

### OVERVIEW

Although local emergency agencies and other relief organizations usually provide essential services before, during, and after a disaster, they are not a substitute for individual and family preparedness. Preparing for a disaster will maximize your family's chances of survival. In particular, individuals who are elderly, physically or cognitively disabled, mobility impaired, require special medical care, or have language or other communication barriers will need to plan ahead.

While local emergency management officials will work to address the needs of vulnerable populations, individuals and families must assume responsibility for their own safety.

Home location will affect vulnerability. For example, homes in low-lying areas such as floodplains typically are more vulnerable than homes on higher ground. Some disasters might cause families to be confined to their homes without water, gas, electricity, or telephones for days or even weeks. During a disaster, not everyone can be reached right away, especially if those individuals live in a remote location.

It may also be necessary to stay in an emergency shelter for much longer than expected. In these cases, having a [Disaster Supply Kit](#) prepared beforehand may reduce the chances that families will be without food, water, first aid, or essential medications after a major event.



*Baker, Louisiana on October 8, 2005. The children of a family displaced by Hurricane Katrina pose in front of their temporary home, a FEMA trailer.*

*Source: Greg Henshall for FEMA*

This guide outlines the steps individuals and families can take ahead of time to protect their safety and help others in the community receive emergency services more efficiently. While this guide may be a useful reference, only you know your local conditions and your family's exact needs.

### RELATED TOPICS

[Evacuation](#)

[Sheltering](#)

### REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS

Creating and regularly practicing a disaster-preparedness plan increases the likelihood of a safe outcome after a disaster.

Before developing an emergency plan, individuals should be aware of the types of disasters that are likely to occur in their area.

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Individuals should know where emergency facilities are located, as well as the evacuation instructions from city government emergency personnel.

Plans take practice! When individuals are familiar with their plan for getting to safety, they will be less likely to hesitate or get confused during a real disaster.

The Disaster Center is a national organization that provides online coverage of disasters in the United States, and compiles and provides links to disaster related statistics and studies.

Four recommended steps to safety are:

1. Find out what could happen to you
2. Create a family disaster plan
3. Complete your checklist
4. Practice and maintain your plan

Details on these four steps can be found at the Disaster Center website, [www.disastercenter.com/guide/family.htm](http://www.disastercenter.com/guide/family.htm). Summaries of these steps and additional information from other sources are provided below.

### PREPAREDNESS

What types of disasters are most likely to happen in your community? Is your community threatened by hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, or terrorist attacks?

Depending on the types of emergencies, you may have to plan differently.

Technological disasters such as the release of harmful chemicals can occur, particularly during a natural disaster, so it is important to note whether these conditions could affect your region.

How should you prepare for each type of disaster? There is no one-size-fits-all solution for disaster planning. If you live in an area that has multiple hazards, it may be necessary to have multiple emergency plans in place.

Become familiar with the disaster planning models that are most appropriate for your area's conditions.



*Plan ahead to secure appropriate shelter for your pet.*

*Source: Michael Rieger for FEMA*

Some key considerations for disaster planning include:

### Public warning system

Does your community have a public warning system? What do your community's warning signals sound like and what should you do when you hear them? If you or someone in your family is hearing impaired, it may be necessary to rely on other forms of warning signals, such as television or blinking lights. Ensure that you and your family have access to the appropriate communication technologies to allow warning signals to reach you.

### Pets

Other than service animals, pets are often not permitted in places where food is served, or in many emergency shelters. Plan where you would take your pets if you had to go to a public shelter.

### Elderly or disabled

If you care for elderly or disabled persons, tips for ensuring their care can be found at the Center for Disability Issues and the Health Professions website, [www.cdihp.org/evacuation/toc.html](http://www.cdihp.org/evacuation/toc.html).

### Outside the home

Does your workplace or children's school or daycare center have a disaster plan? If any of these places do not have disaster plan, contact the necessary people and work with them to ensure that a disaster plan is developed. The American Red Cross offers a guide for business and industry disaster planning at its website, [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).

Contact school officials to learn how they will notify you of your child's status if an emergency occurs. For older children who can drive and have access to a vehicle, remind them to follow the instructions of authorities during an emergency.



*Residents of Beaumont, TX gather at a local high school to wait for transportation out of the area before Hurricane Gustav.*

*Source: Patsy Lynch for FEMA*

### Create a Family Disaster Plan

Meet with your family and discuss why you need to prepare for a disaster. Explain to children the dangers of fire, severe weather, and earthquakes. Plan to share responsibilities and work together as a team. Keep it simple enough so people can remember the important details. A disaster is an extremely stressful situation that can create confusion. The best emergency plans are those with very few details.

Your plan should include maps of evacuation routes and destinations, a [Disaster Supply Kit](#), provisions for the notification of family or friends, extra cash, important family documents, books, toys, pillows,

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blankets, a pet plan, and steps for securing your home.

Make sure to have multiple copies of critical health information and emergency contact information for all family members. Emergency health information communicates to emergency and rescue personnel what they need to know about you if they find you unconscious, confused, in shock, or unable to provide information. Keep copies of this information in your emergency supply kits, in your car, at work, and in your wallet or purse.

Practice regular self-assessment: evaluate your abilities, limitations, needs, and surroundings to determine what type of help you will need in an emergency. For those who may need extra assistance during a disaster, work out support relationships with several individuals. Identify a minimum of three people at each location where you regularly spend a significant part of your week such as at your job, at home, or at school.

Be familiar with evacuation routes from your home and aware of alternative routes in case certain roads are blocked. Remember to follow the advice of local officials during an emergency; they will direct you to the safest route.

Make sure you know where and how to get to your local evacuation centers or shelters. If your family does not own a car, make sure you know where to go to access emergency transportation. Contact your local emergency agency early to determine local pick-up or meeting points.

Develop a plan for how and where your household will reunite after a disaster. Separation is a possibility during the day when adults are at work and children are at school. Identify two places to meet: one right outside your home and another outside your neighborhood, such as a library, community center, or place of worship.



*Develop a plan for how your household will reunite after a disaster.*

*Source: Andrea Booher for FEMA*

Develop an emergency communication plan. Ask an out-of-town relative or friend to be your "family contact." Your contact should live outside of your area. During a disaster, it is often easier to make a long distance call than a local call. Family members should call the contact and tell him or her where they are. Everyone must know the contact's name, address, and phone number.

If you or a family member is [mobility impaired](#), make transportation arrangements to your meeting place ahead of time. Contact your local emergency manager to learn what plans are in place to assist you in case of evacuation. For those who have home health caregivers or are bed-bound, it is essential to discuss emergency procedures with service representatives.

### **Complete -- and follow! -- Your Checklist**

Post emergency telephone numbers including your doctor or pediatrician by the phone. You may not have time in an emergency to look up critical numbers.

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Teach all responsible family members how and when to turn off the water, gas, and electricity at the main switches or valves. Paint shut-off valves with white or fluorescent paint to increase visibility. Attach a shut-off valve wrench a conspicuous place close to the gas and water valves.

Check that you have adequate insurance coverage. Depending on your coverage, you may or may not be reimbursed for your losses after an event. Ask your insurance agent to review your current policies to ensure that they will cover your home and belongings adequately.

Install smoke alarms on each level of your home, especially near bedrooms. If someone in your family is hearing impaired, make sure that you have a strobe or another alarm in place.

Conduct a "home hazard hunt." During a disaster, ordinary objects in your home can cause injury or damage. Anything that can move, fall, break, or cause a fire is a home hazard. Look for electrical, chemical, and fire hazards. Contact your local fire department to learn about home fire hazards. Inspect your home at least once a year and fix potential hazards.

Stock emergency supplies and assemble a [Disaster Supply Kit](#). Ideally, a disaster supply kit will include as many of the items listed below as possible. However, if keeping extra supplies is cost prohibitive for your family, the most critical items are a three-day supply of water and a flashlight.

Ask your physician or pharmacist about storing prescription medications. It may be difficult to obtain prescription medications during a disaster because stores may be closed or supplies may be limited.

Keep a smaller Disaster Supplies Kit in the trunk of your car. If you become stranded or are not able to return home, having these items will help you to be more comfortable. Keep items in airtight plastic bags. This will help protect them from damage or spoiling.

Use an easy to carry container for the supplies you would most likely need for an evacuation. Label it clearly. Possible containers include a large, covered trash container; a camping backpack or duffel bag; or a cargo container that will fit on the roof of your vehicle.



*A first aid class can teach you and your family basic safety measures.*

*Source: Mark Wolfe for FEMA*

Pets should also have emergency supplies, including a carrier or leash, food and bowls, cat litter and litter box, medications and schedules, identification, contact information, veterinary shot records, beds, and toys.

Keep a portable, battery operated radio or television and extra batteries. Maintaining a communication link is a step that can mean the difference between life and death. Make sure that all family members know where the radio or television is located.

Consider using a [NOAA Weather Radio](#) with a tone-alert feature. NOAA Weather Radio is the best means to receive warnings from the National Weather Service, which

continuously broadcasts updated weather warnings and forecasts.

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Take a [Red Cross First Aid and CPR class](#). Have your family learn basic safety measures, such as CPR and first aid. These are critical skills, and learning can be a fun activity for older children.

Find the safe places in your home for each type of disaster. Different disasters often require different types of safe places. For example, while basements are appropriate for tornadoes, they could be deadly in a major chemical emergency.

Make a complete inventory of your home, garage, and surrounding property. The inventory can be either written or videotaped. Include information such as serial numbers, make and model numbers, physical descriptions, and price of purchases with receipts, if possible. This list could help you prove the value of what you owned if your possessions are damaged or destroyed, or help you to claim deductions on taxes. Do this for all items in your home. Store a copy of the record somewhere away from home, such as in a safe deposit box.

### **Practice and Maintain Your Plan**

Quiz your children and other family members frequently so they remember what to do, where to go, what to bring, and who to call.

Conduct practice drills every six months with your family. These can serve to familiarize everyone with procedures, as well as approximate travel times and distances.

Replace stored food and water every six months.

Test smoke alarms once a month and replace batteries once a year.

If you have a home fire extinguisher, make sure it is accessible and properly charged.

### **Sheltering**

Planning where and how you will take shelter in a disaster is critical.

Depending on a number of factors, shelter may be provided for you or you may have to take responsibility for sheltering yourself. You may seek protection in your home, place of employment, or other location when disaster strikes. In other cases, you may have to take shelter outside of the hazard area. This kind of sheltering could include staying with friends and relatives, seeking commercial lodging, or staying in a mass care facility operated by disaster relief groups in conjunction with local authorities.

Your family should make a disaster emergency response plan.

Include in your family's emergency preparedness plan the locations of emergency and special needs shelters, transportation strategies for how to get there, and how to shelter-in-place if necessary.

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Depending on the types of local hazards in your area, it may be a good idea to develop a safe room to provide short- or long-term refuge for your family. Consult your local emergency agency to determine whether a safe room is appropriate for your home.

Although mass care shelters often provide water, food, medicine, and basic sanitary facilities, you should plan to take a [Disaster Supply Kit](#) with you so you will have the supplies you require.

During extended periods of sheltering, you will need to manage water and food supplies to ensure you and your family have the required amounts to stay healthy.

Information on how to manage water can be found at the FEMA website:  
[www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/watermanage.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/watermanage.shtm)

Information on how to manage food can be found at: [www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/foodmanage.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/foodmanage.shtm)

Taking shelter in your home may be long-term. Your household should be prepared to be self-sufficient for at least three days if cut off from utilities and outside supplies of food and water. However, being prepared for two weeks is recommended.

Become familiar with the shelter-in-place plan for your place of employment. If there is no plan, meet with your supervisor or the building owner to develop one.

### **RESPONSE**

If you are in an area that is being evacuated, the American Red Cross recommends the following:

- α Evacuate immediately if told to do so by authorities.
- α Listen to a local radio or television station and follow the instructions of local emergency officials.
- α Wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and sturdy shoes. The most common injury following disasters is cut feet.
- α Lock your home. Secure your home as you normally would when leaving for an extended period.
- α Take your pets with you when you leave, provided you can do so without endangering yourself.
- α Use travel routes specified by local authorities. Since certain areas may be impassable or dangerous, avoid shortcuts. Do not drive through moving water. Barriers are placed for your safety; if you come upon a barrier, follow posted detour signs.
- α For more information on evacuation procedures, see the [evacuation](#) Promising Practice.

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If instructed to stay where you are:

- α If local emergency officials tell you to shelter-in-place or stay where you are, you must remain in your home or office and protect yourself there.
- α Lock all windows and exterior doors, and close vents and fireplace dampers. Turn off all fans and heating and air-conditioning systems.
- α Get your emergency supplies kit and make sure the battery-powered radio is working.
- α Listen to the radio or television until you are told all is safe or you are told to evacuate.
- α For more information on sheltering-in-place, please see the Promising Practice on [shelters](#).



### PROFILE: COMMUNITY RESPONSE TEAMS

<b>Program:</b>	The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program
<b>Organizations:</b>	FEMA, Emergency Management Institute, National Fire Academy, Citizen Corps, The Department of Homeland Security
<b>Keywords:</b>	disaster preparedness, emergency response
<b>Source:</b>	<a href="http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/index.shtm">http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/index.shtm</a>
<b>Brief Summary:</b>	The Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) developed a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program in 1985 to educate people about preparing and responding to disasters with skills in fire safety, search and rescue team organization, and disaster medical operations.

CERT members assist others in their neighborhood or workplace when professional responders are not immediately available to help.

To start a CERT:

- α Identify the program goals and available resources to start at CERT in your area.
- α Gain approval from public officials to use CERT as a means to prepare citizens to care for themselves during a disaster when services may not be adequate.
- α Identify and recruit potential participants such as community groups, business and industry workers, and local government workers.
- α Train CERT instructors.
- α Conduct trainings and refresher exercises with CERTs.

The CERT course is delivered in the community by a team of first responders who have the requisite knowledge and skills to instruct the sessions. Instructors should complete a CERT "train-the-trainer" program through their state emergency management office in order to learn the training techniques that are used successfully by the LAFD.

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For additional information on how to maintain a CERT Program in your area once it has been started, see the CERT website at: [www.citizencorps.gov/cert/prog-maintenance.shtm](http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/prog-maintenance.shtm)

For an example of a city-wide CERT program, see the CERT Los Angeles Home Page at: [www.cert-la.com/index.shtml](http://www.cert-la.com/index.shtml)



### PROFILE: COMMUNITY RESPONSE PROGRAMS

<b>Program:</b>	San Jose <i>Prepared!</i>
<b>Organization:</b>	City of San Jose Office of Emergency Services
<b>Keywords:</b>	community response, disaster preparedness
<b>Source:</b>	<a href="http://www.sanjoseca.gov/emergencyServices/pdf/Updated2Hour.pdf">www.sanjoseca.gov/emergencyServices/pdf/Updated2Hour.pdf</a>
<b>Brief Summary:</b>	The San Jose <i>Prepared!</i> Program helps communities and city employees prepare for disaster. A newsletter is available.

To prepare the community for natural disasters, the City of San Jose coordinates with FEMA and the State of California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (OES). One of the most visible city-sponsored OES programs is San Jose *Prepared!* This community emergency response training (CERT) program instructs the community and city employees in disaster preparation response and recovery skills.

San Jose *Prepared!* offers a variety of free classes to help community members prepare for a disaster. Longer courses focus on personal preparation, neighborhood organization, fire safety, triage, search and rescue, and terrorism awareness.

An e-newsletter is available.



### PROFILE: DISASTER COMMUNICATION

<b>Program:</b>	Safe and Well Website
<b>Organization:</b>	American Red Cross
<b>Keywords:</b>	disaster plans, disaster communication
<b>Source:</b>	<a href="http://www.bt.cdc.gov/preparedness/plan/">http://www.bt.cdc.gov/preparedness/plan/</a>
<b>Brief Summary:</b>	An important part of any individual or family disaster preparedness plan is a strategy for contacting friends and loved ones following a disaster. The Red Cross developed the Safe and Well website to facilitate contact between family members.

By logging onto the Safe and Well website, a person affected by disaster may post messages indicating that they are safe at a shelter, hotel, or at home, and that they will contact their friends and family as soon as possible.

During large-scale disasters, there will be telephone assistance via the 1-866-GET-INFO hotline for people who live within the affected areas but do not have Internet access.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1) Everybody Ready: Disaster Preparedness for Individuals and Families

A brochure that provides information on preparing a disaster supply kit. The brochure is available in multiple languages

Montgomery County Maryland Department of Health And Human Services

<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/hhstmpl.asp?url=/content/hhs/phs/APC/preparedness.asp>

2) Family Preparedness: Make a Plan, Build a Kit, Be Involved

This short video provides useful information, with audio and sign language, on how families can be better prepared for disasters.

North Carolina Department of Crime Control and Public Safety

<http://www.nccrimecontrol.org/readync/DeafLinkVideos/familyprep.mov>

<http://www.ReadyNC.org>

3) National Resource Center on Advancing Emergency Preparedness for Culturally Diverse Communities

This website includes a wealth of resources on helping vulnerable populations, including individuals and families, prepare for disasters.

[http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/Target-Audience/Target-Audience/28/audienceId\\_15874/](http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/Target-Audience/Target-Audience/28/audienceId_15874/)