

# SECTION: SHELTER

## TOPIC TITLE: Emergency Preparedness



### Importance of Topic:

Emergencies can happen at any time and can directly impact shelter residents and staff to varying degrees. In addition to managing potential crises like evacuation of offices and/or shelters, disasters may also lead to an influx of individuals seeking support from domestic violence programs as incidents of domestic violence tend to escalate during and immediately following disasters. Emergencies can include situations like hurricanes, intruders, tornadoes, mental health emergencies of clients or staff, and loss of heat in the middle of winter. Having a clear emergency preparedness plan with delineated responsibilities and action steps is critical for the agency's ability to provide continuous services.

### Statutes/Professional Standards:

- Code of Virginia Reference: None
- [Professional Standards Reference](#): STANDARD #3:Sexual and Domestic Violence  
Agencies will adhere to sound management practices that demonstrate operational stability, including organizational principles and practices that reflect accountability and transparency. Written protocol for staff that includes instructions for responding to a medical emergency, a mental health emergency, and an emergency that threatens the safety of staff and/or the individuals being served by the staff.

### Terms Used or Needed to Understand this Topic:

Emergency: an event that can be responded to using the resources available at hand, implying that there is no need to request external assistance ([Source](#)).

Disaster: an occurrence disrupting the normal conditions of existence and causing a level of suffering that exceeds the capacity of adjustment of the affected community ([Source](#)).

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Preparedness: taking action before a disaster to ensure that you are ready for the emergency. These actions include developing your plan, training employees, running drills, and pulling together your disaster supplies. ([Source](#)).

## Did You Know?

There are four phases of emergency management:

1. **Preparedness** Is taking action before a disaster to ensure that you are ready for the emergency. These actions include developing your plan, training employees, running drills, and pulling together your disaster supplies.
2. **Response** is the action that you take immediately in response to the threat, primarily to ensure everyone's safety.
3. **Recovery** Is the work of restoring what was damaged or interrupted by the disaster.
4. **Mitigation** involves using lessons learned during the disaster to prevent or lessen the effects of the next emergency or disaster. These actions may help reduce your risk in the future ([Source](#)).

## Racial/Social Justice Focus:

For families that experience additional barriers like language access or financial poverty, accessing services during an emergency becomes even more daunting. Resources needed to stabilize after emergency disasters such as phone/internet access, electricity, clean water, and heat may be limited. A shortage of translators may cause individuals to rely on their family members as interpreters, impacting their ability to fully disclose their situation or needs. People with medical needs may have difficulty accessing providers or pharmacies. The needs of those with physical disabilities are also important to centralize during an emergency so that they can have equitable access to resources and safety.

*Scenario 1:* At the emergency shelter, an advocate receives a tornado warning alert on their phone. Grabbing the emergency supplies box, the advocate goes to each room to inform and get all residents to gather in the windowless hallway for safety. The advocate then double checked other rooms for anyone they may have missed. Within the emergency box, there is a bag of supplies, small items for children, light snacks, small water bottles. The

advocate takes time to process with residents about any concerns, especially for certain residents who have trauma-related to experiencing tornados. Even though most of the present residents have their own phones, the advocate keeps everyone updated on tornado text alerts, hands out water for all, and some fidget toys for kids. They also provide a translated handout of the agency's emergency plan with tornados for Spanish speaking residents, so that everyone is on the same page.

- What could have occurred if the advocate did not bring all residents to a central location?
- Why is it important to center language access during an emergency? How may the survivor(s) feel if they don't know exactly what is happening?
- How does supporting residents together, when possible, instead of separately in their private spaces promote trauma-informed care?
- Each person perceives emergencies differently. What are potential ways that the advocate's own perception of the emergency could be manifested? How may the tone of this event be altered if the advocate displayed a clear sense of panic?

*Scenario 2:* Due to a hurricane warning, residents and staff of Lovehouse shelter received notice that everyone is required to evacuate and move to a safer evacuation site. Staff supported residents who needed transportation support and connected with each resident to ensure they had the medication and items they would need for 24-48 hours. When arriving at the evacuation site, one of the residents, Sam, disclosed to the shelter staff that they received a text that their abuser, Frank, was also planning to arrive at the same location. Sam began to look very fearful, looking around the site, and asked the advocate what they should do.

- What are some immediate options for Sam's safety?
- During the emergency preparedness stage, how can staff identify multiple evacuation site options for residents?

### **Trauma-informed Focus:**

In the event of situations concerning emergency preparedness, survivors of domestic violence are confronted with the additional trauma impacts and barriers. In addition to

prioritizing and assessing their physical safety, validating and acknowledging a survivor's emotions, feelings, and experiences of disasters or emergencies in an accepting, safe, and non judgemental way are essential. Navigating this additional trauma may manifest in a similar way a survivor has processed trauma, but can also present completely new behaviors and reactions. It is also important to assess staff's impact of trauma from emergency situations and their ability to continue serving survivors during this time.

## **Promising Practices:**

### *Overview of General Characteristics:*

- Agency has written emergency preparedness plans and staff are trained on protocols.
- Agency has working relationships with local emergency planning departments, emergency responders in the area, and participates in the Community Emergency Response Team (if available).
- Survivors are informed of emergency plans and in the event that notice is given, like tracking a hurricane, staff work with survivors to safety plan before the critical incident occurs.
- Emergency plans are printed in multiple languages and displayed in accessible locations throughout the shelter.
- Emergency supply preparation is explicitly explained in the emergency plan, with recurring dates to check batteries, expiration dates, etc.
- If an agency has multiple shelter sites, on a shared campus or throughout the community, shelter-in-place options are identified and communicated to staff and residents.

### *Examples:*

- **Samaritan House** (Virginia Beach) must prepare for hurricanes and has learned to navigate the uncertainty of bad weather over time. Samaritan House has hurricane boxes always packed and updated annually that are delivered to each of the emergency houses if bad weather is anticipated. The boxes include flashlights,

battery radio, non-perishable food, can opener, toilet paper, diapers, batteries, etc. The agency is aware of all flood zones/evacuation areas. In the event of an evacuation, staff would transport clients and the hurricane kit to a safe community shelter or alternative location. Samaritan House manages multiple sites requiring excellent staff communication during bad weather situations and being prepared ensures better outcomes in the event of evacuation or power outages due to storms.

*Program Focus:*

- Is your emergency plan accessible to all staff?
- Is there a training component in emergency preparedness to optimize staff preparation? CPR/First Aid? How often is training provided and are refresher training courses available?
- What parameters are in place to support staff experiencing their own traumas during an emergency?
- Is your shelter space equipped with emergency items such as a generator and emergency food supplies and water?
- If in need of evacuation due to flooding or aftermath of a hurricane, have alternative emergency locations been identified?

**COVID-19 Focus:**

Emergency preparedness during COVID-19 is a critical part of making sure survivors continue to receive shelter and services during the pandemic. Agencies will need to act quickly and decisively to enact emergency plans to keep shelters open or to determine alternate locations. This is the same with service provision where plans must be made to continue service delivery or create alternative ways to deliver services during this emergency. The pandemic forces agencies to work with scarce resources and find new ways to fund alternate plans. By using this time to assess an agency's strengths and weaknesses, agencies can develop new strategies for managing other emergency situations in the future.

During COVID-19:

- What new emergency plans will your agency enact to continue services?
- How will your agency use COVID-19 to strengthen your emergency preparedness plans for the future?

### **Additional Resources + Links:**

#### *Publications:*

- [Emergency Preparedness For People with Chronic Diseases](#): Infographic with brief health preparation tips and links for specific issues such as diabetes, cancer, epilepsy, and high blood pressure.
- [Planning ahead for Disasters](#): General guidance and tip sheets on preparing for specific disasters.
- [Natural Disasters and Severe Weather](#): General guidance from the CDC.
- [Clearinghouse on Disasters and Domestic Violence](#): Comprehensive resources & a [planning toolkit](#) for domestic violence advocates and agencies.
- [Winter Weather Preparedness](#): General government guidance on safety during winter weather (also has a collection of links to surviving other emergencies that can be useful information)