

BEST PRACTICES FOR NATURAL DISASTERS



A Guide for Elected Officials



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Why This Guide?

These are the kinds of events that every public official dreads, the crises that transform peaceful, productive residents into frightened, frustrated or angry victims:



A powerful hurricane



An uncontrolled wildfire



An unexpected flood



A devastating tornado

Municipalities work hard to minimize their exposure to these events. But the fact remains that the best planning and the most conscientious attention to public safety cannot guarantee that a municipality will weather such events without significant physical damage, major disruption to services and/or human trauma.

In a unique way, these events tax the skills and knowledge of elected municipal officials. The nature of the challenge varies with the form of municipal government, the character of the community and the nature of the event. Much, if not all, of the operational leadership for dealing with a potential natural disaster will come from professional staff in most municipalities. Many of the same staff members who manage smaller-scale emergency events transition into incident management leadership roles for larger-scale incidents. Those staff members can include a City Manager, Fire Chief, Police Chief or Public Works Director, depending on the community and type of event. Still, **elected municipal officials instinctively know that they, too, have a part to play as their communities experience emergencies.** That part, however, is not always obvious.


That's the reason for this guide.

OVERVIEW

In the next few pages, we'll walk through the stages of an emergency and examine the opportunities elected municipal officials may have to serve their communities in times of crisis. We'll also highlight some very important cautions, things that well-intentioned elected officials sometimes do that can negatively impact a municipality's response.

The observations and recommendations were gathered from elected municipal officials, city managers and municipal communicators who generously gave their time and experience as the guide came together. The **Florida League of Cities** extends our heartfelt thanks to all of them.

One of the points many of them emphasized needs to be made upfront. **Each Florida municipality is structured in a distinctive way.** Your citizens approved a charter, and perhaps amendments to that charter, that they believed suited the unique character of their community. The first and most important counsel we can offer here is this: Become familiar with what your municipal charter and policies define as your role. Especially in an emergency, stay within the boundaries of your role.



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policies define as your role.
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Always Ready

To serve effectively in an emergency, you need to be prepared long before the emergency appears. This is why airlines go over the safety protocols on every flight; there may not be time to figure out where the exits are or how to work an oxygen mask if an emergency arises.

In the same way, you need to know how your municipality deals with emergencies of various types long before it happens.

REQUEST A BRIEFING

Ask for a private briefing on your local (municipal and county) emergency management plans. Recognize that the emergency plan itself or portions might be exempt from public record, but it is important for each elected official to understand the concept of operations and what to expect. Your Clerk and Municipal Attorney can help guide you on any exemptions from the public record.

CONFIRM CONTRACTS

Before hurricane season begins, ensure all storm-related private sector contracts are in order. Delays in recovery response or costs of services could be impacted if contracts are signed after hurricane season begins or immediately after a storm event.

HOLD A PUBLIC WORKSHOP

Consider a public workshop during which staff will review appropriate parts of the emergency management plan with your council/commission and for the public. Some communities will schedule an annual information session/town hall meeting to share preparation, response and recovery tips with the community.



TIP:

**Review
*Florida
Statute 252*
as it sets the
structure for
the state,
counties and
municipalities
to operate
during a
declared
emergency.**

OBSERVE EMERGENCY SIMULATIONS

If you have the opportunity to participate in or observe emergency simulations or tabletop exercises, take advantage of those opportunities. Knowing how your city will respond to various kinds of emergencies can help you help your constituents understand what is happening when an emergency arises.

DETERMINE KEY CONTACTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

- ▶ Familiarize yourself with all key stakeholders at the municipal, county and state levels during a declared state of emergency.
- ▶ Confirm that you have current names and contact information for the community leaders, such as presidents of homeowners associations and the Chamber of Commerce as well as key religious leaders. They will play an important role in helping you identify community needs and will disseminate information during and after the storm.
- ▶ Ask for the key contacts you should use in the event of an emergency.
- ▶ Be sure key staff have your personal contact information so they can reach you in the event of an emergency.

COMMUNICATE YOUR ROLE WITH FAMILY

Discuss with your family how you will balance your public and family responsibilities in the event of an emergency.

On the Horizon

Some potential emergencies, like hurricanes, usually come with some advance warning. Flooding events induced by tides, winds or heavy rain also may provide some advance notice. For these sorts of emergencies, there's an opportunity (and a necessity) to do some additional preparation in the hours or days before they arrive.



REVIEW EMERGENCY PLAN

- ▶ Review the relevant elements of your municipality's emergency plan.
- ▶ Confirm how you will receive updates on your municipality's implementation of the emergency plan.



SHARE CONTENT FROM OFFICIAL SOURCE

Link your followers directly to the official source at all times; don't try to summarize information about what may be a rapidly changing situation. Items to communicate include:

- ▶ Individual preparedness
- ▶ Additional steps neighborhoods could take
- ▶ Immediate action to be taken after the storm event



KEEP UP TO DATE

Stay informed about forecasts and official municipal announcements. In addition, share information from your emergency management officials about the weather predictions. This information helps the public understand the severity of this particular storm, what to expect and how the event could impact the community (for example, a wind event vs. flooding). This is another opportunity to get the word out on where the most accurate, up-to-date information can be found and how to reach out for assistance if needed.



DIRECT CONSTITUENTS TO MUNICIPAL OFFICIAL CHANNELS

Encourage constituents to follow the official municipal communication channels, and make sure the municipality is communicating information from your area's emergency management officials in real time. **Pushing outdated information does not help the preparation/recovery effort and may lead to mass public frustration.** For example, share a link to the information source so they can continue to access the latest information. Some municipalities and counties add "This information is outdated" to old social media posts that no longer contain correct information.



CHECK WITH MUNICIPAL STAFF

Confirm that municipal staff members have your personal contact information and know where you will be.

In the Midst of the Storm

One of the most difficult and, for public officials, frustrating periods is dealing with an emergency during the actual event. Initial media reports may not be accurate because information can be quickly coming from multiple sources and is still being verified. Whatever the emergency, to some extent the unfolding events will be beyond official control. This is especially true for elected officials. **If your role does not include your being present at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), don't plan on being present during the storm and immediately after impact.** The professionals need to be given space (and support) to do their job.

The role that elected officials can and should play during this period, however, is incredibly important. Using your public profile and your direct connection to constituents, you can help ensure accurate communication of essential information and give the public confidence that the community will get through the emergency.



COMMUNICATE AND BE SUPPORTIVE

- ▶ Continue to direct constituents to official communication channels.
- ▶ If you use social media, have an email list of constituents or some contact medium for groups of constituents, and send encouraging messages to them. Assure constituents that appropriate municipal staff are involved and that you are tracking events. Make sure your messaging is consistent with, and directs constituents back to, official channels.
- ▶ Be supportive of the work of staff.
- ▶ Do not repeat unsubstantiated reports related to the emergency. Note what is being reported, and assure the individual that your emergency management team will follow up.



PRIORITIZE NEEDS

- ▶ If constituents report life-threatening conditions, direct them to the emergency number.
- ▶ If constituents report conditions that are not life-threatening, collect the necessary information (name, contact information, location of condition, nature of condition) and assure them that you will forward that information to the appropriate department once the emergency has passed. If your emergency management team has a non-emergency number the public can use to report non-emergency issues, encourage the public to use it.
- ▶ Help your constituents understand the need to prioritize truly dangerous conditions over other matters, even serious ones, during an emergency.

Aftermath

The first hours and days after an emergency present a host of challenges to a municipality. Search and rescue teams may need to be deployed. Damage needs to be assessed. Emergency repairs to key infrastructure may need to be undertaken.

All of this takes place in a climate of uncertainty that, over time, will resolve into clarity. It also takes place as residents and business owners come to grips with their losses. They need emotional support as well as good information. So do members of your municipal staff, especially those who have shouldered the burden during the unfolding emergency and who will carry that burden through these early hours and days.

As an elected municipal official, you can do many things to help your community begin the process of recovery. Many of these tasks echo what was needed during the emergency itself, but there are some new opportunities as well.

BE SUPPORTIVE OF STAFF

- ▶ Publicly thank the team.
- ▶ Remind your community how hard they are working toward restoration. If your EOC activates Alpha/Bravo shifts (two daily 12-hour shifts), let the public know they are literally working around the clock. It provides the community "buy-in" when they are aware of the situation.
- ▶ When appropriate, share official information about which areas are experiencing difficulties and the number of crews working in the area. It sends the signal that help is on the way and working hard. For example, a citizen might not see an electric crew working on their street and become frustrated, but the root cause of power failure might be at a substation and is being addressed.



Remember that often, especially at this stage of an emergency, people most need to know that they are being heard. You don't need to be able to fix their problem (and often, you won't be able to, at least immediately). Listen, gather information and share with the emergency management team so requests can be prioritized.

CONTINUE TO COMMUNICATE WITH CONSTITUENTS

- ▶ Continue to direct constituents to official communication channels.
- ▶ Do not repeat unsubstantiated reports about causes, impacts or responses to the emergency. Note what is being reported, and assure the individual that your emergency management team will follow up.
- ▶ Continue to offer assurances and assist constituents with challenges from the disaster. Direct those with a true emergency to directly contact the emergency number. Guide them on how to report non-emergency issues so you can help ensure their issue is being reported and tracked for future action.
- ▶ Continue to help your constituents understand the need to prioritize truly dangerous conditions over other matters, even serious ones.
- ▶ Following your municipality's procedures, pass on the information you have received to the appropriate contacts or departments.
- ▶ When and where it is safe and consistent with the guidance you receive from your municipality's team, start getting out into the community. Listen to your constituents' experiences and concerns. Your presence in their neighborhood can provide powerful emotional support.

Recovery

Depending on the nature of the emergency, full recovery for the community can be a matter of a few days, weeks, months or even years. In some instances, a community does not "recover" from an emergency but is transformed by it.



RECOVERY PROCESS

Whatever the path of recovery, elected municipal officials play a very large role in the recovery process. As policymakers, you and your colleagues will be asked to approve contracts to address recovery issues. You and your colleagues may be challenged to re-evaluate established budget priorities in light of emergency impacts. Your council/commission will exercise oversight over your staff's handling of the emergency and recovery. You may even find you need to set new policy directions for the future of your community.

If the city will be involved in the after-action review, document your observations on what worked in all aspects of the event (planning and recovery) and what proved to be a challenge. Keep honest notes, and work with your colleagues and the municipality to help produce a report to learn from.

Here are some recommendations about fulfilling your responsibilities as an elected municipal official during what can be a long and challenging journey of recovery.



LEND A HAND AND BALANCE NEEDS

- ▶ Show up and lend a hand where your presence can be helpful.
- ▶ In your communication with colleagues, staff and constituents, find the right balance between the community's desire to be "normal" again and the real challenges of recovery.



OFFER ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THANKS

- ▶ Acknowledge and thank your municipal staff for the hard work of recovery. Highlight the incredible work done by the team. It humanizes the experience to the public.
- ▶ Acknowledge and thank members of your community for their contributions to recovery.



COLLECT AND SHARE INFORMATION AND FEEDBACK

- ▶ With your colleagues, request and be attentive to reports from staff (and possibly other agencies) about emergency impacts and recovery efforts. This important activity can help your council/commission make better decisions and provide the public with important information.
- ▶ Receive complaints and concerns with seriousness and respect. Communicate them to the appropriate staff. Follow up with constituents and staff.
- ▶ Where you, your colleagues and/or your constituents have thoughts about opportunities for improvement or concerns about the performance of city staff and services, choose an appropriate time in the recovery process and an appropriate forum for addressing them. If the city is involved in an after-action report workshop, that might be the appropriate scenario to address all issues and allow the public to weigh in as well. Conduct such reviews professionally. Be sure staff know that, even where you may find fault, you also recognize the difficulties and the hard work. Always remember that the public records laws of the State of Florida do not exempt communicating during storm events. Think twice before communicating in the heat of the moment.



Remember Who You Are

This guide has emphasized the unique opportunities elected municipal officials have to help their communities through emergencies. Making sure that your community is prepared is an important strategic responsibility of the elected body. During an event, it typically becomes an operational function of the staff to manage the response. When the dust settles, it is just as important to evaluate the municipality's response and for the governing body to look to their team for continuous improvement.

One of the dominant themes is the importance of your voice of support, whether it is encouraging constituents to prepare, heed official warnings and instructions, be hopeful in the midst of the emergency or be patient during recovery.

In times of crisis, people seek evidence that their leaders can handle the crisis. They often lean into whatever trust they have in their public officials and hope not to be disappointed.

Leaders who offer assurance but do not promise impossibilities, who emphasize that the situation is a shared challenge

through which, together, the community will pass, consistently receive high marks from their constituents. Leaders who use these opportunities to exploit divisions, however, may generate stronger support from some factions in the community but inevitably generate opposition in others.

Communities that are able to come together in crises are communities that recover and thrive. Communities that see their existing divisions widen in crises travel a much longer and less hopeful road to recovery.

You are only one elected municipal official. You alone cannot determine whether the next crisis to strike your municipality will devastate it for decades or be a source of resurgence for a more hopeful future. You cannot control the emergency or its aftermath.

But you can help tip the scales in one direction or the other. That's the power your constituents gave you, the power that, in a crisis, they look for you to wield for their good.

Remember that this is who you are: their public servant.



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