



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.