Preparing for and Responding to a Disaster or Emergency

Disasters and emergencies can strike quickly and without warning, giving Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) little time to prepare. Small-scale emergencies can affect a few families in a building or block, and large-scale emergencies or disasters can affect an entire town, city, or region. The availability of stable housing during and after a disaster is crucial for protecting lives and helping vulnerable populations recover from an emergency. Because PHAs are a major resource for stable housing for their public housing (PH) residents and Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) participants, it is critical that PHAs reduce service interruptions during and following a disaster to the greatest extent feasible.

Regardless of the nature or scale of the emergency, the best way for PHAs to recover from a disaster is to have a plan prepared for responding to emergencies and disasters that enables continuity of operations. Regularly reviewing the plan with staff, PH residents and HCV participants, and partners will help to enhance emergency response and ensure that PHAs can continue to provide critical services during difficult times. This fact sheet covers the steps that PHAs can take to prepare for disasters and emergencies, and it lists immediate response actions that can help minimize service interruption and begin recovery.

Disaster Readiness

Preparedness Planning

Planning for how your PHA will respond in an emergency or disaster situation is the first step toward protecting your residents, participants, and portfolio. A common best practice is to develop a Disaster Preparedness Plan and a Continuity of Operations Plan to ensure that your PHA can perform essential functions and support residents during any disruption to normal operations.

The development of your agency's Disaster Preparedness Plan should be guided by a few fundamentals:

- **Risk Assessment**: Look for specific vulnerabilities that may pose challenges to your residents, participants, and/or properties under different natural or human-made disaster scenarios. Review your public housing portfolio, office(s), community buildings, and other assets for vulnerabilities. Knowing your risks ahead of time will help your PHA prepare for potential impacts.
- **Internal Policies and Resources**: Review and revise your Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy (ACOP) and HCV Administrative Plan to include disaster preference and transfer policies. Update procurement policies to establish clear emergency procurement procedures. Review your insurance policies to ensure that they are up to date, provide adequate coverage for all properties and administrative facilities, and document available internal and external resources for response and recovery. Have your list of resources easily accessible or posted in a location that is easy to find.

- **Training and Communication**: Establish a list of essential staff who will conduct core preparedness and response activities and make sure that they clearly understand their assignments and responsibilities. Training exercises, drills, and simulations are valuable in helping members of the team understand the challenges of an emergency and their roles during it. Communicate regularly with your residents and participants so that they understand your emergency procedures, establish several outlets for communication to ensure redundancy, and connect residents to resources for their own family preparedness plans.
- **Coordination and Partnerships:** Understand the larger community disaster plan and integrate your plan within that framework. Establish relationships with other community stakeholders and build partnerships with entities across the community to better align resources to support recovery efforts should a disaster occur. Also, become familiar with your local emergency management offices, typically a city or state Office of Emergency Management. It is critical to establish this relationship as part of your preparedness planning and stay in close contact with them immediately following an emergency or disaster.

Your PHA's Disaster Preparedness Plan should be tailored to your local conditions, including potential risks and available resources and agencies. Disaster risks could include natural, technological, or human-made threats. Planning for and responding to those risks may be similar, regardless of cause. Planning should recognize a continuum of disaster risks and likelihoods, ranging from small events that occur frequently to massive (regional or national) events that are highly unlikely.

HUD's PHA Disaster Readiness Plan Template and FEMA's Continuity Plan Template and Instructions for Non-Federal Entities and Community Based Organizations are useful tools for developing a disaster preparedness plan and Continuity of Operations Plan. For more information on risk assessments, low- and no-cost preparedness tips, and other disaster-related content, visit Ready.gov.

Key Elements of a Disaster Preparedness Plan

At a minimum, your agency's disaster preparedness plan should include the following:

- A list of critical business operations and prioritization of essential functions
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all staff
- A list of operational and financial records, including primary and backup storage locations
- A protocol for notifying your Board of your operating status
- A protocol for communicating with external partners, such as the media and local, state, and federal agencies, and designating a single point of contact
- A protocol for resident communications—who is responsible for crafting and distributing messages?
- Temporary housing options for residents
- A directory of local partners and contact information, including the local HUD Field Office

- Guidelines for assessing damage
- Predeveloped checklists and logs
- An established agreement with a PHA outside your geographical location for operational support if needed

Please review HUD's *Public Housing Agency Disaster Readiness, Response, and Recovery (PHA-D3R) Guidebook* for detailed guidance on developing elements of your disaster preparedness plan.

Note: If your region is prone to seasonal natural disasters, such as wildfires or hurricanes, make sure that all responsible staff review your agency's Disaster Preparedness Plan—and practice response elements if possible—in the off-season prior to the increased risk of emergencies. PHAs should review plans and staff assignments for each type of emergency at least annually and again if an emergency or disaster is imminent. This will allow for a smoother and more effective response in the aftermath of an emergency or disaster. Staff should clearly understand their roles and responsibilities before, during, and after a disaster, should the time come.

Disaster Response

First Steps Toward Recovery

During a disaster or emergency, the primary priority for PHA staff, PH residents, and HCV participants should be to take appropriate measures to safeguard their personal safety and weather the storm. Once the immediate threat has passed and it is safe to do so, PHA leadership should begin implementing the steps in its preparedness plan, connect with local emergency partners, circulate pertinent information to residents and participants, and assess the PHA's portfolio.

PHAs should take the following immediate response steps as soon as it is safe to do so:

- **Perform a quick scan**: This includes assessing your business operations, PH residents and HCV participants, and the public housing stock for exigent health and safety (EH&S) issues. These are items that pose an immediate risk to the health and safety of residents and/or the public. This scan will help you understand the full scope of impacts and allow you to prioritize items based on need and available resources.
- **Assess your staff**: Gauge the welfare and capacity of your staff as they conduct essential functions. A useful strategy is for leadership to first contact essential staff and branch out to the remaining staff to ascertain the health and safety of employees and their families. This will help you develop a list of staff who can report to work when it is deemed safe to do so or can work remotely. You can then delegate mission-essential tasks to the available workforce. *Note:* It is important for PHA leadership to monitor the safety and capacity of their staff and support staff who may be balancing their official duties and care for residents with care for their own families and dealing with personal loss of life or property.
- **Assess your offices**: Assess the central office and any scattered-site offices for operational capacity and damage to equipment and records. Activate an alternate or remote workspace for your essential staff, if necessary.

- **Assess your properties**: After the first quick scan, you should perform a more detailed property assessment of your public housing properties to identify all items that require attention. Depending on the types and severity of the disaster, conditions and impacts can quickly evolve, so you may have to reassess properties. Photograph or video the property and associated impacts for future insurance claims and/or financial resources that might become available.
- **Communicate with residents**: Immediately after the disaster, inform your PH residents and HCV participants about how to report unit damage and displacements. The sooner you are aware of the damage and/or displacement the sooner you can take measures to address them. You should establish several outlets for communication to ensure redundancy, and you can create distribution lists through services such as Constant Contact, Rave Alerts, and Everbridge, which allow you to send messages through email, text, and automated phone calls.
- **Communicate with HCV landlords and third-party managers (if applicable)**: Conduct outreach with your HCV landlords and third-party property managers, informing them how to notify the PHA of any damage to subsidized units that would render them uninhabitable.
- **Address exigent health and safety issues**: Prioritize any EH&S items identified during your assessments for mitigation within 24 hours.
- **Secure emergency housing for displaced residents**: Refer your displaced PH residents and HCV participants to the American Red Cross and/or Salvation Army for emergency shelter. You can also use vacant units for temporary housing, if available. Capital Fund dollars and often insurance can be used to pay for emergency hotel stays for your displaced PH residents. You should also refer your displaced PH residents and HCV participants to FEMA for Individual Assistance and Transitional Sheltering Assistance.
- **Report significant damage to your insurance provider**: Immediately contact your insurance provider if you have experienced significant damage or loss to property. The provider should schedule an insurance adjuster to evaluate the property, assess damage, and estimate repair or reconstruction costs. *Note:* If you have the capacity following a disaster, obtain an independent assessment of damage at your properties to help you validate or dispute the insurance adjuster's assessment, if warranted.
- **Report damage and immediate needs to local emergency management offices**: Inform your local emergency management offices, typically a city or state Office of Emergency Management, of your damage and immediate operational and resident needs. This will help support their request for a FEMA Major Disaster Declaration or Emergency Declaration if one has not yet been declared. It will also help you identify partners and service providers that offer financial and nonfinancial support. *Note:* PHAs will coordinate any requests for FEMA Public Assistance (PA) through their state entity that administers PA awards.
- **Communicate impacts with your local HUD Field Office**: At your earliest opportunity, communicate your impacts with your local HUD Field Office. HUD often issues waivers or alternative requirements during periods of national emergencies that could be helpful to the PHA. For large-scale events, the local HUD Field Office will typically reach out to the PHAs in the affected area, but if the emergency is localized, the nearest HUD Field Office may not be aware of the incident. Establish a single point of contact to update the local HUD Field Office.

- **Activate your partnerships with local service providers**: As you identify substantial needs from your PH residents and HCV participants that are outside your book of business (e.g., food, clothing, medical services, and locating lost family), activate your partnerships with local service providers and voluntary organizations that are active in the disaster to support your residents and participants. It is especially important to find partners who can perform wellness checks and provide services to your elderly persons or persons with disabilities after a disaster.

Assessment Checklists

Developing checklists and logs for your emergency preparedness plan will expedite assessments, promote consistency, ensure that all necessary items are reviewed, and establish a record retention process during your response to an emergency. Checklists could include:

- Log of all staff and their emergency contact information, when contact was made with the employee, the employee's status, alternative and best forms of communication, and any other pertinent information.
- Log of PH resident and HCV participant status, including contact information, evacuation status, displacement status, reasonable accommodations and services needed, date of last contact, and notes.
- Damage assessment checklist for public housing portfolio, including name and location of site, damage to exterior/grounds and building envelope, need for debris removal, operational status of utilities, EH&S items, water intrusion, wind damage, damage to dwelling units, and damage to common spaces/ community buildings.
- Damage assessment checklist for central and satellite site office facilities, including name and location of office, damage to building envelope, operational status of utilities and communications systems, and integrity/accessibility of records (physical and electronic).
- Damage report logs from PH residents, including their contact information.
- Damage report logs from HCV participants and landlords, including contact information for both.
- Checklists/logs for other pertinent information that the PHA deems necessary.

Please review HUD's Public Housing Agency Disaster Readiness, Response, and Recovery (PHA-D3R) Guidebook for information about helpful assessment checklists.

By developing a disaster preparedness plan and activating your plan in response to an emergency or disaster, your PHA is minimizing service interruption and laying the groundwork for recovery for your business operations, repair and/or redevelopment of your property, and recovery for your PH residents and HCV participants. Longer-term recovery planning will ultimately identify all of your PHA's needs and determine the resources available to meet those needs. Please review this fact sheet for steps to take for longer-term recovery from a disaster or emergency.