

# Working With Children, Youth, and Families on Disaster Preparedness

Child welfare professionals are entrusted with supporting, protecting, and caring for the children, youth, and families living in the communities they serve. This work can be complex and difficult during calm times, and it can become even more challenging during natural, human-caused, or medical disasters. Federal law requires State child welfare agencies to develop disaster plans, and there are steps that staff can take to ensure they are familiar with these plans and are otherwise prepared to respond to crises.

This bulletin outlines the importance of disaster planning in child welfare and discusses how caseworkers, with the help of their supervisors, can prepare themselves and the children, youth, and families on their caseloads for emergencies. It then provides direction for child welfare professionals on response and recovery tactics they can use should disasters occur in their communities.

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While this bulletin addresses disaster preparedness and response (DPR) with children, youth, and families from a practice perspective, there are also strategies that child welfare agencies can implement at the systems level. For a comprehensive look at agency-level DPR, see the Children's Bureau's Capacity Building Center for States' [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems](#) web section.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS IN CHILD WELFARE

As evidenced by the emergencies that have occurred in recent years, such as mass shootings and major weather and public health events, disasters are unpredictable and can impact multitudes of people, including children and youth. Relative to adults, young people have additional needs and vulnerabilities following disasters (for more information see [Understanding the Impacts of Natural Disasters on Children](#) from the Society for Research in Child Development). However, there are several factors that can influence their reactions, including the extent of their exposure to the disaster and a range of individual and family characteristics.

Of particular importance are findings on marginalized groups and their enhanced vulnerabilities to disasters. For example, studies have shown that low-income people are more likely to live in unstable housing that provides less protection from natural disasters and puts them at higher risk for material loss when crises occur (Hallegatte et al., 2017; Phillips, 1993). People from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds suffer greater economic setbacks following disasters and have greater difficulties accessing government aid provided through relief efforts—circumstances that have become especially apparent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Winston, 2021). (For information on equitable approaches to disaster preparedness, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Embedding Equity Into Disaster Preparedness Efforts in Child Welfare](#).)

Research also indicates that child maltreatment risk and reports increase following disasters (Curtis et al., 2000; Keenan et al., 2004; Self-Brown et al., 2013). These events can leave child welfare professionals scrambling to continue their work with families. Child welfare caseworkers are frequently forced to deal with everyday emergencies and high caseloads, which can make it difficult to focus on planning for events that may never occur. It is important, however, for caseworkers and supervisors to take the time to familiarize themselves with agency disaster plans and work with children, youth, and families on disaster preparedness so they can better protect the well-being of those they serve. Fortunately, the strategies that child welfare professionals can use to help prepare families for disasters often overlap with strategies that are critical to ongoing case management.

Many people living in a community impacted by a disaster will focus on taking care of themselves and their loved ones, making the role of child welfare professionals in helping vulnerable young people more critical. A child welfare agency's responsibility to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children and youth in their care continues during a disaster, and caseworkers—with the help of their supervisors—are uniquely positioned to mitigate risks for young people in times of crisis by doing the following:

- Working with the children, youth, and families on their caseloads to prepare for potential disasters
- Providing support to children, youth, and families in the aftermath of the disaster and throughout the recovery phase

- Sharing strategies and resources with caregivers on how to support children and youth as they cope with the impacts of the disaster
- Identifying children and youth who are having difficulties recovering from disasters and referring them to the appropriate services

In addition to disaster planning being good practice, Federal law requires it of State child welfare agencies. The Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288) mandates that these agencies develop disaster plans that include how they will do the following:

- Identify, locate, and continue the availability of services for children under State care or supervision who are displaced or adversely affected by disaster
- Respond, as appropriate, to new child welfare cases in areas adversely affected by a disaster and provide services in those cases
- Remain in communication with caseworkers and other essential child welfare personnel who are displaced because of a disaster
- Preserve essential program records
- Coordinate services and share information with other States

The Children's Bureau requests that States and Tribes provide information about their disaster plans, such as whether they were utilized or have any proposed changes, in their Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR) submissions. For more information, see the [Children's Bureau Program Instructions for State and Tribal CFSPs and APSRs](#).

## **PREPARING CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES FOR DISASTERS**

For child welfare caseworkers and supervisors to help children, youth, and families be prepared for disasters, they must first be knowledgeable about the policies that guide their agency's disaster response activities. Each agency's disaster plan will be unique and account for the specific characteristics of its community and organizational structure. However, research and experience have revealed a set of guiding best practices that can inform agency disaster preparedness and be adapted for a jurisdiction's unique circumstances. For comprehensive guidance on disaster preparedness for child welfare agencies, see [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide](#) by the Capacity Building Center for States.

## **INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION**

When preparing for and responding to a disaster, child welfare professionals can collaborate with human services agencies and other groups, such as emergency-management agencies, courts and attorneys, schools, service providers, community- and faith-based organizations, hospitals, police and fire departments, and vendors for postdisaster necessities (e.g., diapers, toiletries). Developing an integrated approach to disaster planning helps ensure the safety of children, youth, and families because it can facilitate the delivery of necessities, such as income and health-care provision and maintenance, as well as other resources and services administered by outside organizations (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009).

Collaboration can begin with child welfare caseworkers and supervisors seeking out and learning about the disaster preparedness efforts of community partners. Initiating contact with personnel from partnering community organizations and reviewing their disaster-planning materials may inform the disaster preparedness approach that caseworkers use with families. For example, a local emergency-management agency may be able to provide caseworkers and supervisors with a range of tools designed specifically for the communities within the child welfare agency's jurisdiction, such as maps of evacuation routes and emergency meeting points. Cross-system collaboration can also lead to the identification and repairing of gaps that exist in disaster response processes in a community. For more information on how child welfare professionals can initiate collaborations with other community-based organizations and agencies, see the following Information Gateway publications:

- [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Health-Care Professionals\*](#)
- [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Behavioral and Mental Health Professionals\*](#)
- [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators\*](#)
- [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Law Enforcement\*](#)
- [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Domestic Violence Services Advocates\*](#)

Agency staff can also help community organizations in preparing to serve families—especially those involved with child welfare—during disasters. For example, child welfare professionals could help train other first responders on identifying and reporting suspected child maltreatment or implementing trauma-informed response techniques with children, youth, and families. For more information on how child welfare professionals can collaborate with community partners on disaster preparedness, see Information Gateway's [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Disaster Preparedness and Response Professionals\*](#) and the Capacity Building Center for States' [\*Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems\*](#) web section.

### **Example From the Field: Colocated Disaster Preparedness Staff**

The South Carolina Department of Social Services colocates a child welfare disaster preparedness specialist in the State's Emergency Management Division, an arrangement that allows the specialist to form close working relationships and strategic partnerships with emergency personnel (M. Leach, personal communication, June 14, 2021). The disaster preparedness specialist facilitates emergency-response drills, tabletop exercises, and collaborative planning calls that account for the needs of the children, youth, and families in the State's care. When disasters occur in South Carolina, the specialist can readily leverage their emergency-management contacts to assist specific families with immediate needs.

## **DISASTER PREPAREDNESS TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

A child welfare agency has many needs and responsibilities when it comes to disaster preparedness, and it is important for caseworkers and supervisors to understand the specific roles they will play in an agencywide disaster response. Caseworkers and supervisors can begin this process by reading their agency's disaster plans so they know what is expected of staff in a crisis. The following questions are important to consider regarding your agency's disaster plan:

- Where is your agency's disaster plan located and how can you access it during a disaster?
- Is your agency's disaster plan updated on a regular basis? How often do you need to review it?
- What is your agency's chain of command when it comes to disaster response and who are your assigned contact people?
- How will agency staff communicate in the event of a disaster?
- What role are you expected to play in a disaster? What are your assigned tasks?
- Which of your normal job responsibilities must you continue to perform during and after a disaster? Which responsibilities can be put on hold?

If any aspects of an agency disaster plan are absent or unclear, it is important to ask for clarification from leadership—ideally, specialized disaster preparedness personnel, if available. Caseworkers and supervisors who have clear understandings of the roles they will play for their agencies in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery are in the best positions to assist children, youth, and families in the event of an emergency.

## Personal Disaster Planning for Caseworkers and Supervisors

When child welfare caseworkers and supervisors are confident that they and their loved ones are safe during and after a disaster, they are better equipped to assist others. Therefore, they should have personal disaster plans in place that meet the same standards they set for the families they serve. Caseworker and supervisor disaster plans should also account for their assigned and anticipated disaster-related work responsibilities. When creating personal disaster plans, consider the following questions:

- How will you contact your agency in the event of a disaster (i.e., communication method)?
- What contact information will you need for staff members; service providers; and children, youth, and families (e.g., home and cell phone numbers, email addresses)?
- How will you receive emergency alerts and warnings?
- Who will you designate as your emergency contact?
- What are your family's evacuation, shelter-in-place, and communication plans?
- Do you need to assemble or update a disaster preparedness kit?
- Do any family members in your household or community have special needs? What considerations need to be taken into account when helping these individuals during and after a disaster?
- How can you coordinate your personal disaster plan with the work responsibilities dictated in your agency's plan?

Some child welfare agencies may provide staff with disaster plan templates that account for both personal and work considerations. In the absence of an agency-provided template, refer to the sample disaster plans provided by the American Red Cross in their [Make a Plan](#) web section and supplement the templates with any information specific to your work and agency using the guiding questions in this section. Additional disaster-planning information is available at [Ready.gov](#).

## WORKING WITH CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES ON DISASTER PLANNING

Making plans with children, youth, and families—specifically those involved in out-of-home care—so they are ready to respond to emergencies is one of the most critical aspects of disaster preparedness for caseworkers and supervisors. Foster, adoptive, and kinship care families (i.e., resource families), as well as congregate care facilities, should have documented plans on file with their local child welfare agencies that detail how they will keep the young people in their care safe in the event of a disaster. However, because larger congregate care facilities are likely to have their own disaster plans, child welfare caseworkers will likely need to provide more assistance to individual families and youth.

Many State child welfare agencies require foster caregivers to create disaster plans and share them with the children's caseworkers as a condition of licensure, and some agencies also include disaster preparedness in mandatory foster parent trainings. In advance of working with resource families on disaster preparedness, it is important for caseworkers to familiarize themselves with the most up-to-date policies and procedures established by their agencies, including any disaster plan templates or other forms that may need to be filled out or updated by caregivers. The information included in this section incorporates a comprehensive approach to disaster planning and may be used as supplemental guidance to agency planning requirements.

**Emergency contacts and communication strategies.** Resource families can begin their disaster planning by establishing emergency contacts and communication strategies so that each person knows how to locate one another in times of crisis. Each family member should store emergency contact information in a safe, accessible place, such as on the virtual wallet or notes app of a cell phone or on a backpack card (see the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's [CDC's] [Backpack Emergency Card](#) template).

An emergency contact list can include the numbers and email addresses for family members, their child welfare caseworker and other agency contacts, and an out-of-town contact—preferably a friend or relative living in another State who may be easier to reach in the event of an emergency. While families can have multiple options for communicating with each other, one of them should be text messaging, since phone lines can get overloaded during disasters.

The emergency contact lists and communication plans for children and youth in out-of-home care should include detailed instructions for getting in touch with their biological families. Children and youth who are sheltering in place or evacuating with resource families might be anxious to know that their biological parents and siblings are safe. Caseworkers may need to gather additional information on biological families—such as their emergency contacts or comprehensive disaster plans—to ensure that children in out-of-home care can maintain contact with them if they wish.

**Shelter-in-place and evacuation arrangements.** Disaster plans should include arrangements for both sheltering in place and for evacuating homes and communities. Shelter-in-place plans are often utilized for health emergencies and pandemics, as well as for certain types of localized disasters, such as tornadoes, active shooters, or chemical leaks. These plans should include strategies for securing homes and facilities and accessing needed supplies on a family's property. Evacuation plans—typically used during hurricanes, floods, fires, and other large-scale natural disasters—will ideally account for a range of scenarios. Families should consider where they will evacuate to during potential short- and long-term stays, as well as what they will need to bring with them depending on the length of time they may be displaced. If resource families indicate that they will not have a means of evacuation, caseworkers can help set them up with transportation plans and arrangements. When working with other families on a caseload (e.g., in-home cases), caseworkers can help brainstorm possible transportation options (e.g., neighbors, public transportation).

**Physical and mental health provisions.** Another critical component of a disaster plan involves ensuring that a child's physical and mental health needs are accounted for. Families should consider how and where they will obtain health care in the event of an evacuation, and they should always plan to bring children's medical insurance or Medicaid cards with them to their destinations. In addition, any special child-health needs should be specifically addressed and accounted for in a family's disaster plan, including any needed medical equipment and ample backup supplies of vital prescription medications. If families depend on energy to power at-home medical equipment, caseworkers should verify they have a plan in place for recovering medical services.

Caseworkers should encourage families to put all phases of their disaster plans in writing, including emergency contacts and communication strategies, shelter-in-place and evacuation arrangements, and health-care needs. The details should be presented in simple terms so that all family members can remember them. Plans should be saved in digital and physical formats and stored in secure yet accessible locations. Once families have developed and recorded their plans, caseworkers should request copies and encourage families to share and exchange plans with any other interested parties, such as trusted friends and neighbors, personnel from the children's schools, and any service providers that families might be working with. Caseworkers can explain that sharing a disaster plan helps increase the likelihood that children are reunited with families if they are apart when a disaster occurs. Disaster plans should be updated in accordance with the child welfare agency's established review timelines.

### **Example From the Field: Annual Disaster Planning With Families**

Each year prior to the beginning of hurricane season, caseworkers with the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services are required to complete a systematic review of the disaster preparedness plans for foster homes and residential providers to ensure that their placement and contact information is current in the State data systems (L. Calloway, personal communication, May 17, 2021). At this time, they also distribute to out-of-home caregivers the updated emergency preparedness guide and disaster preparedness checklists that account for the needs of the children in their care. Caseworkers can then provide direct assistance to families on obtaining any disaster preparedness items or documents they may need help securing.

**Disaster kits.** Preparing resource families for shelter-in-place and evacuation scenarios can include the creation of a disaster kit—an easily portable container (e.g., a backpack) that is stored in an accessible, waterproof location. A family disaster kit should include the following supplies (Capacity Building Center for States, 2021a; CDC, 2020; Ready.gov, 2021):

- Water (at least one gallon per person per day for several days)
- Food (at least a 3-day supply of nonperishable food for each family member)

- First-aid kit
- Cash
- Copies of children's documents and other important files in a waterproof container (child identification and citizenship documents; medical information, including records, immunization history, and physician's name and contact information; educational records; court orders; home and other insurance documents)
- Agency and attorney contact information
- Prescription medications and eyeglasses or contact lenses (at least a 2-week supply per medication)
- Cell phone with chargers and a backup battery
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Fire extinguisher
- Pet and service animal supplies
- Baby supplies (e.g., formula, diapers)
- Face masks (to help prevent the spread of diseases, such as COVID-19)

Updated emergency preparedness checklists are available on the [Emergency Kit Checklist for Kids and Families](#) section of the CDC website and the [Build a Kit](#) section of the Ready.gov website. For information on disaster kit considerations for children with special health-care needs, see the CDC's [Emergency Kit Checklist for Families With Children and Youth With Special Healthcare Needs \(CYSHCN\)](#) web section.

**Disaster planning with children in out-of-home care.** Children in out-of-home care may have increased disaster preparedness needs, as they often live in unfamiliar surroundings and may not know the necessary safety precautions for their current environments. Disaster readiness is best achieved when all members of the family plan together, and having a disaster plan in place can ultimately help reduce fear and anxiety in foster children if an emergency occurs. While it is important to involve foster children in disaster preparedness efforts, adults undertaking this work—typically temporary caregivers—should take care to utilize sensitive and age-appropriate language, lessons, and tools. The following resources can help caregivers prepare children for disasters:

- [Ready Kids](#) (Ready.gov): A collection of resources for children, youth, and families, including age-appropriate games and interactive tools and checklists
- [Ready Wrigley](#) (CDC): A series of disaster preparedness checklists and activity books designed for young children
- [Let's Get Ready](#) (Sesame Street and Public Service Enterprise Group): A collection of videos, tip sheets, and other interactive resources to help families plan for disasters together

**Disaster planning with youth in out-of-home care.** In many cases, child welfare caseworkers in collaboration with placement care providers should work directly with the youth on their caseloads to develop and update their personal disaster plans and kits—especially youth who will be exiting foster care due to age restrictions rather than permanent placement. As these youth begin to plan for their independent futures outside of the foster care system, they often face significant challenges that require transition-planning assistance from their caseworkers, such as finding housing and employment and continuing their education. However, attention should also be given to disaster preparedness, since experiencing crises can lead to major life setbacks for vulnerable youth (e.g., homelessness, job loss).

The foundation for effective disaster preparedness is authentic youth engagement, which involves a young person and a supportive adult working together as partners to make decisions about the youth's life and future. When it comes to disaster preparedness, effective youth engagement means directly involving them at every stage of the process, starting with the planning phase (Capacity Building Center for States, 2021b). Creating disaster plans and building disaster kits with youth require identifying and talking through potential challenges related to disaster readiness and figuring out the solutions as a team in which members have shared power and influence over the outcomes, such as the implementation of the disaster plan. This process offers an opportunity for youth inclusion in decision-making and helps caseworkers build rapport with the young people on their caseloads. That rapport, in turn, increases the likelihood that youth will feel supported if a disaster happens and that caseworkers will have a better understanding of how to assist them with their specific needs during agency response and recovery efforts.

For more information on working with youth on disaster preparedness, see the Capacity Building Center for the States webinar, "[Disaster Experts & Youth Engagement: A Recipe for Disaster Planning Success](#)." To learn more about youth engagement, see Information Gateway's [Prioritizing Youth Voice: The Importance of Authentic Youth Engagement in Case Planning](#) and [Using Your Voice: A Guide for Youth on Participating in Case Planning](#).

## **RESPONDING TO CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES DURING DISASTERS**

Immediately following the onset of an emergency, a child welfare agency will enact its disaster plan, thereby setting a chain of response activities in motion. Each caseworker and supervisor will have a unique set of responsibilities depending on the nature of the disaster, the agency's general approach to disaster response, and the worker's designated role in those activities. However, there are certain best practices that should inform the approach of all workers, including the focus on locating and reunifying children and youth with their families and providing for their basic and emotional needs.

It is important to note that, while disaster plans are designed to lay out the ideal responses to various types of crises and emergencies, when disasters strike, families may be confronted with unforeseen realities that affect their ability to respond in the safest possible manner. For example, families in the child welfare population often have limited financial resources, and when disasters occur, they may not be able to afford expenses associated with either shelter-in-place or evacuation plans. Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors should keep in mind that the families they serve are often confronted with various disadvantages when they experience disasters, and the bigger the disaster, the greater the potential for disparate outcomes in the absence of aid and intervention.

## Data Documentation and Information Retrieval

As part of their disaster preparedness efforts, child welfare agencies need to assess their technological capacities and develop data documentation and retrieval plans that account for a variety of different access scenarios (e.g., power loss, mobile network failures). Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors should familiarize themselves with these aspects of their agency plans and should be prepared to retrieve information on their families and document any disaster response activities in the event of an emergency. Caseworkers and supervisors should consider the following questions regarding data documentation and information retrieval:

- How will you communicate with children, youth, and families, particularly if you have limited or no access to cellular phone networks, data plans, or Wi-Fi?
- Does your agency have special procedures for documenting casework activities (e.g., communications with families) during and after a disaster?
- Do caseworkers and supervisors have remote access to records? If so, what is the procedure for obtaining access during an emergency?
- What other agencies or organizations might be able to provide the information you need if child welfare records are inaccessible?
- Are there paper records that can provide helpful information during and after a disaster? What processes are in place to preserve these records during various emergencies?

For detailed guidance on addressing data documentation and technology needs in disaster planning at the agency level, see the [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide](#) by the Capacity Building Center for States.

## LOCATING AND REUNIFYING FAMILIES

When a disaster occurs, caseworkers should establish and maintain contact with each of the families on their caseloads—including those receiving in-home services—to verify that everyone is safe and accounted for. Families and certain youth (i.e., those in independent living and those receiving Education and Training Vouchers) will likely be expected to check in with the agency within a designated time (e.g., 24 hours) in accordance with the agency disaster plan. To locate individuals who do not check in, caseworkers should follow agency protocols, which often require calling or texting the family's emergency contact numbers or coordinating with other systems that have child, youth, and family location information. Some States and jurisdictions may have other systems in place, such as mobile phone apps with emergency notification systems that ask families to verify their safety status. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter can also be useful tools for locating and communicating with family members, especially young people. For tips on how to successfully use social media in child welfare practice, see Information Gateway's [Social Media: Tips for Foster Care Workers](#).

## Example From the Field: Emergency Notification App

The Texas Department of Child and Protective Services uses the [Send Word Now](#) app during emergencies to establish contact with foster and adoptive families, provided they have the necessary technological capabilities and indicate a preference for receiving disaster communications through their mobile devices (T. Harris, personal communication, May 27, 2021). Through the app, the child welfare agency can automatically distribute messages to multiple families, such as location and safety status requests and inquiries around any immediate needs that family members may have. After identifying families that are not responding to the app's emergency alerts and messages, caseworkers can focus their efforts on contacting these unresponsive families and, if needed, working with other emergency personnel in the community to locate them.

If a disaster has triggered evacuations, caseworkers may need to take additional measures to locate children, youth, and families. When family members are unavailable at their provided contact numbers, caseworkers should check the area's emergency shelters. In some cases, the nature of a disaster will require families to evacuate to a location outside the child welfare agency's jurisdiction or State. Within each agency, a mechanism should exist to help foster parents obtain legal authorization to evacuate children in out-of-home care across jurisdictional or State lines in the event of an emergency, before having to secure a court order. Child welfare agencies will often have information-sharing agreements in place with neighboring jurisdictions and States, and caseworkers and supervisors should be prepared to coordinate with emergency shelters in these areas to locate displaced families and share information that will aid in the continued provision of their health-care and other critical services. For more information on how child welfare agencies can establish liaisons with other jurisdictions, States, and partners to share information and coordinate services, see the [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide](#) by the Capacity Building Center for States.

Since most children and youth attend school outside their homes, it's not unlikely for them to be apart from their foster families when disasters occur. In cases where young people and their families are separated during a disaster, caseworkers should make it a top priority to aid in the reunification process. Family reunification may require a coordinated, community-wide response (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA] et al., 2013), and caseworkers should consult agency disaster plans for protocols on working with community-based organizations that specialize in reunification during emergency response. Some of the ways that local child welfare professionals can support displaced children and youth and aid in the family reunification process include the following:

- Facilitating culturally and linguistically appropriate temporary care and shelter for unaccompanied children
- Verifying the custody rights of adults seeking children and safely releasing children to verified caregivers
- Sharing case file information across jurisdictional lines so that displaced children, youth, and families can access the services and supports they need

## Disaster Response and Recovery Agencies

The following organizations are among the many entities that operate domestic and/or international disaster response and recovery efforts and may provide critical services to child welfare professionals during times of crisis:

- [FEMA](#): Coordinates the Federal response and recovery efforts when disasters occur in the United States
- [American Red Cross](#): Offers robust disaster-planning, response, and recovery services at the community level
- [Save the Children](#): Provides international [emergency response](#) in the wake of a disaster to children, youth, and families in need
- [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#): Administers a range of [family reunification services](#), including a 24-hour hotline for reporting missing children and access to targeted case management support

## ASSESSING NEEDS AND STABILIZING FAMILIES

Once caseworkers have determined that the children, youth, and families on their caseloads are safe and have been reunified, they should work to determine each family's most pressing needs, including the following (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009; Capacity Building Center for States, 2021a; Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015):

- Basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, sanitation, health care)
- Child welfare-related payments and subsidies
- Flexible funding, if available (e.g., through Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families grants)

After addressing these needs, child welfare professionals can focus on providing emotional support. Caseworkers should ask each family member how they are coping, refer them to support services when needed, and encourage the use of informal and formal supports (Agrawal & Kelley, 2020). Caseworkers can also employ psychological first aid, which involves psychoeducation and support services to promote effective coping strategies and the overall healing process. According to Schonfeld and Demaria (2015), psychological first aid includes the following:

- Providing timely and accurate information that promotes understanding
- Offering appropriate—but not false—reassurance and correcting any misconceptions that might unnecessarily increase fear and anxiety
- Supplying information about possible emotional reactions and suggesting practical strategies to facilitate coping
- Helping family members identify supports in their family and useful resources in their community

One model for providing psychological first aid is [Listen, Protect, Connect – Model & Teach](#), which outlines concrete strategies for providing psychological support in the aftermath of a disaster. For more information and resources on promoting coping in children and youth in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, see the [Helping Children Cope With Emergencies](#) section of the CDC website.

Caseworkers should also try to connect children, youth, and families with needed services as soon as possible following a disaster. Service needs might include the following (Capacity Building Center for States, 2021a):

- Immediate trauma services
- Assistance for medically fragile children and their caregivers
- Additional time for standard service visits due to accessibility and other challenges
- Benefit programs to respond to new needs (e.g., housing repairs or reconstruction)
- Child care for families
- Extra assistance for foster families to provide for all the children in their care

In times of crisis, local service availability may be limited. Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors can consider seeking out virtual options operating outside of their jurisdictions that are able to provide immediate assistance. Additionally, some locally based services may be operational but require alternative locations or relocations. Caseworkers can coordinate with these providers to make their services accessible to children, youth, and families; this may require using mobile units, neighborhood centers, or coordinated outreach.

In addition to providing direct assistance to families, caseworkers can equip caregivers with tools and resources to help children and youth cope in the aftermath of a disaster. First, it is important to remind caregivers to safeguard their own mental health. A caregiver's expressions of fear and stress following a traumatic event may diminish their capacity to provide the proper emotional support to their children and can even threaten children's sense of safety and security and serve as a negative model for emotional regulation (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015).

Caseworkers should also educate caregivers on how to monitor for symptoms of distress in children in accordance with their developmental stages. Caseworkers can remind caregivers that children and youth who have experienced disasters will benefit from having access to a trusted adult who will listen to their thoughts, questions, and feelings and respond truthfully and reassuringly (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). However, the amount and type of information shared with each child should vary by developmental level and by the child's typical coping strategies (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015). Generally, older children, as well as children who cope by using learning and understanding techniques, will benefit from more information. Regardless of age or coping style, it is often best to start with basic facts about the disaster and provide any additional information based on the child's questions. For guidance on helping children at various developmental stages cope in the aftermath of disasters, caregivers can consult the following resources: The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers](#) and the CDC's [Helping Children Cope During and After a Disaster: A Resource for Parents and Caregivers](#).

It is also important for caregivers to be mindful about a child's media exposure following a crisis (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015). Media coverage of a disaster will often contain graphic images and intense emotional content that can be upsetting for children. Easy access to media content via televisions, computers, and smartphones may make it difficult to control a child's viewing of disaster coverage. However, to the degree possible, parents should limit a child's exposure to media in the aftermath of a crisis and maybe even consider reducing adult access, as children can overhear or pickup information secondarily. In households where media is accessible, it can be helpful for caregivers to watch previously recorded disaster coverage alongside children so they can serve as gatekeepers for disturbing images and excessive detail and answer questions in a way that actively helps with the coping process.

### **Safeguarding the Mental Health of Child Welfare Professionals During and After Disasters**

When disasters occur, child welfare caseworkers and supervisors may suffer from secondary traumatic stress—or stress that a professional feels when working with people who have experienced trauma. Following disasters, it is important for agencies to offer their workers access to stress-management services, such as crisis counseling, psychoeducation, and self-care instructions (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). Even if they don't feel they need help, caseworkers and supervisors should strongly consider participating in employer-offered services, as they can give staff a needed outlet for dealing with stress. Secondary traumatic stress experienced by caseworkers can affect their interactions with children, youth, and families, making it critical for them to safeguard their own mental health in the wake of disaster. In addition to utilizing agency-provided services, child welfare professionals can refer to the resources featured in the [Secondary Traumatic Stress](#) section of the Information Gateway website.

## **HELPING CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES RECOVER FROM DISASTERS**

While there are many ways that caseworkers and supervisors can support children, youth, and families immediately following a crisis, some consequences of a disaster will be more severe, and families might need additional supports and services during a long-term recovery phase. After a particularly catastrophic event, there will likely be a long period of recovery and rebuilding that may last months or sometimes even years. Because immediate response efforts can be intensive and may take resources away from continuing recovery efforts, child welfare agencies and professionals will need to account for the long-term needs of children, youth, and families during the planning and immediate response phases of a disaster.

## PROVIDING TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Children and youth often experience trauma following exposure to disasters, which can be expressed as feelings of fear and distress, as well as the sense of dislocation that comes when routines are disrupted and familiar environments are inaccessible (Capacity Building Center for States, 2021a). In addition to these more immediate consequences of disasters, children may also suffer longer-term effects, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Hensley & Varela, 2008; Hoven et al., 2005; Osofsky et al., 2015), somatic symptoms (Hensley & Varela, 2008), depression (Lai et al., 2014), and anxiety disorders (Hoven et al., 2005).

The specific nature of a child's reaction to a disaster in the long term will likely depend on several factors, such as the nature of the event and resulting amount of destruction, the degree of personal or family involvement with the disaster, the duration of time before the child's routine returns to normal, and the nature of any secondary stressors or losses that follow the event (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015). When working with children and youth from a child welfare population who have experienced disasters, it is important to remember that their reactions to traumatic events may be compounded with the emotional distress caused by previous or current maltreatment, or the trauma of being removed from their homes and placed in foster care.

In the weeks and months following a disaster, child welfare caseworkers will often have ongoing contact with impacted children and youth on their caseloads and are well-positioned to conduct assessments and referrals to needed services. Many children and youth experiencing difficulties will not have any observable symptoms, or they will avoid expressing concerns so as not to burden the adults in their lives who are also having trouble coping (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2015). It may be difficult for caseworkers to detect symptoms of PTSD in children and youth, since those suffering from the disorder often actively avoid thinking or talking about the triggering event and any associated reactions to it. For these reasons—and because most children and youth exposed to disasters will exhibit some symptoms of trauma—child welfare professionals should employ trauma-informed strategies that provide support to all children and youth on their caseloads following a community-wide crisis.

In jurisdictions impacted by disasters, it may be useful for caseworkers to conduct universal trauma screenings with valid and culturally sensitive tools that do not require the administrator to have specialized clinical certifications (e.g., [Child Traumatic Screen](#)). Screenings are fundamental to identifying children and youth who may need mental health services or treatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). In the wake of a disaster, child welfare agencies will often ensure that additional mental health services are available to families, and caseworkers should make concerted efforts to connect children, youth, and families who are impacted by trauma with these services. Ideally, child welfare agencies in jurisdictions impacted by disasters will continue to offer increased access to mental health services throughout a long-term recovery phase and in advance of future events that may occur. For more information, see Information Gateway's [The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System](#) and Child Trends' [A Toolkit for Child Welfare Agencies to Help Young People Heal and Thrive During and After Natural Disasters](#).

## REESTABLISHING ROUTINES AND SERVICES

Most people desire a return to normalcy following a disaster. A sense of normalcy is especially critical for children and youth in out-of-home care, many of whom have already dealt with a great deal of uncertainty in their lives. Since changes to routines can lead to anxiety and other difficulties, every effort should be made to reestablish routines as quickly as possible. There are several ways child welfare professionals can assist the children, youth, and families on their caseloads with reestablishing certain routines that increase feelings of normalcy. Ensuring that children and youth attend school is of primary importance, as research shows that teachers can play an important role in helping young people cope following a disaster (Barrett et al., 2008). Children and youth should also be encouraged to see their friends and engage in extracurricular activities.

Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors should also review the continuity of services and reestablish needed services for children, youth, and families following a crisis. This might involve the following (Capacity Building Center for States, 2021a):

- Assessing individual needs for new or modified services
- Continuing to provide additional programs and services to respond to needs, especially those related to trauma caused by the disaster
- Continuing to provide services to unaccompanied children and working to reunite them with their families
- Ensuring service delivery is culturally sensitive and responsive

## VIRTUAL SERVICE DELIVERY

When a disaster impacts a community, it may not be safe for caseworkers and other providers to deliver services to families in person. However, it is critical for caseworkers to maintain communication with children, youth, and families in a manner that provides continual support and access to services (Agrawal & Kelley, 2020). Virtual service delivery, during which contact is established through video or streaming communication channels, offers a safe alternative that allows children, youth, and families to access the services they need. When allowed by the agency disaster plan, virtual contact may also be used during times of crisis to support family time between parents and their children who have been placed in out-of-home care, as well as for family team meetings, court hearings, and other scheduled events.

To adhere to certain safety precautions during the COVID-19 pandemic, many service providers transitioned to a virtual delivery model. Although research on the effectiveness of delivering services in a virtual setting is limited, one study conducted during the pandemic on SafeCare, an in-home services model, indicated that providers perceived strong family commitment to the program (Self-Brown et al., 2020). Specifically, families were actively engaged in the services and made positive progress on developing targeted skills. Providers also noted that virtual service delivery was perceived as less intrusive by families since they were able to participate without providers coming into their homes.

There can also be challenges associated with virtual service delivery. Some families may not have access to reliable internet or technological devices with video capabilities, or they may have data plan limitations or concerns with privacy and confidentiality issues associated with digital streaming and video platforms (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020; Goldschmidt, 2020). Caseworkers and providers facilitating parent-child visits or other services should be prepared to troubleshoot potential technological issues and have backup plans for service provision. To accommodate competing demands of families during times of crisis, caseworkers and service providers may also want to consider adjustments to delivery schedules by offering a wider range of available delivery dates and times or by dividing long sessions into multiple shorter sessions.

For more information on how caseworkers can facilitate and support virtual service delivery, see Information Gateway's [Tips for Supporting Virtual Family Time](#). For information on how agency leadership can assess and plan for technology needs in times of disaster, see the [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide](#) by the Capacity Building Center for States.

### **Example From the Field: Virtual Visitation**

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services' Child and Family Services Division was able to quickly transition to a virtual service delivery approach (A. Beattie, personal communication, July 7, 2021). Family support teams, which are assembled early on in a child welfare case to give families access to services, gained the capacity to meet virtually a few days after the State's stay-at-home orders went into effect. This new virtual approach has allowed for family support team meetings to be held more quickly, which has in turn given children, youth, and families more immediate access to the services and supports they need. Recognizing these benefits for families, Montana plans to continue holding family support team meetings virtually after COVID-19 safety concerns have diminished.

### **ACCESSING DISASTER SUPPORT FUNDS AND SERVICES**

When seeking out disaster support funds and services for families in need, caseworkers and supervisors can first check the FEMA [Individual Assistance](#) program, which may be available if the President issues a major disaster declaration. The program includes a variety of funding sources, many of which provide financial and direct services to eligible individuals to assist with housing, employment, legal fees, and other needs. Disaster assistance may also be available through other government agencies, such as tax relief through the Internal Revenue Service or low-interest loans from the Small Business Administration. Caseworkers and supervisors can also refer to their agency's postdisaster communications, which will often provide up-to-date information on available funding sources.

Disasters will often mobilize other entities, such as nonprofits and corporate entities, to allocate or donate recovery funds, as well as goods and services, to people living in the impacted area. It is especially important for children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system (who are often economically disadvantaged) to gain access to these funds. Child welfare agencies can help connect the families on their caseloads to these resources by assessing eligibility requirements and assisting with application processes. Child welfare agencies can do some of this work in advance, such as determining which services will likely be needed by families and working with community networks that compile information on organizations that provide these services. It is important to note that all work around funding and resource distribution should be done in an equitable manner.

### **COVID-19 Resources for Caseworkers and Supervisors**

COVID-19 has placed additional pressure on vulnerable children, youth, and families who already faced significant challenges prior to the onset of the pandemic. Child welfare caseworkers can play an important role in supporting families during this time of increased stress. The following resources provide guidance to caseworkers and supervisors on how they can safely address the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families:

- [COVID-19 & Boosters](#) (CDC, FEMA, and the White House): The Federal information hub for COVID-19 guidance and other information and resources
- [COVID-19 Resources](#) (Children's Bureau): An information hub presenting current guidance and resources on how to address child welfare practice and system factors impacted by the pandemic
- [COVID-19 State Child Welfare and Related Health Resources](#) (Information Gateway): A list of websites focusing on State-specific child welfare guidelines and responses to the COVID-19 emergency
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information, News, & Resources for Child Welfare Professionals and Others](#) (Child Welfare League of America): A website designed to support child welfare professionals as they navigate the COVID-19 pandemic
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Resources](#) (National Indian Child Welfare Association): A collection of information and resources for Tribal child welfare programs to support their planning for and programmatic response to COVID-19
- [COVID-19 Resources](#) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network): A compilation of resources to help address the physical and emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families

## CONCLUSION

Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors play a critical role in DPR for the children, youth, and families they serve. While it is often difficult to commit time to future needs, disaster preparedness strategies often overlap with strategies that are essential to ongoing case management. Specific disaster preparedness practices will vary by jurisdiction and depend on the policies set by individual agencies. However, there are strategies that all caseworkers and supervisors can employ while working directly with families to help keep them as safe as possible should emergencies occur in their communities. Because disaster preparedness is a cyclical process, it is also important for child welfare professionals to stay nimble and adjust their practice based on lessons learned from current and previous emergencies. Ideally, this involves gathering feedback directly from children, youth, and families who are experiencing or have experienced disasters and harnessing their lived experience to make changes in preparation for future crises.

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