

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 Role of an Action Plan in CDBG-DR Funding

Working in advance of a disaster provides ample time to frame probable needs and develop programs consistent with Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) requirements for funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). To best prepare, one must understand the overall purpose of an Action Plan, its role in receiving CDBG-DR funding, and priorities of CDBG-DR funding. Without this understanding, funding can be delayed.

What is an Action Plan?

Each state and entitlement community completes and submits a Consolidated Plan, which describes community development priorities and multiyear goals based on an assessment of housing and community development needs, economic market conditions and available resources, every three to five years to HUD as a requirement for CDBG funding. This Consolidated Plan also requires an Action Plan to be completed each year. These annual Action Plans, adjusted as necessary, provide a concise summary of the actions, activities, and the specific federal and non-federal resources that will be used that year to address the priority needs and specific goals identified by the Consolidated Plan.

An Action Plan that is developed for CDBG-DR funding is quite different from a yearly Action Plan. Even the most sophisticated grantee can struggle when it comes to making decisions on the priority needs and goals for disaster assistance. For example, in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, two grantees worked through six Action Plan amendments within the first year after HUD's approval of the initial Plan. Initially, needs and priorities are based on short-term fixes. As the recovery process gets underway, a longer-term view must prevail and grantees must be willing to make adjustments through Action Plan amendments.

While using CDBG-DR funding comes with regulations that, without experience and knowledge, can slow the recovery process down, it also **offers recipients the funding and program creation flexibility that is needed and often most effective in the aftermath of a natural disaster.**

Disaster recovery Action Plans for CDBG-DR funding should:

- Be flexible to meet needs, regardless of the size and type of disaster event
- Be designed to connect with wraparound services to provide comprehensive disaster recovery solutions
- Be efficient and cost effective with controls to limit benefit duplication, waste and fraud

- Serve the greatest population—with an emphasis on assisting the most vulnerable in functional areas—including, but not limited to: maintaining independence, communication, transportation, supervision and medical care
- Quickly provide permanent and sustainable housing to those affected
- Encourage revitalization of existing property
- Incorporate mitigation and sustainable building techniques to reduce future liability and promote green development
- When possible, aid in job creation and increased economic activity

Any program contemplated for the recovery process utilizing CDBG-DR dollars must meet one of these national objectives:

- Benefit low- and moderate-income (LMI) persons
- Aid in the prevention or elimination of slums or blight
- Meet a need that is particularly urgent (referred to as an urgent need)

HUD maintains that 50 percent of CDBG-DR funding must be used for the benefit of LMI persons. Plans and programs should be developed to meet this important funding threshold.

After Congress approves disaster funding, HUD publishes the allocations, waivers and any alternative requirements in a Federal Register notice. Grantees—typically states or entitlement communities—must conduct an assessment to determine critical, unmet needs for long-term disaster recovery. Based on their findings and public input, grantees submit a disaster recovery Action Plan to HUD.

The Action Plan's Role in Funding

It takes an act of Congress to appropriate these special CDBG-DR funds, which can take months. **The approval of the Action Plan is the first step in receiving CDBG-DR funds; therefore, having a foundational Action Plan in place before the disaster strikes can greatly accelerate the process.** Without an Action Plan in place, significant delays can occur.

Clear direction, particularly when it comes to funding opportunities, can help victims get back on their feet much more quickly. The months leading up to the appropriation can then be used to fully assess the damage and unmet needs of the area. Instead of starting from point zero, those in charge of relief, recovery and rehabilitation with an already-documented Action Plan can adjust and amend it to sharpen their response.

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:

<https://www.hudexchange.info/>
<http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD>
<http://www.passaiccountynj.org/>

This post is Part Three 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.