

# ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS ACTIVE IN DISASTERS (COADS)

*A Practical Guide to Building Resiliency in West Virginia Communities Before, During, and After Disasters*



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Created as part of the West Virginia Flood Resiliency Framework

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community resiliency is defined as the ability to withstand and mitigate the effects of a disaster, an essential component of which is effective pre-disaster coordination of the complex network of actors involved in response and recovery. Easily one of the most important aspects of building community resiliency is the presence within a community of a group—formally or informally—that is organized to address disasters. Captured in this guide as Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COADs), these groups can be part of planning councils, local governments, voluntary organizations/associations or any number of like bodies. Whatever title or name they use, the key is that these COADs are groups of like-minded individuals, organizations, and agencies working toward the common purpose of increasing their community’s disaster resiliency through robust communication, coordination, collaboration and cooperation before and during a disaster.<sup>i</sup>

*“All disasters begin and end locally.”*

This guide is intended to assist communities across West Virginia establish and strengthen COADs. COADs can play a critical role in meeting unmet needs in their communities in the event of a disaster, but they can also do much more. Permanently established COADs will encompass all phases of disaster management: mitigation, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. COADs use community disaster education, hazard analysis, training exercises, community leadership classes, local emergency management plans, and the expertise of its members to bring holistic disaster awareness to its community and citizens.<sup>ii</sup>

This guide is part of the [West Virginia Flood Resiliency Framework \(WVFRF\)](#)<sup>iii</sup>, funded by the National Science Foundation’s Civic Innovation Challenge Program, and was created based on insights of the West Virginia disaster response and recovery network. We hope your community will benefit from these insights on lessons learned from West Virginia’s all too frequent flooding and from the framework we have developed for building resiliency in our communities.

# CHAPTER 1

## BUILDING RESILIENCY BEFORE A DISASTER STRIKES

Developing a disaster-response plan prior to an event is a critical way to help West Virginia communities respond to and recover from disasters. The checklists included in this guide can help communities identify the steps necessary to formulate a plan, so they are ready in the event of a disaster. Ultimately, resiliency comes down to two factors: relationships and resources. The more you can invest in relationships and resources prior to a disaster event, the easier it is to access them when you need them.



### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout the country and in every West Virginia county there is a local emergency planning committee (LEPC) According to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), LEPCs are meant to “develop emergency response plans, review those plans at least annually, and provide information ... to citizens. Plans are developed ... with stakeholder participation. LEPC membership must include (at a minimum): elected state and local officials; police, fire, civil defense, and public health professionals; environment, transportation, and hospital officials, ... and representatives from community groups and the media.”<sup>iv</sup>

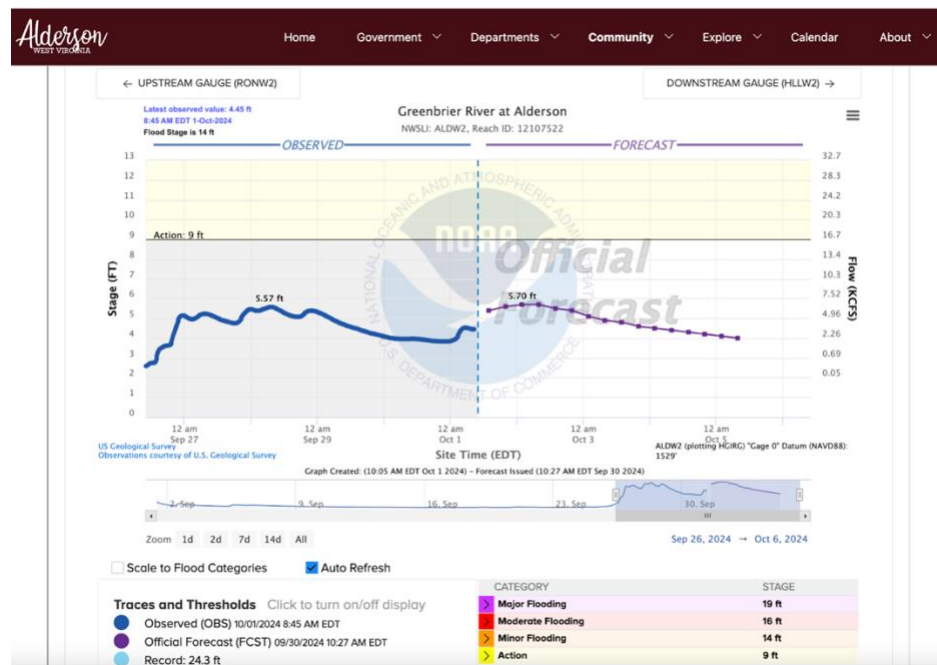
From a community resiliency perspective, LEPCs provide a solid starting point for building COADs. While generally focused on the emergency segment of a disaster (rescues, relief, etc.), with an expanded membership that includes voluntary organizations, faith-based organizations, and other community partners, the relationships built through LEPCs lend themselves to disaster response scenarios that require extensive long-term recovery.

During “blue skies” (before-a-disaster exercises), community leadership should work with LEPC leadership to develop an expanded membership and to ensure that the latter’s training also include post-emergency/recovery operations. Reach out to the organizations who will have a role in recovery operations and invite them to participate in LEPC events.

## STEP 1: CREATE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION PLAN

Consistently stay up to date with the National Weather Service and Homeland Security.

- Create a digital and paper copy of an emergency call list. Cell phones may not work in a disaster, so include landlines when possible. See Appendix 1 for a sample.
- Create a digital and paper copy of emergency resources available in the community. See Appendix 2 for a sample.
- Create a digital and paper file with insurance policy information, including policy numbers and phone numbers for claims.
- Establish quarterly meetings to review and revise all emergency planning documents.
- Consider implementing “sunny day” training exercises to practice emergency response.
- If a 211 system is not already in place, consider contracting a call center to receive requests for assistance.

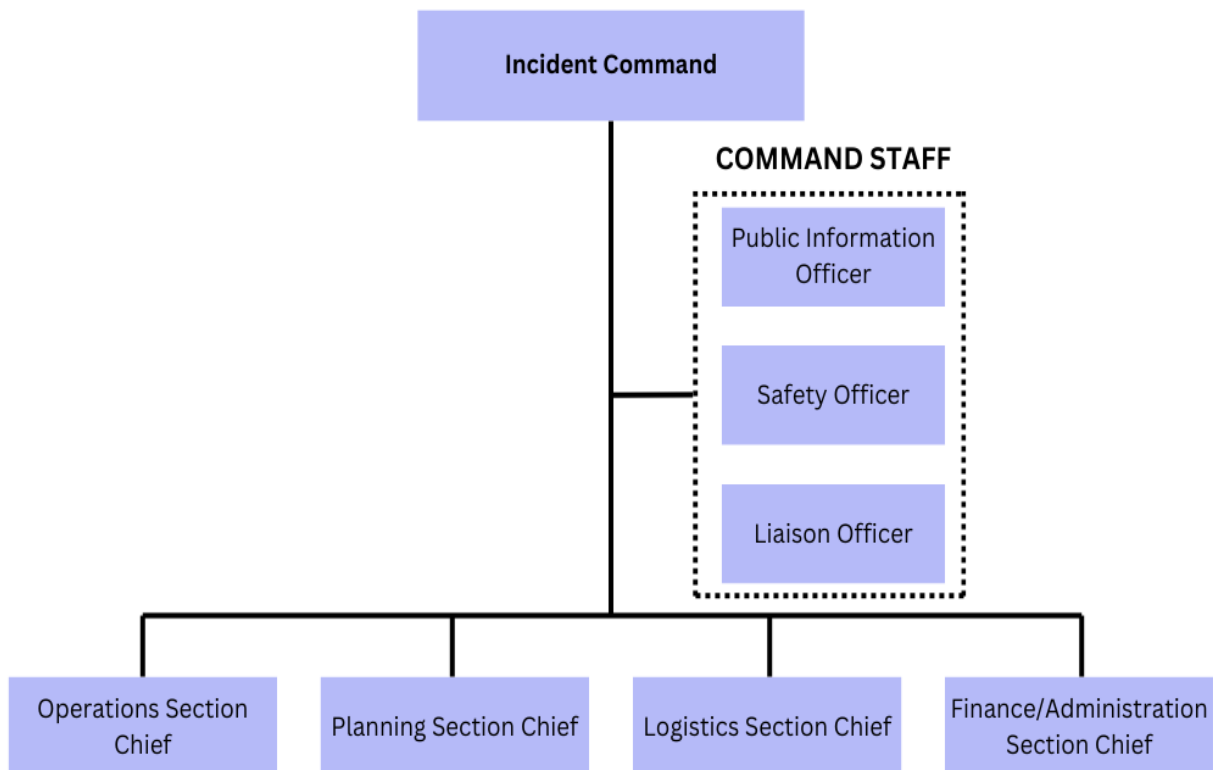


Example of early warning system from the website of Alderson, WV (<https://www.aldersonwv.org/riverstatus>)

- Determine how you will disseminate information. Social media may be a good way to disseminate good information, but it can also be the source of bad information.
- Determine who will serve as a Public Information Officer to be the point person to disseminate important information quickly and efficiently during a disaster.
- Consider incorporating early warning systems into city websites.

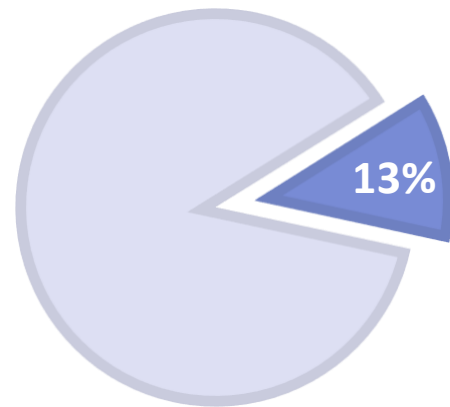
## STEP 2: CREATE EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN

- Create an emergency resources map including things like shelters, distribution sites, higher ground areas, etc.
- Consider finding a FEMA Public Assistance consultant to assist with processes related to eligible spending and reimbursement. Municipalities and counties will be bombarded with solicitations from disaster services consultants, and they are not all reliable. Do not wait until the disaster to find a reliable consultant.
- Make sure each town supervisor or plant operator is assigned to get vehicles and other equipment to higher ground as soon as a flood is expected.
- Establish a central supply point for receiving & disseminating supplies and donations.
- Have a plan in place for managing unsolicited volunteers. They will require supervision to put their skills to use appropriately.
- Consider creating a county level disaster Task Force to coordinate beyond town or city.



### STEP 3: PLANNING FOR SHELTER & FOOD

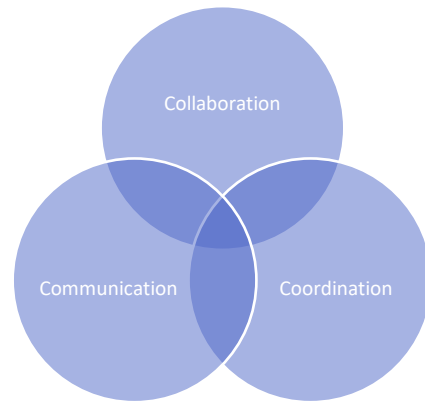
- Confirm where shelter(s) will be located. Make sure they are out of the flood zone.
- Plan for how to power the shelter. In the event of a power outage, how will the shelter operate? By generator? How large? Who will pay for it? Plan for routine maintenance.
- What supplies will be needed? Consider cots, blankets, sheets, pillows, comfort kits, etc. Where will the supplies come from? Who will pay for them? Who will re-stock?
- Have a plan for generators. The WV Army National Guard has emergency generators for critical sites in disasters, but an electrician is needed for hookups. Critical sites should have a transfer switch sized for the facility pre-disaster. Have local emergency management conduct a prime power survey for all potential generator locations.
- Plan for how you will feed people. Where will it come from? How much will be kept on-hand? Who is responsible for rotating the stock of food? Who will prepare meals? Consider independent feeding trailers that come in to help. You will need to assign the Health Department to oversee and certify them. Plan specifically for how to feed first responders.
- WV VOAD can provide shower and laundry trailers needed. Plan for where they will go.
- Make a specific plan for seniors and residents with disabilities, including where they can sleep. Cots will not work for everyone.
- Make a plan for sheltering pets. Expect large numbers, including strays, lost pets, and families with pets that lost their home. Also plan for pet food donations.



If there was a severe flood, **only 13% of respondents** said they would go to a shelter if **pets were not allowed** at that shelter.

# CHAPTER 2

## EFFECTIVE RESPONSE DURING A DISASTER



- Contact Homeland Security and Emergency Management and as a first step.
- Contact WV VOAD for advice and assistance immediately.
- Assign your Public Information Officer to manage communication and answer calls.
- Convene your county level disaster Task Force. Meet as often as needed to collaborate, communicate, and coordinate. Invite all relevant public and private organizations.
- Coordinate with whomever is doing the “boots on the ground” Substantial Damage Assessments, which are to be done by Floodplain Managers or FEMA staff.
- Coordinate unsolicited donations. Clarify what you will take and what you will not take.
- Determine where you can accept, house, and sort it. Have enough people at the donation site for unloading.
- For managing pets during disasters, coordinate with the WV Department of Agriculture and ask FEMA and get a pet specialist assigned.
- Keep good records. Organize every receipt, every expense, and consider recording conversations with outside officials.
- Consider declaring a disaster at the local municipality level.

*“Substantial damage assessments impact the rebuilding phase significantly!”*

*“Document, document, document from the very beginning, even before [a disaster] actually gets declared.”*



## CHAPTER 3

# BUILDING RESILIENCY AFTER A DISASTER

- Educate first time homeowners on repairing and maintaining homes that were built by non-profit organizations.
- Prioritize mitigation of homes over demolition of homes to maintain the tax base.
- Identify an entity as the fiscal agent to receive and disburse donated funds (e.g., a local community foundation). Do not start a nonprofit if you don't have to.
- Contact WV Behavioral Disaster Coordinator for crisis counselors.
- In the absence of trained disaster case managers, find volunteers (e.g., clergy, counselors, etc.) who can sit with survivors and listen.

### *Telling their story is cathartic for survivors.*

- Find groups that can work specifically with traumatized children.
- Identify groups that can be pulled together to form a recovery network and create a long-term recovery committee, ideally managed by an existing organization.

# CHAPTER 4

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNINCORPORATED AREAS

- Form a community disaster team. The first step is to look at your community and determine what people and organizations can come together in an emergency. Reach out to these organizations and individuals.
- Develop memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between and among the parties. MOUs will determine each organization's role in the response plan (i.e. the local fire department may be in charge of shelter security, the local community center may agree to be the emergency shelter, etc.)
- Develop a one-page comprehensive community survey. This can be done by a direct-mail campaign, through social media, via an electronic survey or any other method used to communicate with the community at large. The survey should include all of the following points: 1) Assets people are willing to lend in the event of a disaster; 2) Volunteers who are willing to assist in an emergency; 3) Persons who may be particularly vulnerable during a disaster; 4) Persons who need a check-in phone call during an event. Each of these items is discussed in greater detail below:
  - ASSETS TO BE LOANED –Assets can include things like chainsaws, ATVs, tractors, tools, boats, etc. Make sure to develop both the list of resources and their location in the community as some areas may be inaccessible in an emergency.
  - VOLUNTEERS who are willing to work and assist during a disaster. The call for volunteers should also determine if the volunteer has special skills that can be used during the crisis (i.e. physician, nurse, EMT, cook, electrician, firefighter, sign language interpreter, clergy, mental health counselor, etc.)
  - INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS – This can include anyone who is wheelchair bound, has a disability, is homebound, uses home oxygen, is deaf or blind, etc.
  - CALL LIST FOR THOSE WHO NEED A VERBAL CHECK – Many times in rural areas, people tend NOT to use shelter services even if available. However, some would still like to be checked on in the event of an

emergency. These people tend to be senior citizens who are seeking information and reassurance but who are reluctant to leave their homes.

- Compile databases from the survey responses received – once the survey responses have been received, develop specific databases to determine volunteers and any special skills they possess, assets and their location, individuals with special needs, and the list to call for reassurance.

**Key message:** Disaster preparation in rural, unincorporated areas can present unique challenges. In most cases, there are no local systems or municipalities to coordinate a response, and often there is no infrastructure in place that would aid in responding to and/or mitigating the effects of a disaster. This leaves rural areas particularly vulnerable to catastrophic events. Below are some specific steps for these communities to consider before a disaster.

## E N D N O T E S

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<sup>i</sup> National Voluntary Agencies Active in Disasters (NVOAD) Communication, Coordination, Collaboration and Cooperation four C's.

<sup>ii</sup> P.3, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS ACTIVE IN DISASTER, Indiana COAD Guidance Manual Developed by Steve Cain of Purdue University In cooperation with the State of Missouri & University of Missouri Extension Reviewed by Eric Evans, University of Missouri Extension; Lucinda Nord, United Way of Indiana; Kevin Cox, Hope Crisis Response Network; Revised January 2012. Acknowledgement is made here that this language was drawn and slightly modified from the manual's original language.

<sup>iii</sup> [Creating the West Virginia Flood Resiliency Framework for Comprehensive Disaster Response and Long-Term Community Recovery](#)

<sup>iv</sup> Paraphrased from <https://www.epa.gov/epcra/emergency-planning>.