

# **Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: A Framework for Child Welfare Agencies**

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# Before a Disaster: At a Glance

## Create a Plan

- Assess the types of disasters the agency might face.
- Develop a child welfare disaster plan (coordinate with department level and statewide disaster plans, assign person responsible, consult with stakeholders, state expectations for providers, write the plan – how to manage, build critical infrastructure, prioritize).
- Conduct or participate in drills on all levels.
- Update the plan regularly.

## Prepare to Manage

- Designate managers in charge and backups.
- Identify essential functions; designate staff and backups to oversee these functions, provide training; plan for communication.
- Assign other critical roles (media, volunteers, liaisons to other States, federal partners, and courts).
- Stress leadership.
- Consider post-disaster workload demands and resources.
- Identify locations for operations (prepare buildings, consider generators, determine possible alternative locations).
- Prepare disaster supply kits.
- Consider flow of funds.

## Enhance Critical Infrastructure

### Coordinate with Key Partners

- Work with emergency management agencies.
- Establish liaisons with other States to coordinate services and share information.
- Build collaborations with other relevant State agencies and programs.
- Collaborate with service providers.
- Coordinate with courts.
- Establish liaisons with federal partners.
- Identify potential volunteers and their tasks.

### Develop Communication Systems

- Establish toll free numbers.
- Establish and use internal communication systems.
- Designate websites for disaster information.
- Prepare for media communication.
- Arrange for and use communication technology (e.g., alternatives to land line telephones; computers and mobile computing; explore GPS locators).

### Strengthen Information Systems

- Build on existing plans.
- Store critical information in statewide automated systems.
- Provide access to automated systems.
- Protect vital records (e.g., off-site backup, protect computers).
- Protect equipment.
- Assess paper records.

### Prepare Staff and Contractors

- Encourage staff to develop personal disaster plans and keep them updated; store information from the plans so they are accessible during a disaster.
- Require staff to check in after disasters and provide information on how to do so.
- Keep emergency supplies in offices.
- Train all agency staff on agency disaster plan; participate in drills.
- Establish support services for staff.
- Develop expectations and support for contracted staff.

### Prepare Families, Providers and Youth\*

- Require foster and adoptive families and providers to develop disaster plans and keep them updated; store information from the plans so they are accessible during a disaster.
- Require families, providers and youth to check in after disasters.
- Provide families, providers and youth with information on emergency preparedness.
- Prepare birth families and families receiving in home services.
- Collect critical identifying information for birth parents when possible; store contact information so it is accessible during a disaster.

\* This includes foster parents, relative caregivers, adoptive families, group homes, residential treatment centers, other facilities serving children in the care of child welfare agencies (psychiatric hospitals).

# During a Disaster: At a Glance

## Manage

- Designated disaster managers take charge; those in charge of essential functions take on their roles; communicate with staff and providers.
- Those assigned to “other critical roles” take on their tasks.

### Workload Management

- Assess the availability of child welfare staff.
- Deploy staff to meet the demands of the disaster and draw on extra resources.
- Carry out work functions identified as essential; waive others.
- Find out what special waivers might go into effect during a crisis and communicate those to all parties needing the information.
- Train staff to answer the toll free phone numbers.
- Rotate local and non-local staff.
- Have managers log situations they address.

### Assess and Respond to Client Needs

- Establish contact with/locate families, providers and youth; maintain database to track.
- Conduct an initial assessment of locations and needs of families, providers and youth.
- Provide information, support and services to families, providers and youth; coordinate with other agencies.
- Provide additional programs/services for children, youth and families affected by the disaster.
- Identify and serve children separated from parents
- Relocate services to alternate locations as required.
- Locate services close to where families and children are.
- Make services culturally competent.
- Inform clients of other available disaster-related services and programs.

### Support Staff

- Offer staff support and opportunities to process emotions.
- Allow staff scheduling flexibility.
- Advocate for staff to have priority in emergency housing.
- Establish a separate administrative center for staff to meet and take breaks.
- Address immediate staff needs (child care, need for goods, funds).

### Manage Volunteers

- Assign a person or position the responsibility of screening, assigning and communicating with volunteers.
- Develop brief manuals or one-page “tip sheets” of instructions for tasks.

### **Coordinate**

- Draw on established relationships with key partners to communicate as necessary about the crisis. Include:
  - statewide emergency management staff,
  - liaisons in other jurisdictions,
  - contractors,
  - service providers,
  - courts,
  - federal partners, and
  - potential volunteers.

### **Communicate**

- Use internal communication system to broadcast messages.
- Ensure that toll free numbers are working.
- Post critical information on websites; keep updated.
- Implement the media plan.
- Review communication technology.

### **Assess Information Systems**

- Review access to computers for staff.
- Check off-site locations with backups of critical information systems.

# After a Disaster: At a Glance

## Manage

- Assess need for new or modified services as a result of the disaster.
- Continue to provide additional services and supports to affected families.
- Provide services to children, youth and families from other States who arrive in your State.
- Coordinate services for children who are out of the area or out of State.
- Continue to provide services to unaccompanied children.
- Ensure service delivery is culturally sensitive and competent.
- For staff answering the toll-free numbers, develop a frequently asked questions document.
- Maintain contact with federal partners.
- Communicate with staff and contractors frequently so they know what is going on.
- Continue support services for staff and contractors to help them deal with the trauma and stress of child welfare work and disaster work.
- Recognize staff efforts.
- Invest in rebuilding; collaborate with partners and with broader emergency response efforts.

## Capture Lessons Learned

- Hold debriefing sessions.
- Update the plan based on these debriefing sessions.
- Communicate revisions to the plan.

## Rebuilding Better Systems

- Assign a person to collect information on rebuilding resources.
- Identify systems that need to be strengthened.
- Build new systems that will improve disaster response and also strengthen critical infrastructure to improve performance and outcomes.