

# **SOUTHSTRONG CITIES**

PEOPLE FIRST. EQUITY CENTERED

## **EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS**

SouthStrong Cities Grab-N-Go Policies

# Emergency Preparedness

JUNE 2021

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## What's the issue?

During emergency events, disadvantaged communities and households are disproportionately impacted due to a variety of social and economic factors. Low-income residents may be the least prepared for emergencies and yet live in neighborhoods that suffer greater damage and are the slowest to recover. During emergency events, individuals within vulnerable communities, including those with disabilities, also have more difficulty accessing aid and shelter, evacuating, and connecting with critical updates and communications. Given which, successful emergency preparedness efforts must incorporate a focus on equity and access issues if they are to succeed. When cities build emergency plans and outreach with equity as a centerpiece, communities become safer, more connected and more resilient.

Data below is published by [GovTech](#): *How to Include Diverse, Vulnerable Populations in Emergency Preparedness*

“ A study of 1,089 people affected by Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama found that 28 percent of those who didn't evacuate couldn't leave because of limited means, according to the nonprofit Fritz Institute. Of those who couldn't evacuate for this reason:

- 71% said they had nowhere else to go
- 37% percent didn't have a car
- 36% couldn't leave their homes without assistance.

84% of those with limited means had household incomes of less than \$50,000; 58% were African-American; 66% were women; 57% said their highest level of education was a high school diploma or less; and 32% had a physical disability.

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## Why does it matter?

Communities seeking sustainability should focus on emergency preparedness and work to make preparedness initiatives a local-level priority. Extreme weather events are prevalent across the US and occur in the South with regularity. Combined with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this context has increased awareness of the benefits cities can achieve through ongoing investments in planning, training and organizing emergency community response.

In general, low-income areas are often vulnerable to emergencies. This is due to legacy issues related to geography (flood-prone neighborhoods, for example) and the lesser capacity for low-income households to devote resources to resiliency preparations (for example, extra food and supplies, extra medication, backup heating or cooling). For these reasons, community investments in emergency preparedness should also consider issues of equity. Emergency plans that include an equity perspective will incorporate the specific needs of the community's most vulnerable residents and neighborhoods and will result in better allocation of scarce resources during times of crisis.

Every city has a responsibility to plan and prepare for municipal operations in the event of emergencies. However, cities often struggle to prioritize emergency preparedness activities alongside day-to-day functions. The degree of city commitment to emergency preparedness is something that communities can both influence and assist with. At a minimum, city preparedness should encompass planning and resiliency for core responsibilities such as public safety, municipal services and infrastructure.

Beyond these plans, cities can lead the important work to educate, train, and coordinate community volunteers. These volunteers can add significant value to city resources and provide critical support in local emergency events. By investing time and attention to a range of preparedness programs, cities can help to develop more resilient and connected neighborhoods and communities.

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## Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

### 1. Develop and publicize City-level preparedness initiatives

Often, the work to formalize emergency plans is housed at the county level. However, communities can benefit from implementing city-level emergency plans, so local knowledge and training are needed ahead of emergency events. This is particularly true for communities where events will be regional in nature, and response capabilities will be spread more thinly. In these areas, the work to enhance self-sufficiency through city-level preparedness can have an important impact.

This level of strategic planning also provides the opportunity for cities to consider how to incorporate equity issues within their emergency preparations. As cities take up the work to develop emergency plans and designate staff leadership, they can assess local community vulnerabilities (both physical and economic) and build programs that acknowledge important equity concerns. With the effort to incorporate equity into emergency preparedness benefits from a local, city-level perspective, city leaders will be more familiar with the vulnerabilities and needs of particular neighborhoods.

#### **Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)**

To guide city-level preparedness, many cities will begin by developing and adopting a local EOP. This document highlights key hazards or potential vulnerabilities for the community, identifies a general operational response to each scenario, and designates key staff and roles. The EOP is typically a fairly formal document, and the structure aligns with similar planning documents at the county level. The benefit of a local EOP is that it identifies community-specific hazards and plans and prompts/indicates the city's commitment to developing local-level preparedness capabilities.

This [North Charleston, SC example](#) presents a standard and thorough EOP, with specific plans for local scenarios.

The EOP is presented within a broader set of information about the city's emergency preparedness efforts:

- [Emergency Operations Plan](#)
- [Emergency Preparedness](#)

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## Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

### Cont. 1. Develop and publicize City-level preparedness initiatives

#### **Provide dedicated staff to manage and coordinate emergency preparedness within the City and with community members and partners**

Work on emergency preparedness must compete against other day-to-day needs within a city and can be hard to prioritize. When a city commits to part or all of a staff position dedicated to this effort, the results can be significant. The dedicated staff helps coordinate and emphasize training within the City's staff and leverage significant volunteer efforts from community members. Emergency preparedness is an example of making someone's specific job, rather than "everyone's job," improve efficiency and results.

For example, Gulf Shores, AL has a designated coordinator and a commitment to work "throughout the year" on preparedness.

#### **Consider how to incorporate equity issues within community emergency preparedness**

Many resources outline the rationale for, and benefits from, equity considerations within local emergency preparedness. Below are some examples:

This Georgetown Law website overviews equity issues within emergency planning, detailed policy goals and planning tools, and several city case studies.

This NAACP guide discusses pre-existing vulnerabilities in some communities, how to prepare communities to be front-line responders, the need to monitor for equity in disaster response, and advance an equitable disaster policy platform.

This 2018 paper, *From Surviving to Thriving: Equity in Disaster Planning and Recovery*, covers many aspects of emergency preparedness and advocates for equity considerations in disaster planning and recovery.

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## Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

### 2. Develop and implement a training schedule for City staff

Cities control how much time will be designated for staff participation in individual training (like FEMA's ICS program), how deep that training will go (citywide or selected staff), and how often staff will participate in various drills and exercises. While no organization can fully prepare for a significant emergency, the investment in an ongoing and active training program helps to ensure that the city has anticipated key operational and safety issues and is positioned to support the community in the event of need.

#### **National Incident Management System (NIMS)/Incident Command System (ICS) training for City staff**

This national training [FEMA program](#) is the standard used by most agencies to organize staff training.

For [example](#), this training schedule for Lynchburg, VA staff outlines which personnel are required to complete various NIMS training courses. Some courses are required for all full-time employees.

#### **Tabletop exercises (TTX) for City staff and partners**

As a complement to FEMA training, tabletop exercises can provide an effective learning opportunity and require fewer resources and time commitment than an active drill. Periodic tabletop exercises can help prepare staff for the issues and coordination challenges that can arise within various emergency events. Because tabletop exercises are less involved than an active drill, they are less disruptive to other operations and can be supported on a more frequent basis (for example, quarterly or twice a year).

Because they are designed to be more conversational than other types of drills, tabletop exercises can be a good venue to invite participation from partner organizations in the community (nonprofits, community volunteers) and youth participants.

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## Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

### 3. City outreach initiatives to increase community awareness and preparedness

Community engagement is a critical ingredient in successful emergency preparedness. During events, community resources are needed to supplement city capabilities. Educating and engaging residents and partner organizations and seeking their preparedness participation is an important component of emergency planning efforts.

A city can access its existing communication channels to publicize emergency preparedness initiatives, highlight key hazards/scenarios for the community, and provide easy access to resources and tools. Cities can also sponsor opt-in communication platforms to help residents stay informed and updated during emergency events.

#### City Website Resources

Cities engaged in local emergency preparedness can use websites to provide a range of information to encourage and assist residents in preparedness.

As an example, the [Augusta, GA website](#) offers a range of resources and an FAQ.

The [Raleigh, NC website](#) offers guidance on toolkits, flood risk and evacuation routes.

#### Community Alert Systems

To assist with communication efforts, many cities offer notification channels for residents to opt-in for emergency alerts. These tools provide important information during emergency events and also prompt awareness and engagement among residents.

For example, the [local alert program](#) in Hattiesburg, MS, provides detailed information on how and when they will utilize the alert system.

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## Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

### 4. City-led training programs for community

While the city organization is responsible for planning and preparing for municipal operations, community residents share the responsibility for making sure households and neighborhoods are ready to be resilient and self-sufficient to the degree possible. This will allow the city's resources to focus on critical life/safety issues during emergencies.

Expanded preparedness in the community means greater capacity during emergencies, as the full range of residents' resources can supplement the efforts of city staff and other first responders. To access this expanded capacity, cities can lead the effort to educate and train residents and to encourage neighborhood-level resiliency through mapping initiatives. Some common types of city-led training programs are below.

#### **CERT Training**

Many cities and/or fire departments organize Certified Emergency Response Team (CERT) training programs.

This [Germantown, TN example](#) explains the goal for CERT training.

#### **Organizing Neighborhood-Level Preparedness**

Cities can lead the effort to have residents work at the neighborhood level to encourage household readiness and map resources and needs. This [Knoxville, TN example](#) includes a guide to help prepare households and expand and develop a neighborhood plan.

Many west coast cities have implemented the Map Your Neighborhood (MYN) program, developed by Washington State and adopted by cities in California and Oregon. MYN encourages readiness at a neighborhood level and provides hands-on tools to identify skills and needs within small groups of households (15 - 20):

- This [Washington State website](#) includes a range of MYN resources, including kits for different types of neighborhood housing.
- This [Wilsonville, OR website](#) provides a typical example of a smaller city's implementation of the MYN program.
  - [Mapping Your Neighborhood](#)



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## Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

### Cont. 4. City-led training programs for community

#### **Medical Reserve Corps**

Cities can lead the effort to identify and organize volunteer residents with special skills and training to support local public health and safety during emergency events. The coordination of a Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) can help supplement the resources of first responders and health agencies. In the context of COVID-19, there is increased appreciation for how local MRC can contribute to public health outcomes during emergency events and help offset some of the capacity challenges that can arise with local health care systems. This can be especially valuable for communities or emergency events where transportation to health care is challenging.

This [US Dept. of Health and Human Services guidebook](#) provides suggestions to local leaders on starting an MRC program.

For example, Alexandria, VA coordinates an MRC, and their [website](#) includes an FAQ about participation and benefits.