



Disaster Planning for Child Welfare Agencies

Child welfare agencies are entrusted with supporting, protecting, and caring for children and families in their communities. This work can be complex and difficult even during calm times, and it can become even more so in the midst of natural or manmade disasters. Federal law requires State child welfare agencies to develop disaster plans. Doing so is a best practice that can help child welfare agencies be better prepared to serve children and families, both those that were previously in contact with the agency and those that may require the agency’s assistance due to the disaster. This factsheet outlines the reasons child welfare agencies should develop disaster plans, provides an overview of plan development, points to resources for creating preparedness plans, and highlights State and local examples.

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Why Child Welfare Agencies Should Develop Disaster Plans

As evidenced by the disasters that have occurred this century, such as the attacks on September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina, and Hurricane Sandy, the occurrence and impact of disasters are unpredictable. Disasters can leave child welfare agencies and other service agencies scrambling to continue operations, which can be difficult to nearly impossible without ample planning and preparation. Additionally, research has shown that child maltreatment risk and reports increase following a disaster (Curtis, Miller, & Berry, 2000; Keenan, Marshall, Nocera, & Runyan, 2004; Self-Brown, Anderson, Edwards, & McGill, 2013). Child welfare agencies are frequently forced to deal with everyday emergencies and high caseloads, which may make it difficult to focus on planning for an event that may never occur. It is imperative, however, that agencies take the time to develop comprehensive disaster plans to protect the well-being of the children and families they serve.

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 State child welfare 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 a 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 first required that States, as well as Tribes administering titles IV-B or IV-E, submit their plans with their 2007 Annual Progress and Services Reports (APSRs). Thereafter, the Children's Bureau requested that States and Tribes provide information about their plans, such as whether they were utilized or any proposed changes, in their Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and APSR submissions. (See the Children's Bureau Program Instructions for State and Tribal CFSPs and APSRs at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws-policies/program-instructions> for more information.)

How to Develop a Disaster Plan

Child welfare agencies should address the following issues when developing, or updating, their disaster plans (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009; National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2007):

- **Initiation:** Which individuals (both internal and external to the agency) and events can activate the disaster plan?
- **Accountability:** Who is responsible for specific tasks prior to, during, and after a disaster? What is the chain of command?
- **Location:** If the agency offices are rendered unusable, where will the base of operations be? How will staff be notified? How will the new location affect operations?
- **Funding:** How will agency operations be funded during a disaster? How will agency staff and contractors receive salaries or reimbursements? How will families receive regular foster care, adoption, or other payments? How can the agency support families' emergency needs?
- **Communication:** How will agency staff communicate with each other? With families? With other agencies (both in and outside of the agency's jurisdiction)? With the media? What methods (e.g., walkie-talkies, toll-free numbers, 800 MHz radio systems) are available to assist with communication? How can regular communications (e.g., mail, e-mail) be rerouted during and after the emergency?

- **Accessing and maintaining information:** How can files, including information about how to communicate with or locate resource families, be preserved and accessed? How should recordkeeping continue during and after the disaster? What is the agency's back-up data system and where is it located? How will any data system outages affect the use of mobile technology (e.g., tablets for recordkeeping in the field)?
 - **Displaced children and families:** How will the agency be able to track children or families who are forced to evacuate or are otherwise displaced or unreachable? What services or supports can the agency offer? How will the agency respond to and communicate with children and families who were affected by a disaster in another service area and were relocated or displaced to within the agency's jurisdiction? How will the agency respond to and communicate with children and families from its service area who are relocated or displaced to another jurisdiction? How will the agency support or track children and families in placements under the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (both those placed within the agency's service area or those from the service area who are placed in another State)?
 - **Reunification:** How can the agency assist children and families who have been separated during a disaster? How will the agency identify and locate these children and families?
 - **Service provision:** How will the agency ensure that critical services and supports (e.g., mental health and physical health, housing) are provided to children and families without interruption? How will the agency respond to the need for additional services and supports both during and after the disaster?
 - **Family preparedness:** How will the agency assist families and youth involved with child welfare to develop their own disaster plans? How will the agency ensure families providing care to children have the documentation necessary to care for children while displaced (e.g., birth certificates, custody orders placing children in State custody, documentation of authority to make emergency care decisions for the child, health insurance documents)?
 - **Staff support:** How will the agency support staff affected by the disaster (both professionally and personally)? How will the agency help staff develop their own personal disaster plans?
 - **Other disaster plans:** How is the agency expected to complement and coordinate with other State or other local disaster plans?
 - **Specific populations:** How will the agency's plan incorporate the needs of populations with particular needs, such as immigrants and refugees or children with special needs?
- Agencies should put their disaster plans in writing and update them at scheduled intervals. Child welfare agencies should draft the plans in consultation with their stakeholders (e.g., emergency management agencies, other local agencies, contractors, schools, courts, resource parents, youth, community members, State or county government agencies). They also should ensure the plans address disasters of different magnitudes and types (e.g., influenza pandemic, hurricane, flooding).
- After plans have been developed, agencies should disseminate them to all stakeholders and ensure that they are accessible during an emergency. They also should provide training about how to implement the plan and conduct drills to help further familiarize and train staff and others, including resource parents, the local emergency management agency, law enforcement, fire and rescue personnel, schools, hospitals, and transportation agencies.
- Cross-system collaboration and community partnership is an important part of serving children and families. It is even more important in times of crisis. Child welfare agencies should work with local, State, and national organizations, such as the American Red Cross (<http://www.redcross.org/>) and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (<http://www.missingkids.com/home>). They should also consider assisting other agencies and community organizations in preparing to serve children and families, especially those involved with child welfare, during disasters. For example, agency staff could help train other first responders and community supports about identifying and reporting suspected

child maltreatment, assisting children and families during and after a disaster, and addressing the special needs of children during and after a disaster. Agencies can also point community leaders to helpful resources.

Supporting Children’s Mental Health During and After a Disaster

Children and youth frequently experience emotional distress during and after a disaster. This may be in addition to the emotional distress caused by previous or current maltreatment, or the trauma of being removed from their home and placed in foster care. Child welfare and related professionals should be knowledgeable about how to help children and youth feel safe and how to help them cope with and recover from the traumatic effects of the disaster. Child welfare agencies’ disaster plans should include information about how staff can support children’s mental health needs in the wake of the disaster, including how children may react according to developmental level and appropriate responses by adults. For more information, refer to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s Psychological First Aid web section at <http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid> and *Talking to Children After a Disaster or Traumatic Event*, a tip sheet by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, at <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Tips-for-Talking-With-and-Helping-Children-and-Youth-Cope-After-a-Disaster-or-Traumatic-Event-A-Guide-for-Parents-Caregivers-and-Teachers/SMA12-4732>.

Resources

The following resources provide comprehensive guidance about how child welfare agencies can develop disaster plans:

- *Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: A Framework for Child Welfare Agencies* (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement): <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/rcpdfs/copingwithdisasters.pdf>
- *Disaster Preparedness Resource Guide for Child Welfare Agencies* (The Annie E. Casey Foundation): <http://www.aecf.org/resources/disaster-preparedness-resource-guide-for-child-welfare-agencies/>

For additional guidance and information, refer to the following:

- Children & Disasters [web section] (American Academy of Pediatrics): <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/default.aspx>
- Disaster Preparedness & Response [web section] (Child Welfare Information Gateway): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/disaster-preparedness/>
- *Disaster Preparedness in Migrant Communities: A Manual for First Responders* (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service): <http://lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/DisasterPreparednessInMigrantCommunities.pdf>
- Disaster Relief in America [web section] (Save the Children): http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGlpI4E/b.6234483/k.63A0/Disaster_Relief_in_America.htm
- Disaster Technical Assistance Center [web section] (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration): <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>
- Emergency Preparedness and Response [web section] (HHS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): <http://emergency.cdc.gov/>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network [website]: <http://www.nctsn.org/>

- Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response [website] (HHS, Administration for Children and Families): <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohsepr>
- *Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach* (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency; HHS; American Red Cross; & National Center for Missing & Exploited Children): <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/85559>
- Ready.gov [website]: <http://www.ready.gov/>
- *What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Disaster Preparedness and Response Professionals* (Child Welfare Information Gateway): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/cw-disaster-preparedness/>
- *Disaster Plan for the Indiana Department of Child Services*: http://www.in.gov/dcs/files/Disaster_Plan.pdf
- *Disaster Response and Recovery Plan: Continuity of Operations for Child Welfare* (Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child and Family Services): <http://dcfs.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/dcfsnvgov/content/Tips/Reports/Attachement%20A%20DISASTER%20RESPONSE%20AND%20RECOVERY%20PLAN.docrevisions.pdf>
- *2014 Emergency Operations Plan* (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services): <http://tinyurl.com/zc4k3tf>

State and Local Examples

Below are several examples of State and local child welfare disaster preparedness plans to help other jurisdictions form plans that best meet their needs and the needs of the children, youth, and families they serve.

- *Child Welfare Policy Manual: Emergency Operations Plans* (Georgia Division of Family and Children Services): <http://odis.dhs.ga.gov/ViewDocument.aspx?docId=3007239&verId=1>
- *Child Welfare Services Disaster Response Plan Template* (County of San Bernardino Children and Family Services, California): <http://hs.sbcounty.gov/pddhandbooks/Handbook%20PDFs/CWSDisasterResponsePlan.pdf>
 - A Microsoft Word version of the California Child Welfare Services Disaster Plan Template is available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/Forms/English/TEMPAD525.doc>.
- *Disaster Plan* (Ute Tribe Family Services Department): <http://www.utetribe.com/phocadownload/FamilyServices/ChildandFamilyServicesPlan.pdf#page=17>
- *Disaster Plan* (Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services): http://dhhs.ne.gov/children_family_services/Documents/NE%202015-2019%20CFSP%20Disaster%20Plan.pdf

Conclusion

Child welfare agencies and professionals play an important role in preparing and responding to the safety and well-being of children and families during all phases of a disaster. Ensuring comprehensive disaster management plans are in place before a crisis can help agencies protect vulnerable children, youth, and families during the disaster and move toward building resiliency afterward.

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