

Individuals who are Transient or Homeless

OVERVIEW

According to a study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there were 671,888 homeless people in the United States as of January 2007, including sheltered and unsheltered population.¹

HUD defines homelessness as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The number of homeless individuals fluctuates with the health of the economy.

Homeless individuals confront living situations that may result in being exposed to the elements; substandard (without heating, plumbing, or complete enclosure); in an abandoned building (squatting); in a supervised shelter that provides temporary living accommodations; or, in a temporary residence with a friend or family member.

Homelessness is a manifestation of underlying social vulnerabilities such as physical and mental illness, disability, substance abuse, and chronic unemployment. These vulnerabilities raise the susceptibility of the homeless to disaster events.

Individuals who are homeless are more vulnerable to disasters due to:

- lack of regular access to physical structures that can protect them from disasters;
- fewer resources to respond to a disaster such as a reliable means of transportation, communication services, and money;
- a potentially debilitating physical and mental illness that make responding to an emergency difficult;
- fewer channels of communication to receive public service announcements, due to a lack of physical address or telephone number.

REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS

As with all other potentially vulnerable populations, the needs and capabilities of those who are homeless should be factored into disaster planning to ensure an effective response to an emergency. The homeless, or their advocates, should be involved directly in the planning process in order to help identify specific needs, and evaluate emergency preparedness and response practices.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES – PROMISING PRACTICES

PREPAREDNESS

Prior to an emergency, preparation and strategic planning is necessary to build the capacity to respond successfully to the homeless during and after an emergency. Several pragmatic steps should be taken to build this capacity.

1. Prior to a disaster, coordinate and conduct pre-event planning with local agencies and organizations providing social support to the homeless population.
2. Through these partnerships, identify the usual places where the unsheltered homeless congregate during the day and sleep at night. This knowledge will aid emergency management with disaster preparedness and response.
3. Reach out to this vulnerable population prior to a disaster with information about available support services and how to access them. If knowledge of an imminent disaster is known by emergency management, rapidly provide notification and assistance to this population.
4. Since the homeless frequently lack transportation, conduct an inventory of transportation options available at the local and regional level in order to assess the capacity to serve this population. Coordinate with all available organizations to establish a network of transportation options in the event of an emergency to transport the sheltered and unsheltered homeless to a safe and secure emergency location.
5. Prior to a disaster, establish the capacity for long-term sheltering and permanent housing for the homeless during the recovery period.

RESPONSE

Swift and deliberate action is required to secure the safety of those who are homeless as they have fewer resources than many other vulnerable populations due to their lack of dependable housing, transportation, and communication channels. Without a coordinated intervention, this population will be very susceptible during and after a disaster.

Coordinate with all identified transportation resources just prior to an evacuation order. The majority of homeless individuals do not have a means of transportation and will depend on assistance. Evacuate all sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals to an emergency shelter as soon as an evacuation has been ordered.

SHELTERING

In the event of a disaster, those who are homeless require safe and adequate sheltering. Preparing for sheltering this population requires an emergency system that is adaptable and well-coordinated. Shelters must be able to accommodate a wide range of medical issues and disabilities.

Shelter personnel should be able to identify and transfer those who cannot be accommodated to other shelters or institutions. This population is likely to be diverse and resource-intensive.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES – PROMISING PRACTICES

Recommendations for accommodating the homeless within the emergency sheltering system include the following.

1. Within general shelters a staff member, preferably a qualified medical professional, should be present to make assessments of evacuees to determine if they need additional medical services or support that the shelter is not equipped to handle.
2. Where possible, keep track of every individual (along with their needs) who is sheltering in a database. Make the database available to local government agencies and nonprofits, where allowable by law. This practice will improve coordination among all aid organizations during the recovery period.
3. Shelters should be Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant, as many individuals who are homeless have physical disabilities and may be [mobility impaired](#).
4. Consider partnering with other medical institutions and aid organizations, such as the Red Cross, to broaden the capacity of the shelter.

RECOVERY

After an emergency, many homeless individuals face challenges that must be addressed in order to make the transition from the shelter safe and efficient. This population is different from every other vulnerable population as they do not have a fixed residence to transition to. However, a number of steps can be taken aid this population after a disaster.

Where possible, providing options for long-term sheltering and permanent housing for the homeless should be emphasized. In addition, access to medical, psychological, and other human services should be considered.

Emphasis should be on protecting these individuals from experiencing homelessness again, after being displaced by the natural disaster.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Alliance to End Homelessness

Resources, policy focus areas, and programs are available from this nationwide federation of public, private and nonprofit organizations.

Accessed at: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/>

Project Homeless Connect

PHC is a national best practice model, with over 200 affiliated programs across the country, that pairs volunteers with local agencies, nonprofits and the private sector to provide health and human services to homeless individuals.

Accessed at: <http://projecthomelessconnect.com/HomePage/index.php/home.html>

Interagency Council on Homelessness, America's Road Home Partnership to End Chronic Homelessness Statement of Action and Principles

US Conference of Mayors and National Association of Counties signatories have pledged to 10 year plans to end homelessness in their local jurisdictions.

Accessed at: http://www.ich.gov/slocal/arh_AgreetoEndChronicHomeless.html

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROFILE: HANDS ON NEW ORLEANS

Program:	OperationOC (Orange County)
Organization:	Orange County Rescue Mission
Keywords:	homelessness, disaster response
Source:	http://www.operationoc.org/
Brief Summary:	The Orange County Rescue Mission, a health and human services agency for the homeless and low income populations of Orange County, integrated natural disaster response and recovery into their programming in 2005.

From organization literature:

“OperationOC provides an effective mission ready rapid recovery response to local disasters. It enhances preparedness for, and coordinates response to, disasters by facilitating linkages among Orange County community based organizations, government agencies, faith based organizations, and the private business sector. OperationOC is built upon a flexible, scalable, and adaptable coordinating structure to align key roles and responsibilities for responding to disasters in Orange County.”

By integrating disaster response with low income and homelessness services, Orange County Rescue Mission is extending its core program components to aid **“the least, the last, and the lost during and post disaster.”**

OperationOC became an additional program component of the Orange County Rescue mission in response to the devastation of the 2005 hurricane season. More than 1,000 hurricane evacuees were displaced to Orange County.

OperationOC viewed the displaced victims as “coming into our community to rebuild their lives.” OperationOC standard practice is to first respond to basic needs and survival necessities and then offer transitional aid programs in housing, education and childcare.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROFILE: HANDS ON NEW ORLEANS

Program:	Hands On New Orleans
Organization:	Affiliated with the Points of Light Institute
Keywords:	homelessness, disaster response and recovery
Source:	http://www.handsonneworleans.org/
Brief Summary:	With disaster response to the 2005 hurricane season as the impetus, HandsOn New Orleans has grown into a long-term community service provider, with homeless services as a core focus area.

HandsOn is a nationwide network of volunteers and citizen activists, and operates as a major business unit within the Points of Light Institute. As stated on the organizations website, 250 HandsOn affiliate Action Centers serve 83 percent of the American population. There are also international programs. The Action Centers frequently partner with hundreds of nonprofit, community and faith based organizations.

HandsOn New Orleans played a leading role in addressing the relief and recovery efforts in the region following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. According to organization literature, “HandsOn has evolved from a disaster response project into a thriving resource center for grassroots service project(s).” With disaster response as the impetus, HandsOn has grown into a long-term community service provider, with homeless services as a core focus area.

¹ According to HUD's July 2008 3rd Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, in a single night in January 2007, single point analysis reported to HUD showed there were 671,888 sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons nationwide in the United States