



2.4 Planners and Providers – Bridging the Gap

Disaster planners and service providers need to collaborate to meet the needs of homeless and vulnerable populations during and after a disaster. That means they need to understand each other's backgrounds, perspectives, and processes.

Homeless Service Providers . . .

- Have information, resources, and commitments to their clients (including persons who are unsheltered) that can be useful in a disaster situation.
- Know their communities and some of the most vulnerable people. They know who needs help, what kind of help they need, and whether there are any special cultural or socioeconomic considerations when dealing with their clients. They know where people experiencing homelessness commonly sleep.
- Know the community-based resources (neighbors, small businesses) who are available to solve a problem quickly.
- Respond to emergency needs daily and sometimes face life and death situations. They often operate on shoestring budgets, with limited staff. Disaster planning may require time and resources that providers believe they cannot spare. Therefore, it will be important to demonstrate to providers the critical need for their contributions to the planning effort.
- Might not have financial resources to address emergency needs and will need help from disaster planners to identify resources to increase their services during a disaster.
- Have worked to develop the trust of their clients. Some clients have had difficult experiences with law enforcement or government officials in this country or in their homeland; some maybe undocumented. Others may have mental health issues that make them distrustful of strangers. Homeless service providers can be helpful in reaching and communicating with those in sensitive situations.
- Have clients that may need more support and time to recover than the general public after emergency response systems are shut down. The providers are in these communities for the long haul. Being part of disaster recovery will not be a short-term investment. They will be committed through recovery.
- Can bring in the voices of homeless persons. In these discussions, the knowledge of those who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness can be invaluable. They often have insights and solutions that escape those who have not experienced homelessness.



Disaster Planners know . . .

- They work within a highly organized hierarchy that clearly identifies roles and responsibilities. This structure imposes order in situations that are, by definition, likely to be unpredictable and chaotic.
- The disaster planning hierarchy clearly defines who has authority to declare an emergency and what steps each participating person or agency must take when an emergency is declared.
- Good planning creates a rigid protocol that details what each member of the disaster response team needs to do and when to do it—without wasting time trying to find answers.
- A disaster planning protocol is similar to a medical protocol. It must be followed strictly to avoid loss of life and property and to minimize confusion in a confusing situation.
- A disaster plan includes a communication protocol that ensures those in charge receive accurate information throughout the crisis and are able to communicate changes to the plan as the emergency unfolds. Communication protocols are strictly prescribed to ensure everyone is “rowing in the same direction,” information is passed quickly to everyone who needs it, and no one is left out.
- In an emergency, every minute counts. Disaster planners need to understand the lines of authority within each agency that will provide disaster services. They must be able to depend on their key points of contact to ensure service provider agencies complete all tasks they have agreed to carry out.
- The more comprehensive the disaster plan is, the more effective it will be in a real disaster. A comprehensive plan covers all possible scenarios, addressing what happens in each one and how each person involved responds. No detail is too small. The more planners know, the better they can make decisions in a disaster. This is why the participation of service providers is so important at the planning stage.
- Disaster planning is usually driven by local government, with input and support from state and federal resources. Governments represent large and diverse groups of people. Service delivery by government works best when there are fewer variations. Homeless service providers may be more accustomed to a flexible service delivery model. Too much flexibility in a disaster can result in chaos.
- Governments are typically stable and have more resources than homeless service providers. Homeless providers should specify the resources they will need to carry out their disaster response tasks.