shower facilities, and sleeping accommodations.
 - Some shelters may be able to serve people with complex needs, including providing mental health services, medical services (elderly and vulnerable populations), children’s nutritional and behavioral services, addiction services, accommodations for unaccompanied youth, and protection and accommodation for those experiencing domestic violence.
 - Children will need supervision or childcare. Different families use different strategies to enforce discipline, problem solve, and relax. Shelter staff should be prepared to encounter a variety of behaviors and know where the legal requirement for intervention exists.
- Consider putting in place **agreements with nearby jurisdictions** to house people temporarily if increased capacity is needed.
 - Agreements could include shelters or other facilities, such as hospitals or military bases.
 - To avoid the displacement of people, these arrangements should be with nearby communities and should be used as last resort.



- Commit to keeping enough **shelters open long enough** so that no one is forced out onto the streets, and each individual and family has a housing or shelter placement.
 - Discuss with local American Red Cross and other agencies providing disaster shelter what the standards will be for closing the shelter.
 - Identify contingencies for sheltering people who have no place to go after the disaster shelter closes.
 - Put in place MOUs with homeless service organizations to help with sheltering transition from disaster shelters to housing options or emergency shelters within the community.
 - Sometimes, the decision to close a shelter is a political one. If possible, initiate discussions with your mayor, city council, or county administrator to make the request that the political leadership commit to keeping the disaster shelters open longer.
 - Disaster shelters often have households that require the engagement of local service providers to achieve a return to self-sufficiency. Emergency managers and disaster shelter operators should contact and incorporate local service providers as soon as possible to establish reasonable expectations for residents, service providers, and policy makers.

Clarify protocols for disaster shelters. Work with disaster planners to ensure that disaster shelters have proper protocols to serve anyone who arrives during a disaster.

- Ensure that disaster shelter operators **have explicit policies that disaster shelters are open to all**. This means serving all who seek shelter – individuals, families with children, unaccompanied children, undocumented individuals, as well as people with substance use disorders, physical, psychological, or behavioral disabilities.
- Ensure **intake procedures** are adequate to take in all people in need.
 - Identify measures to address special needs so that they can be supported.
 - Ensure that the facility is physically accessible to people with mobility impairments and those requiring devices like walkers, canes, or wheelchairs to maintain their independence.
 - Consider arrangements for families with children and other households who must stay together.
 - Consider arrangements for unaccompanied minors.
 - Consider arrangements for people who arrive with pets and service animals.
 - Make clear to all intake and shelter workers that the solution to a person presenting with issues is **NOT** to turn them away, but to seek help from a member of the disaster response team. Identify in advance whom shelter workers should turn to in such situations.
- Establish data collection protocols to ensure that shelters and service providers can collect appropriate data at appropriate times and avoid duplication of effort. Ideally this data can be entered into HMIS.
- Staffing plan should include **trained professionals** who can address needs of people who are experiencing trauma from loss of home, services, and connections with community and family.
- Establish a **policy for service animals and pets**. People will arrive at disaster shelters with service animals and family pets. Animals can create health issues in a shelter; however, some people are unable to maintain their independence without their service animal or unwilling to stay at a shelter without their pet. FEMA offers [guidance on pet and service animal policies](#).
- Establish a **support team** of service providers who can address emergency situations where a shelter is turning people away or cannot meet the need.



Conduct training and preparedness exercises.

- Train managers of disaster shelters to navigate the steps of the community and agency disaster preparedness plan and to handle emergencies until appropriate support personnel can be deployed.
- Train intake specialists to identify special needs that should be addressed. Assess people for any special needs to engage appropriate professionals, if available. At a minimum, take steps to reduce opportunities that could lead to conflict in a large congregate shelter.
- Train shelter workers to address common issues that may come up in disaster shelters, especially how to de-escalate conflicts.



Disaster Event Checklist: Shelter and Services for People Experiencing Homelessness

When a disaster occurs, the “Shelter Lead” will ensure that providers of emergency and disaster shelter and services are able to implement the agreed-upon plan. This checklist provides a list of key actions to ensure the people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable people receive shelter and services they are entitled to during the disaster.¹ If your community has not prepared for disaster shelter and services for people experiencing homelessness, see the [Disaster Preparedness](#) checklist.

Disaster Event

Make sure all the elements of your shelter plans are implemented. Stay apprised of developments so that you can address any issues that arise.

- If the disaster is known in advance (e.g., hurricane), the shelter lead should contact all existing shelters as the disaster approaches to confirm that they are prepared for the disaster.
 - Help address any shortages in supplies, staffing, or other needs.
 - Identify vacancies in these shelters.
- Speak with disaster and emergency shelters regularly to address any needs that emerge.
 - Does each shelter know who they should contact in the emergency management office or the emergency operations center (EOC)?
 - Do they have space to take additional people?
 - Are there capacity issues that threaten health and safety?
 - Do they need additional food, water, medications, or supplies?
 - Are additional staff needed?
 - Are there any unexpected events?
- If the disaster period lasts longer than expected, identify resources to keep shelters and services running.
 - Find additional staff or volunteers who can provide backup for exhausted staff.
 - Check that shelters have sufficient food, water, and supplies.
 - Identify any failing facilities; for example, plumbing or HVAC may begin to fail after days of overuse in crowded facilities.
 - Coordinate with FEMA, Red Cross, and/or Emergency Operations Center, as appropriate in your jurisdiction, to ensure needs are communicated.

¹ This checklist supports Emergency Support Function (ESF) #6 Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing, Human Services.



Post Disaster

After the disaster, homeless and other vulnerable people may be the last to leave disaster shelters because they do not have a safe place to which they can return. This is an opportunity to help people move to a situation that is more stable than the one they had prior to the disaster. See the Long Term Recovery Guide for more guidance.

- Keep shelters open as long as necessary so that homeless and precariously housed people can find a safe place to reside. This may require advocacy.
- As shelters close, coordinate with local providers, FEMA, HUD, and any other stakeholders to make sure that all people have a safe place to go.
 - Find placements for those who need them in other shelters, hotels, or other temporary housing.
 - This is an opportunity to engage people who were experiencing unsheltered homelessness before the disaster event in services to ensure that they do not go back to the street. Leverage the local [coordinated entry system](#) if possible.
- As shelters close, make arrangements for transportation. Buses or other mass transportation is not adequate for people who have their pets or belongings with them.
- If you are in a Presidentially Declared Disaster area, use FEMA, Social Service Block Grant and other funding to extend the period of housing support. Be prepared to make the most of that time to find more permanent housing options.
- Follow up with service providers post disaster and discuss what worked and did not work in order to improve your planning for the next potential disaster.
- Include, in your recovery planning, a discussion of the housing needs of people experiencing homelessness. This is a longer-term discussion, but disasters can often highlight gaps in the system and create an opportunities to address unmet needs better than the community had before the disaster.



Return to Community

PROBLEM

One goal of recovery is to return people to their homes; however, the effort to repair and rebuild homes **tends to overlook those who did not have permanent housing or are precariously housed** before the disaster. Disasters also often force households into homelessness for the first time, as the housing market tightens and people who were economically stressed before the disaster are unable to recover from the additional losses. People who were in housing but not on the lease or deed, such as those doubled-up, do not qualify for many housing replacement resources and may have to turn to the homeless services network. The **homeless services network will experience new challenges** and strains on its resources due to these new individuals and families entering the system. A strategic long-term recovery process will take into account this larger homeless population and use the influx of resources and attention to housing replacement as an opportunity to transition all residents to stable housing. Use of coordinated entry systems and rapid re-housing programs are one good approach to avoiding a surge of homelessness in the community.

EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

Give people experiencing homelessness more time. Often, the closing of disaster shelters means that homeless individuals and families have nowhere to go but to unsheltered locations. Even if they had permanent housing before the disaster, it may be gone, and they usually have not had the time or resources to search for new housing. In addition, people who lived on the streets or encampments may have lost their belongings that enabled them to sleep in these locations. Disaster shelters should stay open long enough to allow for the option of safe placements into new shelter. Communities can use the homeless infrastructure from before the disaster (established shelters and housing), but will probably have to expand that infrastructure to accommodate newly homeless persons.

Leverage new resources. The recovery will bring new resources for repair and new construction. As the community assesses its unmet needs and determines the funds needed for recovery, they should take into account the full housing need in the community, including housing for people experiencing homelessness. Include all stakeholders in the discussion including people experiencing homelessness as well as housing and service providers. As the community allocates recovery resources, they should consider dedicating funds to permanent affordable housing.

Address barriers to long term housing solutions. An individual's lack of identification or other documentation required can limit access to mainstream resources. Service providers should help people experiencing homelessness address these barriers to assistance and establish flexible application procedures where possible.



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Establish interim housing options. The jurisdiction should maximize the number of interim housing options available and communicate these options to those who most need them. This may include working with local, state, and Federal agencies to identify vacant housing or buildings that can be converted to housing and temporary options, or mobile housing. It can also include working with neighboring jurisdictions to identify potential housing options in the vicinity.

The [Recovery Guide](#) covers these considerations in greater detail.