

## 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.

### Citizen Engagement and Participation

The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program is a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) initiative that provides flexible grants to help cities, counties and states recover from presidentially declared disasters. To be eligible for CDBG Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funding, a community must create a disaster recovery Action Plan that describes the needs, strategies and projected uses of the disaster recovery funds. **A vital, required element of an Action Plan is citizen engagement and participation.**

Citizens who engage and participate in planning before disaster strikes can help prepare an Action Plan that considers current housing, infrastructure, economic development, and planning and administration needs—which, in turn, will help avoid pitfalls, delays and waste in the future. This preparedness plan will become the foundation for a “smart” Action Plan that will fulfill CDBG-DR funding eligibility criteria, which includes demonstrable citizen participation in developing the recovery strategy.

**Citizen participation is not elective;** it is an explicit requirement per Section 104(a)(2) of the Housing and Community Development Act and by 24 CFR 570.486(a)(6) regulations. The primary goal is to provide citizens—especially low- and moderate-income citizens of the community where CDBG-funded activities will take place—with an opportunity to participate in an advisory role in the planning, implementation and assessment of programs and projects.

**Incorporating citizen engagement and participation into the preparedness plan before disaster strikes allows community leaders to spend more time handling the day-to-day needs of the community in the midst of a disaster.** By learning about specific concerns and vulnerabilities in advance of a disaster, communities can direct their focus to assess the actual damage, compare it to the needs assessment, and determine the projected uses and strategies to disburse CDBG-DR funding while recovering from a disaster. A well-thought-out plan created with the direct input of the community in advance of disaster provides a solid foundation on which decisions can be made quickly, helping to expedite the disbursement of disaster relief funds as they become available.

Reaching out to the community before disaster strikes also helps to raise awareness of the possibility of a catastrophic event, quell unfounded fears with information and a sense of engagement, and improve individual and community readiness for disaster. It also reduces potential legal challenges and citizen complaints, as opportunities for community input are explicitly provided.

Every community is different, as will be the disaster that could strike it. Incorporating citizen engagement and participation into the preparedness plan will result in a community that is more informed, engaged and prepared when faced with disaster.

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This post is Part Five of a six-part series by ProSource Technologies to assist state and local governments with disaster recovery planning. Please e-mail [disasterseries@prosourcetech.com](mailto: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.