

Putting the Plan Together: Creating Emergency Plans that Work for Head Start



We see the result of emergency planning in all aspects of our lives. Fire exit signs in public buildings and street signs indicating emergency routes are symbols that assure our safety and ability to cope if a disaster occurs. Recent devastation in the Gulf Coast caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has placed even more importance on planning in case of an emergency. Outlining an evacuation plan, finding emergency food and shelter, and notifying relatives are as important for Head Start centers as they are for individual families.

But how are emergency plans created? What key planning elements can Head Start programs use in the event of an emergency?

The Life Cycle of a Disaster

A disaster's life cycle includes four stages: risk assessment/mitigation, preparation, response and recovery. The life cycle's four stages can be used as a framework for forming the organizational structure of your emergency plan. An effective emergency plan depends on effective planning for each stage.

Risk Assessment/Mitigation - Evaluates possible emergency situations and a program's ability to handle them. Also includes steps made to reduce damage or personal injury (e.g., reinforce windows in case of tornadoes, hurricanes, and wind storms).

Preparation - Assures all program staff and community members understand and can implement an emergency plan through training, regular practice and revision.

Response - The immediate reaction to an emergency. Determines what your program will do in the hours during and after the event.

Recovery - The process your program uses to rebuild and assist in rebuilding the lives of the children and families you serve.



Steps to Developing an Emergency Plan

1. Inventory what you have, what you need, and how you will use it. This will help determine how to use program resources during each stage. Consider:

- Staff roles and responsibilities
- Food, water, shelter, clothes, and other necessities (e.g., medication, developmentally appropriate books and toys, other necessary equipment)
- Phones, radios, electricity, gas, and other utilities
- Transportation support

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Steps to Developing an Emergency Plan (continued)

2. Consider protocols that assure communication with community members during a disaster. These should include:
 - Clearly identified meeting points close to the program, but at a safe distance.
 - Instructions for using alternate forms of communication in case telephone lines are not working. For example, if staff are unable to contact parents using land lines, they may consider using cell phones.
 - A process to collect and store staff and family phone numbers. Lists should be kept in multiple places for easy access.
 - Communication with local officials, first responders, the State Collaboration Office, and the ACF Regional Office.
3. Develop procedures for deciding and communicating the following possibilities:
 - Program closures – all day, early dismissal, late start
 - Program evacuation – family meeting places or child pick-up
 - Shelter-in-place – sheltering children, staff and families, if necessary
4. Define procedures for maintaining confidentiality of child and family records during an emergency. Establish a system to transport files and/or back-up files on easy-to-carry computer storage (i.e., flash drive, jump drive).
5. Assure mental health services are in place for each stage of an emergency. A collaborative plan should include:
 - Input from the Mental Health Consultant and other community social services professionals.
 - Materials to help prepare staff and families in the event a disaster.
 - Resources to assist children and families cope before and after an emergency.
6. Schedule regular practices and evaluation to ensure your program and community are ready for whatever might occur, whenever a situation arises.

Photo by Bob Crooks



Remember!

One of the most important components of program planning is assuring that personal planning for all staff is already in place. If staff members know their families and friends are safe, then they are better able to support the emergency efforts of your program.