Start Here: First Steps for Emergency Preparedness

These are the first steps recommended by experts for municipal leaders to prepare for disaster. We have tried to list them in order of priority, but any of these actions will improve your community's readiness significantly. Each community has unique assets and needs. Circle those actions that you want to start with and take a step that is most relevant for your community right now.

Get to know your county emergency manager. Each county in Washington has an emergency manager that is part of a statewide network. They respond first in the event of a disaster. Introducing yourself to your emergency manager and knowing how to contact them in an emergency is one of the most important things you can do to prepare.

Work on preparedness at the individual and community levels. Prepared communities are composed of prepared individuals. Your town's leadership can only respond to a disaster effectively if they and their families are safe. You can model preparedness for others. Consider incorporating emergency preparedness activities into council meetings, school gatherings, or your community's special events. Personal preparedness can include steps such as:

- Developing go-kits with essentials to grab in the event of an evacuation
- Ensuring safe storage of key documents such as personal identification, property deeds, etc.
- Identifying an out-of-area emergency contact for the entire family

Develop mutually supportive relationships with leaders in neighboring communities. In the event of disaster, neighbors who are not directly affected will be better able to respond than impacted individuals. Establishing these relationships in advance will make a world of difference in how quickly others mobilize to help and how likely they are to know what your community

members need most. You may also want to create simple interlocal agreements for mutual aid in the event of an emergency.

Build local skills and knowledge. Are there ways that you can encourage local volunteers to get involved in disaster preparedness? There are multiple avenues for community members to receive free or low-cost training from federal and state government and via the American Red Cross and other nonprofit organizations (see Learning & Training Opportunities section). FEMA supports and trains local Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). CERTs can be organized at a local organization or high school.

Access technical expertise from within and outside your community. Government grants proposals such as FEMA funding can be quite technical. Find people in county and state government who "speak the language" and can help you scope a project and describe it in a way that will resonate with funders.

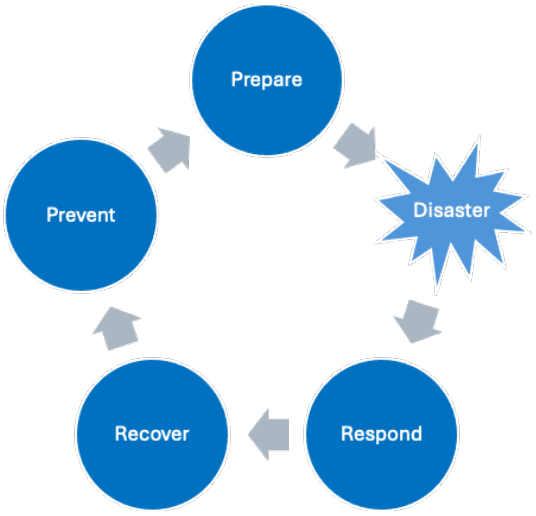
Make an evacuation plan. In the event of a disaster, how will you notify people to evacuate? Predetermine a temporary evacuation point—a safe place where people can gather outside the disaster zone—and let residents know where to go.

Plan for how your local government will operate during an emergency. Develop a continuity of government plan that outlines how you will communicate, what your line of succession is if the mayor is unavailable for any reason, and how key public assets will be protected.

Think about who is most vulnerable in your community, and plan for their needs. How will you ensure that elders, small children, people with disabilities, or non-English-speaking residents are safe in an emergency?

The Disaster Management Cycle

The disaster management cycle provides a framework for understanding how communities can prepare for, respond to, and recover from disruptive events. Each phase plays a role in reducing risk and supporting resilience. Disaster planning should consider each phase and learnings from each phase can inform future actions. This guide is organized to help you understand your role and key actions that local leaders should take at each stage.



Stage	Description
Preparedness (also called Readiness)	build capabilities through ongoing planning, training, and exercises
Response	Communicate, evacuate, provide emergency medical care, shelter, search and rescue
Recovery	Restore essential services, clean up, repair and rebuild infrastructure, assist individuals.
Prevention (also called Mitigation or Resilience building)	Reduce impact/severity through advance actions

Keys to PREPARE: Education and Planning

Learning and Training Opportunities

There are many free and low-cost training opportunities to help you and other community residents prepare for disaster. Here are a few places to start:

- Washington Emergency Management Division offers training for emergency managers and others, including courses specifically for rural communities.
- FEMA's National Preparedness Course Catalog offers a wide array of online courses addressing all hazards as well as going deeper on specific hazards.
- American Red Cross offers CPR, First Aid, and Basic Life Support Classes in Washington.
- There are also many great websites with personal preparedness information that you can access anytime, including Emergency Preparedness Tips from the Red Cross, Be 2 Weeks Ready, and Ready.gov.

Some training helps in any emergency. Additional workshops may be targeted to a particular hazard such as wildfire or flooding. Choose training opportunities that match your community's needs and likely hazards. You could also consider setting up a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). CERT is a FEMA-sponsored, state-run program that trains volunteers in disaster preparedness, basic first aid, fire suppression, and light search and rescue. CERT helps you develop a group of people who are interested in building these skills over time.

Assessing Risk and Planning

What types of threats or hazards are most likely to impact your community? It makes sense to think through which hazards are the biggest threats for your community, balancing the likelihood of the event and the severity if it happens. Is loss of life likely? What is the potential economic impact? Once you have identified the biggest threats to your community, you can begin to plan.

There are several different types of emergency plans, including:

- **Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)** – A plan for an organization to keep its most important services operating during an emergency.
- **Continuity of Government Plan (COG)** – Continuity of Government (COG) plans ensure that essential government functions can continue during an emergency. A COG lays out lines of succession, alternate facilities, redundant communications, and plans for communicating with community members.

You don't have to start from scratch. MSRC's Local Government Emergency Planning resources are a great place to find information about legal requirements and sample plans from other jurisdictions.

How to RESPOND

During and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, your focus will be on safety for residents and protection of homes and property. First responders will take the lead on this work, but municipal leaders play an important role as well. During this phase, you will need to communicate with residents and first responders, assist with decisions such as where emergency shelter and medical care can be located, assess damage, and more. The list of immediate action steps below is based on a list shared by Fred Tribble, Volunteer Emergency Management Coordinator for Endicott, Washington.

Immediate Action Steps for Town Leaders

Clerk Immediate Response Actions

- **Activate Emergency Management**: Contact the Mayor.
- **Establish Communication**: Establish radio communication with town maintenance services. Request "windshield disaster assessment"—a quick damage assessment conducted by driving through town (when safe to do so).
- **Collect Immediate Damage Data**: Quickly assess the extent of damage to the town (addresses, facilities, and city records).
- **Report Data**: Share information with coworkers, the County Emergency Management Coordinator, and first responders.

Mayor Immediate Actions

- **Issue a disaster declaration in writing.** This unlocks emergency powers and sets the stage for county and state assistance.
- **Activate Emergency Management Coordinator (EMC) and Disaster Action Plan**.

Emergency Management Coordinator Immediate Actions:

- Contact County Emergency Manager.

- Determine if evacuation is required.
- Establish Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

Other Details: The town clerk plays a crucial role in disaster response by coordinating communication, maintaining records, and ensuring coordination between Mayor, EMC, Town Maintenance, and responding County agencies. Key action steps include activating emergency management protocols, facilitating public information dissemination, and collaborating with local agencies for recovery efforts.

RECOVER & PREVENT

RECOVER

The recovery phase of a disaster begins after immediate threats to health and safety have passed. Activities include restoring essential services, clean up, repair and rebuilding of infrastructure, and assistance to individuals.

In the wake of a major disaster, communities often form a nonprofit Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) to coordinate recovery efforts. The LTRG is governed by local leaders and can raise funds and coordinate assistance toward priority recovery projects. Recovery can take many years and require coordination of many partners and funding sources coming together to assist with rebuilding. Examples of LTRGs in Washington State include Pine Creek Community Restoration, NCW Disaster Long Term Recovery Group, and Whatcom Strong.

PREVENT

Prevention, also known as mitigation and resiliency building, consists of actions that you can take in advance to reduce the impact and severity of future disasters. Completing a seismic retrofit of city hall, building a seawall, or clearing vegetation to reduce wildfire risk are examples of mitigation projects. You may already know your communities' vulnerabilities. If not, you can identify them as a part of emergency planning.

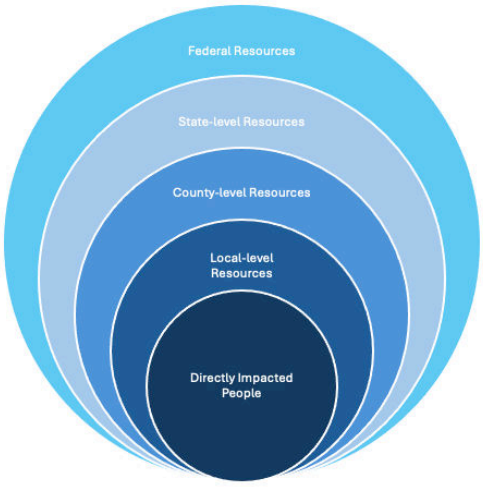
There may be outside funding to support mitigation projects. In addition, you can connect with collaborative efforts to support each other during disasters. For example, WAWARN is a network that helps Washington water and wastewater utilities improve their facilities and provide mutual aid when needed. Use your professional networks to identify additional opportunities for mutual aid.

Emergency Management Partners in Washington State

To access help for your community in the event of a disaster, you need to understand how emergency management is organized in Washington State. Emergency management can be depicted as concentric circles starting with those who are directly affected by the emergency and radiating outward to other resources depending on the severity of the emergency and the skills and/or resources needed to address it.

In the case of a single-family house fire, local resources may be enough to address the emergency. The family is directly affected, local fire fighters put out the blaze, and the local community rallies to provide food and temporary shelter. After the fire, the family may also receive assistance from local nonprofits and file an insurance claim to help with rebuilding their home.

Community-wide emergencies may require an expanded circle of support including one or more of the circles shown below. Your first request for assistance will be to the County Emergency Manager, which is why this is a critical relationship to have in advance of an emergency.



Federal Resources (FEMA) – Disaster case management, individual assistance, public assistance for disaster with a federal disaster declaration

State-level resources (Emergency Management Division, Emergency Operations Center, Voluntary Organizations Assisting in Disasters (VOAD)

County-level resources (county emergency manager, emergency operations center, additional response, support for recovery, community foundation or United Way)

Local resources (local government, first responders, neighbors, churches, service clubs, and nonprofits)

DISASTER RESILIENCE RESOURCES

IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START, START HERE.

Local governments have primary responsibility for emergency management. They are supported by county-level emergency managers and by the Washington Emergency Management Division. With fewer resources available at the federal and state levels, local ownership for emergency preparation is more important than ever.

The Role of the Washington Emergency Management Division

The Washington Emergency Management Division (EMD), part of the Washington Military Department is tasked with state-level disaster preparedness and mitigation support and response.

The preparedness section does statewide planning, supports local planning, runs a statewide training program, and coordinates exercises that improve readiness. They also work to ensure that all state agencies have a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) and a Continuity of Government Plan (COG).

The mitigation section coordinates and supports mitigation planning and manages most federal hazard mitigation funding processes for WA communities.

The response section handles state logistics and communications during major disasters, runs the state Emergency Response Center, the State 911 system, tsunami protection, and jointly administers distribution of federal disaster recovery funds for individuals and local governments.

EMD also coordinates county-level emergency managers, linking local to state to federal disaster services.

The Role of Local Government

Remember, local government is ultimately responsible for disaster planning and response. This is why it is important to do what you can, when you can to increase your resilience as a community. Fortunately, there are partners that can help and resources to support planning,

readiness, and projects to increase your resilience. You can also form joint emergency management districts to prepare collaboratively.

Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations also play a vital role in emergency response and recovery. Organizations like the American Red Cross, Food Lifeline, and The Salvation Army who provide disaster relief and recovery services are networked via Washington Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (WAVOAD) and the wider National VOAD network. VOADs facilitate a coordinated response when disaster strikes. In addition, local nonprofits are a key resource, often flexing to meet basic needs of disaster survivors and organize local volunteers. Your local community foundation or United Way may also be able tos rally community resources, coordinate volunteers, or provide a trusted avenue to receive financial donations.

What about FEMA?

FEMA is our federal emergency response system. See the separate factsheet summarizing the role of FEMA.

Next Steps

Training and networking can help you better understand the network of organizations that respond to emergencies. Relationships developed now will be helpful later. Who in your community can learn more now and be a point person? In many communities, this role falls to interested volunteers.