



# 5.1 Ensure No One Is Left Out: Integrate the Needs of Homeless People in Your Disaster Plans

Use the knowledge of your stakeholders and the data you have collected to improve your disaster plans. Identify needs and likely gaps in services for homeless and other vulnerable populations and work with your stakeholders to identify solutions. This tool walks through an analytic process. You should adapt it as necessary for your community.

## At a minimum . . .

The improvements to local disaster plans should accomplish three critical objectives:

- Establish a common understanding about who will be served and the scope of the effort,
- Define each participating entity’s responsibilities for homeless people in the event of a disaster, and
- Identify the lead entity responsible for coordinating key efforts.

Through these improvements, the plans will enhance the mainstream responses to a disaster so that they do not overlook or exclude homeless and other vulnerable people. The plans should address people who are homeless before the disaster as well as those who are vulnerable to becoming homeless because of the disaster, for example, people who are couch surfing or doubled up in housing. The plans should, at a minimum, include the following:

<b>Critical background information:</b> Provide terms and data to define the scope of the effort.	
	Definitions of “homeless populations” and “other vulnerable populations.”
	Demographic data on the current homeless population and a description of their needs.
	Demographic data on people who are vulnerable to becoming homeless after a disaster, e.g. people who do not own or rent a home but who are not identified as homeless because they find ways to stay sheltered by doubling up or sharing.
	Locations of people who will need specialized assistance and their specific needs in advance of, during, and following an emergency.
<b>Lead agency and partners:</b> List key players and their responsibilities (if no individual already exists in this role, identify someone willing to serve the function).	
<b>Jurisdiction</b>	
	Lead person/agency who will serve as principal organizer of the coordinated response efforts for local homeless and vulnerable populations. Clarify how this person fits into the broader disaster response efforts.
	Person(s)/agency responsible for coordinating key functions including warning and notifications, evacuation and transportation, and shelter and services.



Homeless service providers	
	Homeless service provider representative, and a back-up, that will coordinate with the jurisdiction's emergency response leaders/team during an emergency.
	List of all provider agencies that will assist with emergency response for homeless and vulnerable populations.
Jurisdiction services and supports to be provided: Specify the support that will be coordinated by the jurisdiction.	
	List of warning and notification measures intended to reach homeless people, including unsheltered homeless people.
	Identified evacuation routes that meet the needs of homeless persons. Include transportation arrangements that ensure pick-ups for people unable to utilize standard evacuation routes.
	List of facilities to be made available for shelter. Make explicit policy that shelters will be open to all individuals regardless of behavioral health or physical health issues.

## Stronger plans will include strategies. . .

**Stronger plans will include strategies for meeting the specific needs of homeless people and targeted training to support plan implementation.** The plans should describe the community's approach to warnings and notifications, evacuation and transportation, and shelter and services. These may include medical, behavioral health, and other services critical to stabilizing homeless and vulnerable populations after the disaster. Ideally, the approach will focus on continuity of operations for existing services as well as plans to address surges in needs related to the disaster.

The table below provides a list of possible responses. You should choose the ones that are appropriate for your community. See the companion [Disaster Response Guide](#) for additional detail on how to put in place and implement these strategies.

<b>Risk Analysis:</b> The larger disaster plan will identify the types of disasters that can occur in your jurisdiction and the mainstream response. The effect of particular types of disasters on homeless populations may be different than the effect on mainstream populations, and therefore the risks are different. For example, unsheltered homeless people are particularly exposed to disastrous weather events. In developing your plan, you should:	
	Consider the different effects on homeless and vulnerable populations for each type of disaster your community may face.
	Identify circumstances that will likely pose the greatest risk to the health and safety of homeless and vulnerable persons.
	Identify areas of higher risk and prioritize resources to those areas where possible.



**Preparation and Training:** Describe any activities that must take place to prepare for a disaster. Your plan should include provisions to:

	<p>Develop preparedness exercises that embed practices to ensure inclusion of homeless people in the response. Exercises should be conducted to train case workers, emergency managers, homeless individuals and families, or anyone else who needs the information, and should address disaster response for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheltered homeless people (in shelters, motels, and other temporary housing),</li> <li>• Unsheltered homeless people (on streets, in encampments, in cars, and other), and</li> <li>• Existing support services such as existing shelter and food programs.</li> </ul>
	<p>Deliver training exercises to prepare disaster workers to respond appropriately to persons who may present with mental health or physical health issues and to deal with other issues that some homeless persons may exhibit, such as distrust of authority. These disaster workers may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach workers (enlisting existing outreach workers in advance is a best practice),</li> <li>• Evacuation and Transportation personnel – drivers, first responders, and</li> <li>• Emergency shelter staff – intake, mental health specialists.</li> </ul>
	<p>Develop informational materials (posters, fliers, emergency response cards), to be distributed in areas frequented by homeless persons, that include services that meet the needs of homeless persons such as transportation pick-ups near shelters or encampments. Establish easily identified and remembered locations that will have up-to-date information on the status of disasters, etc.</p>
	<p>Communicate regularly with key stakeholders to ensure preparedness acts are completed. Compile lessons learned to improve future trainings.</p>

For additional ideas on preparation and training, consult the [Response Guide](#).

**Warnings and Notifications:** Describe the steps the jurisdiction will take to ensure that homeless people receive the key information needed to prepare for and respond to the disaster.

Your plan should:

	<p>Include a timeline for communication that lists actions that can be taken immediately, as the disaster approaches (if it is one that gives warning), immediately after the disaster, and throughout the recovery period. Consider alternate timelines for different types of disasters (e.g., the timeline for a hurricane is different from that of an earthquake or a terrorist attack).</p>
	<p>Detail the list of duties for outreach teams, including the methods they may need to employ to make direct contact with homeless people and give them essential information on evacuation, transportation, and shelter support. It is most effective and efficient to draw on existing homeless outreach personnel for this work when developing your disaster response plans.</p>
	<p>Describe outreach methods to be deployed, such as the use of existing outreach workers to make contact, distributing emergency cards to homeless persons, calling shelters regarding their status and support needed, and coordinating with emergency personnel to ensure that services are being deployed in a way accessible to homeless people.</p>
	<p>Outline ways that technology can be used to reach homeless and vulnerable populations (e.g., a 211 emergency notification system to reach all shelters and homeless service providers or cell phone alerts to reach homeless persons with phones).</p>

For additional ideas, consult the [Warnings and Notifications Checklist](#) in the Response Guide. Also see the report, [Send Red Not Blue](#).



**Evacuation and Transportation:** Describe the jurisdiction’s approach to ensuring transportation for all affected people to safe locations. This means explicit inclusion of homeless people in mainstream evacuation plans, as well as additional supports to address any barriers specific to homeless populations. Your plan should:

	Identify the mainstream evacuation routes, destinations, as well as pick up points that are easily identified by, remembered by, and accessible to homeless persons. Ensure that evacuation staff have basic training in working with homeless people or that a trained outreach worker accompanies staff on routes.
	Identify additional routes to hard-to-reach areas if the mainstream evacuation routes will not reach all homeless and vulnerable populations.
	Identify alternative transportation arrangements such as bus vouchers or funds for fuel and parking locations for homeless individuals with cars.
	Address any rules guiding the evacuation that could create barriers to homeless people (e.g., Can they bring their belongings or pets? Is evacuation compulsory?).
	Establish a protocol to check with homeless service providers to ensure their evacuation plans are able to proceed.
	Include measures for ensuring ongoing communication with evacuees, especially evacuees in locations outside the community, so that people can be contacted after the disaster and return to the community. Remember that homeless people who relocate outside the community may not receive messages about when it is safe to return. Extra outreach may be needed.

For additional ideas, consult the [Evacuation and Transportation Checklist](#) in the Response Guide.

**Shelter and Services:** Develop a list of all places designated to serve as shelters in the event of an emergency, including their capacities and capabilities. Review the list and assess its adequacy given the likely surge in need for shelter from people who were both experiencing homeless before the disaster and people who are homeless because of the disaster. Keep in mind that a disaster may push homeless persons into shelters that are not equipped and staffed properly to meet their specific needs. To minimize loss of existing shelters and ensure sufficient capacity in disaster-focused shelters, the community should have procedures in place to ensure continuity of operations as well as to respond to the increased needs in shelters after a disaster.

Your plan should:

	Provide adequate capacity for households who were homeless before the disaster, as well as those who were made homeless by the disaster, for the duration of the disaster response and recovery (The Recovery Guide provides checklists to assist with this process).
	Identify the capacity and services of all potential shelters. Consider current shelters and their surge capacity as well as locations for new disaster shelters. Identify facilities that could be rapidly repurposed as disaster shelters (e.g., recent vacant acquisition, schools, etc.).
	Ensure that disaster shelters have services and staff ready to serve the needs of all displaced people, including the diverse population in the homeless community (e.g., families, individuals, youth, and veterans). If not all disaster shelters have supportive services, know which ones do, and plan to provide transportation as needed to those shelters. Providing supportive services will almost always require a pre-existing agreement with the CoC to provide trained workers to the temporary disaster shelters.
	Include the development of guidance for shelter staff on effective and inclusive ways to support all populations, including those with mental or physical health issues and those who may present as “different” to an untrained volunteer.



	Identify required training for professional staff serving homeless populations.
	Include measures for consistent and comprehensive data collection by disaster shelters during the disaster and immediate recovery that allow for continuous assessment of homeless needs. This and other data can be used to evaluate the response efforts. Establishing, in the plan, a uniform set of data points that will be collected from those coming into disaster shelters – and who will be collecting data from each shelter at a community level – can greatly facilitate post-disaster triage for recovery supports. By contrast, if each agency collects only its own relevant data, it results in a huge duplication of efforts and large inefficiencies.
	Articulate a commitment to serving all people impacted by the disaster. This may include making provisions in disaster shelter rules to accommodate people who have a physical illness, behavioral issues, lack identification documents, etc.
	Include a policy regarding households with pets. Some people may forgo shelter to stay with their pets, but inclusion of pets in shelters raises health and safety issues. Talk to local disaster response experts about policies on pets and shelter.
	Outline specific services provided in shelters that vulnerable populations may need such as medical services, mental health services, support for substance use disorders, basic amenities (e.g., clothing and toiletries), issuance of identification, and help with connecting to their support system (e.g. social workers, parole officers). (Note: Be sure to coordinate with parole officers and any other groups that you believe should be a part of the plan, before including them in the plan. A good time to do this would be during the “Identify Stakeholders” and “Meet with Stakeholders” stages of planning, but it could be done at any point.)
	Establish Memorandums of Understanding that are executed in advance and periodically renewed to ensure that services can be delivered by designated parties and that the parties can be compensated for their services.
For additional ideas, consult the <a href="#">Shelter and Services Checklist</a> in the Response Guide.	

## The best plans will include contingencies . . .

**The best plans will include contingencies to respond to the unexpected.** As every disaster is unique, and a jurisdiction’s homeless population is largely transient, unforeseen circumstances will arise. Additionally, an influx of ‘new’ homeless households, created by the disaster, can overwhelm disaster response efforts. Higher than anticipated damage, damage to communication and transportation infrastructure, secondary disasters (e.g. levee breaks, aftershocks), and other such situations can further disrupt systems. Ideally the plans will consider these types of disruptions and appropriate responses.

**Contingency Plans:** Consider contingencies to address needs in disaster response efforts that turn out to be larger and longer than expected. To address such contingencies, you can:

	Develop staffing plans that account for staff that are affected by the disaster and also that rotate individuals periodically to minimize burnout. Identify additional sources for staffing key functions.
	Identify organizations outside of the homeless service network (religious institutions, fraternal orders) that can provide support including volunteers, transportation, materials, and meals.
	Identify vulnerable emergency shelters (e.g., in a flood zone) and possible replacements.
	Develop plans for the return of homeless people to the community in housing or emergency shelter (not back to unsheltered locations). Consider the services, supports, and beds that will be needed.
	Include people living in assisted housing located in high-risk areas in your planning.