



1.2 Assess Your Community’s Disaster Plans

Review your community’s disaster plans to see if they address the specific needs of homeless people and vulnerable populations. Plans could include a multi-hazard mitigation plan, an emergency operations plan, and/or other planning documents.

As you review your local plans, use the discussion and questions below to determine if local disaster plans have considered vulnerable populations and to identify gaps in past planning efforts. Note that this discussion will not provide you all that you need to improve the plans. The next steps in this Planning Guide will help you gather the information and resources you need to improve your local plans. For now, you want to identify what is there and flag potential gaps.

At a minimum . . .

The disaster plans should identify vulnerable populations. The plans should identify who is considered “vulnerable” in your community, and reference the provisions that the jurisdiction has made for those vulnerable populations. If vulnerable people are not specifically identified in the plan, they will be overlooked in the response and recovery. This oversight is dangerous to the vulnerable individuals and will also create challenges that will hinder the larger response and recovery effort.

Disaster plans must include specific arrangements for everyone in the community, including vulnerable people such as:

	Homeless individuals and families. This includes people living in places not designed for human habitation, those living in emergency shelters or transitional housing, and those fleeing domestic violence or other dangers. It also includes people in imminent danger of losing their housing.
	Persons with extremely limited physical or mental capacities with limited to no support, such as home-bound elderly and/or persons with disabilities, and individuals in group homes and/or rehabilitation centers.
	Very low-income households who lack the resources to secure alternative housing. This may include people living in motels, single room occupancy units, public housing residents and other housing for very low income people.



A stronger plan will address . . .

Stronger disaster plans will address the specific needs of persons experiencing homelessness. The plan should detail the steps that will be taken to accommodate the specific needs of homeless persons as they cope with the disaster and what entity is designated to take these steps. These needs include shelter, services, and evacuation support, as well as appropriate outreach and communication to homeless individuals and families. Key items to keep in mind are those that affect life and safety such as access to safe shelter, food and water, and medication.

Do existing plans address the specific steps that will be taken for homeless people with regards to the following:

Evacuation & Communication/Outreach. People experiencing homelessness have limited ability to be prepared for or respond to calls for evacuation – especially those sleeping on the street, in tent cities, or in other places not meant for human habitation. Common means of communication – emergency alerts by phone and text, radio, TV, and other outlets may not reach these individuals and families. They often do not hear or heed the early evacuation calls. Additionally, they have limited transportation and evacuation options. Does the plan identify specific notification and evacuation activities directed to homeless individuals and families and other vulnerable populations?

- Does the plan include active outreach to homeless people?
- How is transportation arranged for homeless individuals and families?
- Are specific agencies/entities assigned responsibility for ensuring the safe evacuation of homeless people and other vulnerable populations?

Shelter. In many disaster scenarios, homeless people living outdoors will have to move due to unsafe conditions and shelters will have limited occupancy (either due to an influx of newly displaced people or shelters themselves closing due to disaster damage). Do existing plans account for this increased need for emergency beds specifically to support the homeless population?

- Does the number of beds in disaster shelters take into account needs of homeless individuals and families and other vulnerable populations?
- Does the plan include training for shelter staff to identify homeless people and respond appropriately to their circumstances, which may include hygiene, mental health, and substance abuse issues? (When shelter staff are not prepared, people in need often get turned away.)
- Have disability accommodations in shelters been considered, such as wheel chair accessibility or service animals?
- Are there plans for transportation to shelter for people without access to transportation? Do these plans specifically account for people living on the streets or others who may have difficulty getting to the shelter?
- Are there plans to address the needs of families such as space to remain together, transportation to school, privacy for nursing mothers?

Services. As homeless persons are sheltered during the disaster, their existing supports will be disrupted. People with physical and mental illness may not have access to their medication. People suffering from drug addictions may have withdrawal symptoms. These can create life threatening conditions. Do existing plans account for the urgent services that will be needed to support homeless people and other vulnerable people?

- Does the plans address the staffing, services, and arrangements needed to provide support services for vulnerable populations?
- Are there provisions for medications, mental health support, and counseling?
- Are there accommodations for persons with substance use disorders and potential physical withdrawal symptoms?