



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.