Emergency Playbook for Federal Human Services Programs

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Purpose of This Playbook

This playbook aims to synthesize lessons learned and recommendations from existing resources, emergency management protocols, and interviews with federal program staff about responding to emergencies and disasters. As Federal human services program staff serve populations that often experience marginalization, economic disadvantages, and disproportionate negative impacts in a disaster or emergency context, this playbook emphasizes opportunities for federal programs to deliver human services equitably to all populations during and after major emergencies, especially those with multi-state impacts.

Some of the recommendations and frameworks included apply to the federal human services field generally, while some are specific to individual human services programs and are thus not all-encompassing. Each federal agency and program serves different populations and uses unique frameworks. As your program or office responds to an emerging crisis, emergency management specialists at your agency can provide disaster guidance targeted to your specific agency, program, role, and issue area.

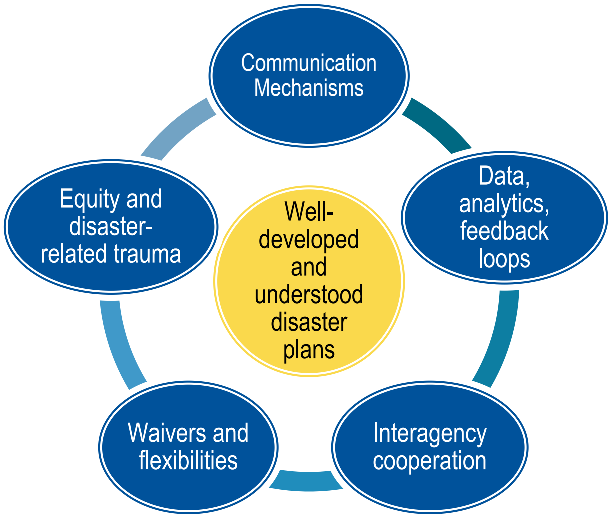
Structure of This Playbook

This playbook is organized by five cross-cutting priority action areas (see Figure 1). Each priority action area is organized by actions federal staff can take during three phases of disaster response: preparedness, response, and recovery.

- The **preparedness** phase includes information on how planning and training can take place before a disaster strikes.
- The **response** phase occurs in the immediate aftermath of a disaster before operations function normally.
- The **recovery** period occurs concurrently with regular operations and activities and supports longer-term recovery.

Underpinning all of these priority action areas is the importance of well-developed and understood disaster plans. Figure 1 depicts that relationship and how each priority action area is connected to the others.

Figure 1. Priority Action Areas for Federal Human Services Programs During Emergencies and Disasters



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Priority Action Area 1

Establish strong, consistent, and effective communication with stakeholders

Objective: Multi-sector communication can help build a unified disaster response, strengthen communication between stakeholders, and ensure stakeholders are aware of each other's roles and disaster services that are available to them. Communicate across sectors and agencies, including and especially with organizations that represent, advocate for, and directly serve members of communities disproportionately impacted by disasters. To facilitate effective two-way communication, program staff can develop comprehensive disaster guidance, templates for planning initiatives, training sessions, workshops, and other resources to disseminate information.

Phase of Emergency	Key Actions	Approaches
Preparedness	Create an emergency communications plan.	• Identify dedicated grantee emergency points of contact and establish professional relationships and communication avenues. • Draft pre-scripted mission assignments and interagency agreements.
Response	Communicate effectively internally and with government agencies at all levels, volunteer agencies, and community organizations.	• Reach out daily to grantees in affected areas to ask if they need additional assistance and determine impacts on the populations the program serves. • Convey needs of stakeholders promptly to relevant federal partners and emergency management experts to identify possible available resources. • Amplify the needs of communities experiencing marginalization, especially voices that are not integrated into other response efforts. • Plan to promptly and regularly update resources (e.g., agency websites).
Recovery	Ensure local entities and communities have multiple sources for information, resources, and support.	• Continue regular communication with grantees, though this may be less frequent than during the response stage. • Use technology, such as webinars and websites, to share disaster response and recovery information and resources rapidly with communities. • Conduct other methods of outreach to communities with limited access to technology due to existing inequities or because of disaster-related disruptions. • Communicate via on-the-ground regional federal staff, local nonprofits, and recovery personnel such as temporary FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers.
	Establish shared nomenclature of emergency management terminology.	• Clarify with state partners and emergency management colleagues a shared understanding of various terms, roles, and services as part of the recovery process.

Playbook in Action

"It can be as simple as a call with a pre-established point of contact in a grantee office immediately following a disaster to quickly debrief on issues and physical damage to understand where grantees have been affected and what types of supports they need. This opens lines for real-time, efficient information sharing."

– Federal program staff

Identifying Grantee Needs

To plan and connect grantees to key information, federal offices may seek information from grantees before, during, and after emergencies about:

- Disaster-specific points of contact.
- Damage to or closure of physical service locations.
- Impacts on staffing and organizational resource needs.
- Challenges meeting federal program requirements.
- Emerging needs of populations served.
- State, local, or tribal response activities.

Priority Action Area 2

Implement real-time analytics, feedback loops, and ongoing data collection from grantees and other stakeholders

Objective: Timely data collection and analysis is necessary to understand a disaster, measure the success of disaster response and recovery efforts, and help federal program staff and agencies react to the changing needs of stakeholders, ranging from survivors of disasters to grantees. These crucial feedback loops can help strengthen coordination among other federal human services programs, regional program managers, grantees, and other affected stakeholders.

Phase of Emergency	Key Actions	Approaches
Preparedness	Incorporate data collection into disaster response plans.	• Detail how to collect, examine, and respond to incoming information about a disaster. • Plan data collection that accounts for the diversity of populations, needs, and resources in communities to help ensure disaster relief is implemented equitably. • Conduct training and technical assistance on how to locate other relevant information, such as flood maps and administrative data.
Response	Facilitate grantee engagement and establish feedback loops to identify rapidly-emerging needs.	• Conduct situational awareness surveys to identify issues affecting grantees, how grantees are addressing these issues, and any training or technical assistance needed. • Ensure data tools identify nuances of grantee needs and inequities in disaster impacts. • Establish recurring meetings that bring together leaders from different human service programs to quickly analyze and respond to rapidly changing data trends. • Ensure there is a plan to use all data requested to avoid burdening grantees while they may be overextended. If data won't be used, don't ask grantees to collect or report it.
Recovery	Collaborate with grantees, partners, and stakeholders to minimize duplication.	• Use demographic data collected by other federal programs (e.g., Social Security, Medicaid, etc.), or community-based organizations to help identify populations in need of additional federal resources, while being cautious of privacy issues. • Avoid siloed and inconsistent data repositories. • Build internal data analytics dashboards based off an inventory of existing data collected across multiple levels, agencies, and offices, such as administrative data and disaster monitoring data. These dashboards do not need to be complex (e.g., spreadsheets and corresponding graphs can suffice if needed).
	Learn continuously and document learnings to be applied in the future.	• Use real-time analytics, data collection, and regular reporting to justify response and recovery decisions and to modify future models and relief and recovery programs.

Playbook in Action

The SNAP program provides links and resources to state agencies on how to locate key information that could inform their emergency response such as household census data, power outage documentation, charts from power companies, and flood maps, to facilitate the data collection process for emergency response.

Approach Snapshot: Office of Head Start

After an emergency, the Office of Head Start (OHS) supports grantees by:

- Communicating with stakeholders to avoid conflicting guidance (e.g., coordinating guidance with USDA/SNAP on flexibilities in reimbursement after a disaster).
- Relaying real-time information between offices. For example, regional program managers first affected by COVID-19 relayed information about impacts on program closures to regional program managers in other regions.
- At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, OHS collected data through a smart sheet on which Head Start centers were open or closed. OHS updated the data every two weeks and created dashboards identifying trends in the data to report to leadership.

Priority Action Area 3

Promote cooperation among agencies, states, territories, tribes, local government, and non-federal entities to help achieve shared goals

Objective: Interagency cooperation can help achieve shared health, well-being, and safety missions. This cooperation may include multiple sectors in addition to human services, such as the public health, medical, mental health, behavioral health, emergency management, and environmental sectors.

Phase of Emergency	Key Actions	Approaches
Preparedness	Establish and communicate clear roles and responsibilities for partners.	• Identify clear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, including grantees, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, and other government entities, accounting for stakeholders' available assets and capacity. • Review emergency response frameworks and update organizational charts.
Response	Promote interagency cooperation through mechanisms such as task forces, collaborative offices, and working groups.	• Establish a consistent set of partners throughout the disaster and begin cooperating immediately. If identified later, add key missing partners quickly. • Identify areas of limited program scope. Coordinate with state/regional program offices and partners to support populations excluded from other response efforts. • Hold daily or weekly calls with community representatives, local leaders, and staff from key agencies and sectors to debrief on current activities and to identify opportunities for collaboration, including through disaster-specific task forces. • Act as a liaison to other federal agencies to communicate inconsistencies in guidance among federal agencies, states, tribes, or territories.
Recovery	Foster partnerships with community representatives to support recovery planning and address unmet needs.	• Utilize community organizations' knowledge of populations affected. • Examine and address as needed how certain policies and activities by different offices, agencies, states, territories, tribes, and local government interact with one another, especially on access to and eligibility for various human services.
	Provide connections and training for grantees to aid in their recovery efforts.	• Provide grantees information on who they can go to for assistance outside of the program, such as connecting them with public assistance funding through FEMA. • Conduct training or TA that helps grantees identify lessons learned from previous emergencies that they can apply to addressing the current emergency. • Support grantees' active participation in state, tribal, or territorial-level recovery coordination and planning in their health and social services recovery support function, and as a federal partner participate in the federal Health and Social Services Recovery Support Function, if activated.

Playbook in Action

One federal agency conducted an "all-hazards" planning assessment (i.e., for many types of disasters/emergencies) by analyzing states' disaster plans, including operational plans, and interviewing state program coordinators. They then held a teleconference to help states reevaluate their plans and improve implementation.

Approach Snapshot: Homeless Service Providers Toolkit

The departments of Veterans Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, and HHS developed a toolkit for homeless service providers that includes an illustrative matrix of key community partners and their roles, strengths and skills, and limitations. The toolkit describes strategies for coordinating among partners, which may be adapted for other human services practice areas. The toolkit is available at https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/docs/VEMEC_Toolkit_20170713_Final_508.pdf

Priority Action Area 4

Identify waivers and flexibilities to support grantees and the public

Objective: Flexibilities and waivers help agencies reduce administrative burden, prioritize staff time, and more quickly meet needs of individuals and families. They also reduce the burden for disaster survivors.

Phase of Emergency	Key Actions	Approaches
Preparedness	Research and communicate with grantees and program staff before a disaster about the waivers and flexibilities available to both program participants and grantees.	• Identify existing requirements, waivers, and flexibilities before a disaster so that program staff do not need to start from scratch in identifying these when disaster strikes. • Communicate information to grantees about what types of waivers or flexibilities are available to them, what they entail, and how to apply for them. For example, develop memos or FAQ documents.
Response	Provide timely technical assistance to federal program staff and grantees about waiver opportunities and how to apply for them.	• Inform communities about available flexibilities immediately following a disaster. • Help grantees navigate the process of locating, applying for, and utilizing waivers and flexibilities by providing standard guidance on flexibilities in funding (e.g., what the funds can be used for). • Share policy guidance on how to distribute and report on emergency allotment funds with program staff and grantees.
	Investigate where existing policies are blocking or slowing down fulfilling the needs of grantees and where waivers and flexibilities need to be implemented.	• Identify unmet needs of grantees and policy barriers to getting those needs met or met promptly. Implement waivers and flexibilities as needed and allowable to help meet these needs. • Provide grantees information on who they can go to for assistance if the program is unable to meet individuals' needs even after waivers and flexibilities are used. For example, connect grantees with FEMA funding.
	Provide to grantees, and revise as needed, guidance on available waivers/flexibilities.	• Provide grantees technical assistance on how to use funds flexibly while maintaining compliance (e.g., develop insights for grantees on what they can do without additional approval to reallocate federal funds to new, pressing needs).
Recovery	Ensure continued service delivery during the recovery phase through waivers and flexibilities.	• Remain updated on any changes in waivers or flexibilities and revise guidance to grantees and program staff as needed. • Document if and how waivers and flexibilities were used or were insufficient to meet emerging needs, including which types of individuals or agencies used such flexibilities, to inform future emergency response efforts and address remaining gaps in flexibility for key groups where possible.

Playbook in Action

In child care programs, switching from attendance- to enrollment-based payments offered financial relief to communities facing COVID-19 shutdowns. Within economic support programs, early waiver flexibilities and the use of online tools to process waiver applications helped programs better handle virtual case processing functions.

Resources for Program Staff

Program staff can explore lessons learned related to human service waivers and flexibilities from ACF's COVID Response Project: Lessons Learned from State Adaptation and Federal Flexibilities, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/media/17677

Examples of waivers and flexibilities provided to ACF grantees can be found in the ACF Emergency and Disaster Waivers and Flexibilities document: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohsepr/training-technical-assistance/acf-emergency-and-disaster-waivers-and-flexibilities

Priority Action Area 5

Address equity implications related to emergency response and recovery, including disaster-related traumatic stress

Objective: Human services programs have a major role to play in reaching all communities affected by disasters and that those populations experiencing marginalization before a disaster do not suffer more because of emergency-related disruptions, including traumatic stress.

Phase of Emergency	Key Actions	Approaches
Preparedness	Gain a deeper understanding of the populations served in normal operations and the potential impacts of a disaster on those communities.	• Identify social determinants of health, vulnerabilities, and capabilities of communities. Factors such as race, income, geography, ability, age, gender, access to internet, and language—and multiple intersecting identities and characteristics—can shape how emergencies affect individuals or communities. • Collect qualitative data during site visits to identify community needs.
	Identify how to equitably carry out disaster response and recovery efforts.	• Develop and include information on how to take an equity-centered approach to disaster response and recovery in disaster plans. • Ensure disaster response plans are trauma informed. • Engage communities in co-developing plans that may affect them.
	Reach out to trusted stakeholders in communities to build buy-in and trust.	• Partner with communities to build trust and to develop plans for involving stakeholders in emergency-related decision-making and service delivery. • Leverage cultural brokers, cultural liaisons, and community leaders to address challenges, including cultural or linguistic barriers.
Response	Investigate how trauma might expand the need for services and consider impacts on program staff.	• Address both underlying traumas and traumas resulting from an emergency. • Identify new populations that may benefit from services due to trauma. • Assess and address the needs of program staff.
	Build on-the-ground workforces that reflect communities served and their needs.	• Employ staff (e.g., case managers and crisis counselors) who reflect or are from communities served. Train all staff on issues pertinent to communities served. • Train staff and on trauma-informed approaches.
	Tailor services and resources to communities based on need.	• Gather information about barriers and disruptions different communities face. • Make resources accessible to people with limited English proficiency.
Recovery	Identify at-risk populations and vulnerabilities of communities.	• Deepen understanding of the inequities facing populations served and unserved populations who could potentially benefit from services. • Ask communities what they need to be resilient.

Playbook in Action

"At the local level, we had to make a special effort to reach out to trusted stakeholders in diverse communities to make sure they were at the table. We [must] bend over backwards to cast [a] wide net beyond our networks. May not be obvious connections. Could be communities of faith, or gathering spots in diverse communities, or inviting leadership of those entities. Build buy-in and trust."

– Federal program staff

Resource for Program Staff: Social Vulnerability Index

To identify communities that may need additional assistance before, during, or after emergencies, program staff could consider using tools such as the Social Vulnerability Index, which analyzes poverty levels and other key factors across zip codes: https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/placeandhealth/svi/index.html

Appendix: Methods and Key Principles Used in Developing This Playbook

Methodology

This Playbook aims to provide federal human services program staff with actions to consider when a major disaster or emergency occurs. The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) contracted Mathematica to develop this Playbook.

It draws on lessons learned by a range of federal human services program offices during recent major emergency, disaster, or crisis events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; West Coast wildfire seasons; hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria in 2017; the Flint water crisis in 2014; and Hurricane Sandy in 2012. It was informed by:

- A targeted document/literature review of emergency management protocols, lessons learned briefs, after-action reports produced following recent major disasters, and guidelines from selected human services programs.
- Key informant interviews with federal program staff.

Key principles

The Priority Action Areas and associated strategies identified for federal human services program offices to consider are grounded in the following key principles that emerged from our research:

- **Coordination with Emergency Management Specialists:** The human services federal response to major emergencies involves interagency coordination among program managers and with emergency management specialists, such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR), and the Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness (OHSEPR) and Office of Regional Operations (ORO) at HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF). In collaboration with their state and local partners, these agencies and personnel support disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.
- **Access to Emergency Management Disaster Plans:** Having well-developed, accessible, clear, and understood disaster plans is crucial for a strong and efficient response and recovery. Human services program staff are encouraged to identify the emergency management specialist(s) in their agency and ensure that they have access to and understand relevant disaster plans.
- **Grantee Communication:** Federal program staff play a key role communicating critical information to and gathering information from grantees and can help ensure the needs of vulnerable populations are met.
- **Identify Lessons for Future Disasters:** Importantly, part of planning is debriefing both within a program/agency and with grantees and other external stakeholders to identify lessons learned, best practices, and areas of improvement after disasters and applying those lessons to future disaster plans and efforts. Several informants explained the importance of improving processes, systems, and guidance after every disaster.