



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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Using Your Disaster Plan to Advance Equity in Disaster Response

August 14, 2023

Dear Child Welfare Colleague and Partners:

Each year, communities around the country are affected by disasters and public health emergencies. Over the past several years, we all have seen or have directly experienced the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, tornadoes, historic flooding, wildfires, severe winter storms, record-breaking heat waves, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Emergencies and disasters are destabilizing for all involved but disproportionately impact and widen disparities for marginalized groups, including people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Disasters are also resource intensive, and they can overwhelm human service systems, like child welfare. It can be difficult for agencies to implement equitable practices when disasters hit if they aren't already imbedded into system responses, policies, and practices.

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Congress passed the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (Public Law 109-288), which included a requirement for Title IV-B/IV-E agencies to submit a Disaster Plan every 5 years, as part of the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), and review and update it at least annually in conjunction with the submission of their Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR).¹ The planning and development of the next Disaster Plans provide jurisdictions the opportunity to proactively and intentionally use their Plans to address disparities and promote equity in disaster preparedness and response.

Child welfare agencies have the opportunity in their Plans to be leaders in the planning for and promoting of disaster equity, which is the provision of community-specific services and resources for disaster survivors that are accessible, and culturally and linguistically tailored to mitigate disparities in health and well-being and support resilience. **By proactively planning for an equitable response, child welfare leaders have the opportunity to disrupt the historic marginalization of underrepresented communities.**

The next CFSP for fiscal years 2025-2029 will be due on June 30, 2024. Updated Program Instruction will be distributed at a later date. In the meantime, the Children's Bureau (CB) urges states, tribes, and territories to use this time to intentionally plan and coordinate with community partners to ensure equitable and collaborative Disaster Plans meet the needs of all families, youth, and children and account for the unique needs of staff to reduce disparities and promote well-being for all.

¹ Please see Program Instruction [ACYF-CB-PI-23-01](#) for instructions for submission of the APSR due June 30, 2023.

Why Equity Matters

As the frequency and severity of disasters increase (U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2016), it is critical for child welfare agencies to build equitable practices and protocols into their disaster preparedness and response (DPR) initiatives, specifically their required Disaster Plan. While families from marginalized and impoverished communities have been experiencing severe setbacks from disasters for generations, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on these disparate outcomes. For example, compared with White people, Black, Hispanic and Latinx, Asian, American Indian, and Alaska Native people have all encountered higher rates of pandemic-related infections and deaths in their communities (Hatcher et al., 2020; Rubin Miller et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2021). They have also suffered greater economic setbacks. Black and Hispanic people have experienced higher rates of poverty and food insecurity compared with their White counterparts, and they have had greater difficulties meeting housing expenses and paying rent during the pandemic (Winston, 2021). Compounding the problem are the relative difficulties that these families have in accessing government aid provided through various relief efforts.

For decades, data have shown that Black, Native, and Hispanic children, youth, and families are also overrepresented in the child welfare system (e.g., Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Disasters compound these issues, as vulnerable families are less likely to have access to necessary recovery resources, making it imperative that public child welfare agencies embed equitable practices in all their policies, plans, distribution of resources, and procedures to enable the reduction in racial disproportionality and disparities. President Biden’s [Executive Order #13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#), encourages systems at the intersection of service to communities and systemic racism to build comprehensive approaches to mitigating disproportionality and disparity in marginalized and underserved communities. Embedding equity in the development of disaster plans is an important component of comprehensive planning to support families and children. (For information on equitable practice strategies that can be used across the child welfare service continuum, see Child Welfare Information Gateway’s [Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity](#)).

Embedding Equity in Your Disaster Plan

To ensure a successful recovery for all communities, there must be an emphasis on addressing inequities throughout all aspects of planning for and responding to emergencies and disasters. Child welfare agencies must work proactively with community partners to inform and guide emergency response plans and other government and agency’s efforts to ensure that services and resources for disaster survivors are accessible, responsive to their needs, and are culturally and linguistically tailored to support families, mitigate disparities, and support resilience. To address the disparate outcomes families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds face following disasters, child welfare agencies can embed the following equitable practices into the planning and coordination they will conduct to produce updated Disaster Plans.

Community Engagement and Collaboration.

There is widespread agreement that when disasters or emergencies occur, emergency response personnel and providers of ongoing human services must coordinate more closely to meet the needs of vulnerable populations requiring specialized care. The increasing frequency of disasters

often exceeds the day-to-day capacity and capability of the human services systems, like child welfare, to provide case management and post-disaster assistance, exacerbating pre-existing inequities. However, social services entities that are responsible for case management or service coordination often lack opportunities to coordinate with emergency management personnel and might lack proactive plans to ensure smooth referral processes, service delivery, and reduce disruptions to care.

Community engagement should occur at all levels of disaster planning and response. This supports a planning process that is able to identify areas of opportunity and improvement early and with community. Sharing information between communities and partners better informs decision making and increases the understanding of community needs and available resources. It establishes more effective, culturally responsive communication channels, which is critical in an emergency. For example, it can support an agency’s efforts to better learn how, when, and where effective linguistically appropriate communication with community leaders can occur. Community engagement incorporates explicit community needs into planning efforts pre-disaster response. Most importantly, it promotes trust building, which can increase public participation and implementation of disaster plans.

Through the development process of your Disaster Plan, your agency can take the lead at bringing a diverse set of partners to the planning table to ensure identified community needs and resources like housing, behavioral health, education, and food supports are coordinated, and cross-sector disaster plans are informed by a specific community’s needs, and the plans are in alignment, which can increase access to and equitable distribution of resources.

Effective planning and response to disasters relies on establishing responsive communication and engagement channels with community partners and partnerships with other disciplines. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the federal lead for emergency response and disaster coordination, has [general planning resources](#) you can use to inform your disaster planning process. Since disasters occur within local communities, accordingly, it is important that you coordinate with your jurisdictional emergency management organization alongside community partner engagement as a first step in your local planning activities.

Tribal Nations are important partners to consider and include in disaster planning. Tribes create their own individual disaster plans. As such, effective disaster preparedness planning, response, and recovery in tribal communities includes consideration of the unique cultural and traditional needs of tribal communities. Tribes may also use a different response system. However, it is also important for tribes and states to align their disaster plans so that it is clear to both where efficiencies can be realized and where and how states and tribal organizations can support each other. See “Collaborating With Tribes and Partners” in Appendix A of the [“Coping with Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide”](#) for links to resources agencies can use to work together with tribes on disaster planning.

Racial equity impact assessments.

A racial equity impact assessment (REIA) is an evaluation of how various racial and ethnic groups might be affected by proposed actions or decisions (Keleher, 2014). REIAs can help child welfare agencies identify strategies for addressing potential inequities and may be useful

for various aspects of disaster preparedness, such as efforts around drafting new disaster plans or updating existing ones. One example of a REIA tool is the *Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit* developed by Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation.

A key feature of any racial equity impact statement is community engagement and validation. The impact of proposed actions or decisions should be co-developed and then shared with community partners for continuous feedback and improvement.

Lived experience.

One way both child welfare leadership and direct service professionals can identify equity gaps in disaster planning is by directly engaging members of impacted groups to gain insights and guidance from their lived experience (Office of Governor Kate Brown, 2020; Office of Minority Health, 2011). For example, caseworkers can have ongoing conversations with the youth and families on their caseloads about existing equity concerns. At the agency level, engagement might involve more formal efforts, such as regularly communicating and engaging with community leaders who can elevate critical equity concerns or forming and consulting with equity teams that include youth and families from underserved communities who have experienced disasters firsthand. Agency staff can work to identify trends that surface during these collaborations and then include individuals with lived experience in relevant data-informed decision-making and continuous quality improvement efforts.

Culturally responsive disaster preparedness training.

Many agencies require staff to participate in foundational cultural responsiveness training—an important first step in racial equity education. However, there are also opportunities to integrate racial equity content into DPR training. For example, DPR training can present explanations of how emergency scenarios disproportionately impact people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including specific examples from the community served by the agency (e.g., environmental hazards, housing and food security, mobility). Training can then provide information and invite discussions on how DPR efforts can account for these increased vulnerabilities. *In the Eye of the Storm: A People’s Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum* by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) provides a comprehensive list of potential disaster-related vulnerabilities for people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Language and Accessibility considerations.

DPR messaging and services should reflect and accommodate a community's language needs (Office of Minority Health, 2011). It is especially critical to consider these needs when it comes to any agency-issued disaster correspondence and alerts. Emergency communications should be translated in an immediate and clear manner that is consistent with communications distributed to other groups in the community. Agencies can also consider which communication channels will ensure their outreach efforts have maximum impact (e.g., culturally specific media outlets). During the disaster recovery phase, child welfare professionals should be prepared to assist multilingual families with applications for government aid, as these programs can be complex and inaccessible, particularly for people whose primary language is not English.

Technology was a critical resource that helped to mitigate many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic by providing phones, tablets, internet, and financial assistance for technology. During an emergency or disaster, officials often have difficulty contacting individuals because of limited emergency contact information and inaccessible or destroyed records. As child welfare agencies upgrade their Comprehensive Child Welfare Information Systems, there are opportunities to build in support for emergencies and disasters. Examples include the ability to send out alerts regarding weather, information on how to access policies related to emergencies and disasters, and the ability to upload information regarding plans to evacuate. It also includes developing strategies to identify families who do not have access to important technology to be informed and receive continued support if disaster occurs.

Equitable distribution of resources.

When distributing resources and aid following a disaster, child welfare agencies should account for and address the disproportionate risks and disparate outcomes experienced by children, youth, and families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. There are monitoring tools that should include community engagement, that can assist agency personnel in observing and documenting the differential needs of specific communities as well as potential gaps in service provision. This is typically done through a combination of first-hand observations and interviews with impacted community members. One sample of such a tool is the Response Monitoring Tool in NAACP's *In the Eye of the Storm: A People's Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum*.

Information and Data Sharing

During disasters, timely and accurate information sharing is essential for determining services, resource gaps, and effective and equitable targeting of assistance. In the event of a disaster, CB shares information with the Office of Regional Operations emergency management specialists on related issues occurring in the jurisdiction, such as relocation of families and children or facilities that have been damaged. Communication with state leadership helps CB to stay abreast of issues where support can be provided, and sometimes initiate coordination with neighboring jurisdictions to facilitate evacuation plans. In addition, information collected by programs is shared with the Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response (OHSEPR) to inform waivers and flexibilities and/or additional support resources for the disaster affected jurisdictions and service providers. Specifically, data can be provided to advise FEMA, the Small Business Administration, and other disaster funders of the survivors potentially eligible for assistance (e.g., temporary facilities or sheltering, direct financial assistance, etc.). Further, impact data are collected to provide technical assistance to Congress to inform disaster supplemental appropriations to ensure program funds are directed towards addressing the immediate and long-term impact of the disaster on individuals, households, providers, and communities.

During an emergency, personnel from CB may reach out to collect information on the following:

- The status of children, foster families, and workforce impacted by and possibly displaced due to the disaster;
- Impact on placement facilities;

- The ability to conduct child abuse/neglect investigations, respond to families receiving in-home services, and support youth in transitional living arrangements; and
- Other impacts to services.

We encourage you to connect with your CB Regional Program Specialist and provide this information, as it is central to ACF’s ability to understand the disaster-caused impacts and reinforce or augment your existing capabilities.

Consider the Needs of Staff

Experiencing disasters significantly impacts the health and well-being of both child welfare staff and the families, youth, young adults, and children with whom they work. Child welfare staff are at significant risk for disaster-related trauma as they continue to work with children, youth, and families under difficult and new conditions while facing potential personal stressors such as health crises, social isolation, child care management, property loss, and psychological distress. Staff may also experience overwork and fatigue due to the challenges created by the crisis or disaster while balancing the impact to their own families’ safety and well-being.

We urge child welfare agencies to model being ready for the next emergency or disaster by allowing staff to use time in their workday to prepare themselves and their families. This type of experience will allow the workforce to institutionalize being ready with a plan and help them to be better prepared to support the young adults and families they work with. Everyone can do their part by reviewing resources available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway ([See Disaster Preparedness & Response - Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)), learning more about what to do to build a culture of preparedness ([See National Preparedness Month 2022 | The Administration for Children and Families \(hhs.gov\)](#)) within the community in partnership with emergency management, and preparing yourself and your family ([See Make A Plan | Ready.gov](#)) before a disaster strikes.

Thank you for all you do to support children and families in times of emergency and all year round. We hope you will be able to use this time to intentionally plan and coordinate with community partners to ensure equitable and collaborative Disaster Plans that meet the needs of families, youth, and children and account for the unique needs of staff.

Enclosed with this letter is a resource with additional information and resources to support an effective response to emergencies and natural disasters.

Sincerely,

/s/

Aysha E. Schomburg
Associate Commissioner
Children’s Bureau

Enclosure

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Below is a short list of websites, publications, and other tools to help your agency implement equitable approaches:

- In December 2021, the Child Welfare Information Gateway released an additional factsheet designed to help child welfare agencies address disproportionately in disasters preparedness and response, entitled [Embedding Equity Into Disaster Preparedness Efforts in Child Welfare](#).
- This resource builds on the updated guide by the Capacity Building Center for States and partners entitled, [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide](#), to help child welfare agencies prepare for and respond to a natural disaster. The Guide builds foundational knowledge about disaster planning, response, and recovery; provides examples of real-life strategies from jurisdictions around the country; and shows how to begin the process of planning to effectively respond to any disaster. It highlights how involvement of children, youth, and families in the development of disaster planning is critical and focuses on addressing disproportionate impact.
- [Ready.gov](#). A place for federal resources to help individuals plan for all emergencies and disasters.
- [Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response \(OHSEPR\)](#). An agency within the Administration for Children and Families/ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- [Human Service Needs and Disaster Displacement](#), February 27, 2023. This report summarizes existing literature and available resources on disaster displacement and human services. The findings in this report can provide useful insights to policymakers, agencies, and organizations that provide human services to people displaced by disasters.

Below are links to some resources referenced in the letter

- [Guidance for Integrating Culturally Diverse Communities into Planning for and Responding to Emergencies: A Toolkit \(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity \(Child Welfare Information Gateway\)](#)
- [Working With Children, Youth, and Families on Disaster Preparedness \(Child Welfare Information Gateway\)](#)
- [What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Disaster Preparedness and Response Professionals \(Child Welfare Information Gateway\)](#)
- [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: Leading Your Agency Through a Disaster \(Capacity Building Center for States\)](#)