

NATURAL DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Waiting for the inevitable is not a plan when it comes to natural disasters. The right time for state and local governments to lay the groundwork and craft a sustainable response and recovery strategy is before the hurricane, heatwave, blizzard, flood or tornado strikes.

Specific recovery actions for a community will vary based on the precise nature of the event, the damage it inflicts, and what the community was like before the disaster; however, taking the time to develop a preparedness plan can assist in quickly getting the community on the track to recovery following a disaster. For people within communities impacted by the disaster—struggling to rebuild their lives, homes and businesses while trying to make ends meet—a preparedness plan can make all the difference. Starting this plan before the disaster strikes allows stakeholders to ask critical questions and seek responsible answers.

The Importance of Preparedness Planning

The American Red Cross reports that more than 200 million people are affected by disasters each year. **Comprehensive pre-disaster preparedness planning can make the transition from crisis to recovery more effective, efficient and immediate.**

It is important to understand that disaster recovery begins long before disaster strikes. The process begins with preparedness planning and moves through the response phase before truly entering into recovery. The entire process is personal and interactive; it can be challenging, it can be emotional, and it can be contentious at times. **By working through a planning process before disaster strikes, the planning, response and recovery process can also be rewarding, spirit lifting and empowering.** It can help a community better understand their resources and assets—and ultimately become more resilient.

Preparedness focuses on understanding how a disaster might impact the community and how education, outreach and training can build capacity to respond to and recover from a disaster. This preparedness helps develop the community responses to immediate threats presented by the disaster, including saving lives, meeting humanitarian needs (such as food, shelter, clothing, public health and safety), participating in cleanup, assessing damage, and beginning to distribute resources.

As the **response period** progresses, focus shifts from dealing with immediate emergency issues to recovery activities such as conducting repairs, restoring utilities, establishing operations for public services (including permitting) and finishing the cleanup process.

Effective disaster recovery requires a prioritized workflow with the flexibility to identify opportunities and make adjustments quickly. City and state organizations must be prepared to navigate through a dynamic, ongoing process of planning for and responding to recovery programs that are still in progress. The ability to simultaneously implement and evaluate programs provides a multi-pronged approach to success for both the recovering survivors and the funding organizations. It more quickly provides funding to those in need while collecting useful recipient feedback that can be used to evaluate circumstances and swiftly make necessary changes.

An important key to the success of the recovery process is the development of a **disaster preparedness plan**. This plan should coordinate with and eventually feed into a larger, comprehensive community plan. This coordination with the larger community plan will help maximize the effective use of the precious and limited resources that are available in a post-disaster situation.

Development of a preparedness plan requires a dedicated and in-depth review process, and should include the following steps:

Designate a lead department/agency or outside organization:

- Identify an entity capable of galvanizing wide-ranging support for the disaster preparedness plan and align the resources needed to get it off the ground.

Identify community assets. Current information for this task may be available in existing strategic plans and economic analyses:

- Inventory current assets and economic drivers. This will help determine economic vulnerabilities as well as resources to harness in the event of a disaster. The assessment should include a strong understanding of:
 - Demographics
 - Housing
 - Infrastructure
 - City or municipality administrative capacity
 - Key industries and/or industry clusters
 - Labor and workforce characteristics
 - Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis
 - Local policy framework (e.g., building codes, local and state incentives and regulations, environmental mitigation policy, etc.)

Perform a vulnerability analysis for each potential disaster type:

- The analysis performed in the previous step should be coordinated with analyses from hazard mitigation and land use planners to identify at-risk companies, industries or industry clusters.

Think strategically about how a disaster could affect vulnerable areas:

- Select a methodology for handling the impacts of a disaster in the most vulnerable areas.
- Develop a triage-tiered plan that prioritizes the most pressing community issues.

Solicit community involvement:

- Network with the community to engage them in planning for disaster.
 - Homeowners, business owners and executives don't naturally see their role in a community's preparedness effort, but in the event of a disaster, local government cannot act alone in addressing all the needs of the community.
- Create stakeholder groups.
 - Involve a diverse and dynamic group of stakeholders, including private and public sectors, elected officials and other key community stakeholders. Include representatives of main recovery segments: housing, public infrastructure, planning and administration and economic development.
 - Ensure there is representation from industries that are local economic drivers; this stakeholder group could also serve as the post-disaster economic recovery team.
 - Make stakeholders aware that planning for post-disaster situations can be a complicated, challenging, and controversial process.

- Establish parameters for the planning process.
 - Ensure that adequate time is given to the planning process.
 - Divide stakeholders into subgroups to focus on specific topics, and then combine their efforts. Establish clear timeframes for each step. This will ensure that the process continues to move forward, keeping the stakeholder groups on target and reassuring the public that although this is a lengthy process, it is finite.
 - Establish a regular meeting schedule for subgroups and the group as a whole.

- Conduct scenario planning for community redevelopment to generate and evaluate options.
 - Define the emergency context and type of disaster.
 - Lead key stakeholders through possible scenarios to identify impact factors.
 - Have stakeholders identify community and economic assets likely to be vulnerable.
 - Work through plausible future situations by combining the recognized forces from the above steps.
 - Develop scenarios of what the community could do in terms of redevelopment or mitigation to protect the community and economic assets.

Propose strategies and steps:

- Establish stakeholder recommendations, strategies and steps that clearly articulate lead actors or entities, roles and responsibilities, action items, and resources needed to complete the effort.

Every community is different, as will be the disaster that could strike it. Gathering information and asking critical questions now can help avoid pitfalls, delay and waste, forming the basis for a “smart” Action Plan that leads to a more efficient, timely and responsive funding process. It can assist grantees in balancing the overall recovery strategies with individual recovery programs.

Online:

<http://www.redcross.org/>
<http://restoreyoureconomy.org/>

This post is Part Two of a six-part series by ProSource Technologies to assist state and local governments with disaster recovery planning. Please e-mail disasterseries@prosourcetech.com to receive electronic notifications of each article as they are released.

ProSource is a professional consulting firm specializing in right of way/site acquisition, relocation, environmental, and disaster and emergency management services for public and private clients. Experience with large-scale recovery efforts around the country has given ProSource the knowledge and capability to help other communities with disaster preparedness planning, as well as manage their critical, finite resources when disaster strikes.