



Home Visiting in Times of Crisis: Tips for Effective Planning, Coordination & Response



Introduction

From hurricanes and winter storms to wildfires and pandemics, disasters and public health emergencies strike every state, territory, and community. Over the last decade, the U.S. experienced nearly 100 catastrophic events annually, with countless additional disasters affecting hundreds of communities. While widespread and far-reaching, these occurrences disproportionately affect low-income neighborhoods and Black, Indigenous, and other families of color. Geography and inadequate infrastructure make underserved, historically marginalized neighborhoods particularly vulnerable to man-made and natural disasters. In addition, families living in these communities often lack the resources needed to adequately prepare for—and recover from—disasters and other public health threats.

Families and communities most at-risk during disasters and public health threats are the families and communities served by the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. Recent emergencies and COVID-19 underscored the critical role played by home visiting programs in supporting families during times of crisis.

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children up to kindergarten entry. Home visiting helps prevent child abuse and neglect, supports positive parenting, improves maternal and child health, and promotes child development and school readiness.



[Visit the MIECHV Program website to learn more!](#)

This tip sheet highlights best practices and resources to aid MIECHV awardees and local implementing agencies (LIAs) in planning and responding to emergencies. Emergencies can strike with little warning and having plans and protocols in place at the state/territory, tribal, local, and agency level helps home visiting programs fulfill their critical role in supporting families, staff, and communities.

Drawing on lessons learned by home visiting programs in dealing with disasters and public health threats, this resource outlines strategies for networking, education, and advocacy; planning and coordination; effective communications; and staff support before and after emergency events. Links to tools, checklists, and resources are provided to aid planning and coordination efforts as well as support home visiting programs, staff, and families.

Network, Educate & Advocate

At the State and Territory Level

Emergency management at the state/territory, tribal, and community levels involves a network of public and private agencies and organizations. State and local governments have primary responsibility for planning and responding to disasters and public health threats. [The Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#) supports these efforts after the emergency has occurred by coordinating the response of federal agencies and the [American Red Cross](#).

Home visiting programs need to be part of these networks. Involvement in emergency planning is key to raising awareness about the role of home visiting and its capacity to reach pregnant and parenting families in communities. Program staff, as well as the families participating in home visiting programs, can provide a unique perspective on the needs of families during emergencies and how best to meet them. Active participation in state and community emergency preparation and planning efforts also offers an important opportunity for

Advocating for a Family-Focused Emergency Response

Is your state, territory, or community family-focused in its emergency planning and response? Are shelters family-friendly? Are families supported if they need to shelter in place? Things to consider:

- Do emergency shelters support pregnant women and families with newborns?
 - ◇ Are diapers and other baby supplies available?
 - ◇ Is there refrigeration for breastmilk or a private area for pumping?
 - ◇ Are there activities, books, and games for infants and toddlers?
 - ◇ Are plans in place if a woman goes into labor?
 - ◇ Are sites able to care for children and families with special healthcare needs?
 - ◇ What plans are in place to transport children and families to shelters as needed?
- Following the emergency, how are the immediate needs of families addressed?
 - ◇ Do they have access to shelter, food, and water?

home visiting programs to advocate for a family-focused, [equitable response](#) to disasters and other adverse events.

For MIECHV awardees, this means reaching out to designated lead staff within your state/territory or tribal agency and identifying opportunities to participate in planning and preparation activities, such as annual state emergency plan reviews and updates. Designated agency leads are also important links to [state emergency management agencies](#) responsible for developing and implementing plans and for coordinating the immediate response to disasters. They can also tell you how home visiting programs are addressed and how participating families are supported in emergency management plans.

In addition, MIECHV awardees can play an important role in educating emergency planning staff about the ways home visiting can reach and support participating families before, during, and after a crisis—by, for example, collecting supplies, accessing shelters, and developing plans for contacting and connecting with family members. This information can help emergency planning staff better understand and mobilize home visiting resources and services as well as help them develop the coordinated response necessary to meet the urgent needs of families with young children. One way to do this is by developing and sharing common guidance for all home visiting programs in the state.

MIECHV awardees can also ensure that the needs of pregnant women and families with young children are specifically considered in state and local emergency management planning

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- ◇ Can they get formula, baby food, diapers, and infant supplies?
- ◇ Do they have plans for accessing health care, including prenatal care and delivery?
- ◇ Are they connected to counseling and other supportive services?
- How are family-serving agencies, including home visiting programs, engaged in identifying and meeting the needs of families?
 - ◇ Do shelters or emergency supply distribution sites assess needs and provide information and referral services?
- How do plans address equity in preparing and responding to individual and community needs?
- Are families involved in the planning process? How do plans respond to needs identified by families?
- How do plans support the transitional and long-term needs of families?

“We focused on developing a coordinated response and guidance across home visiting programs including MIECHV, as well as early intervention services and a special home visiting program for families impacted by opioid use. We successfully developed an internal-facing document that highlighted the Department of Public Health’s priority populations and addressed structural and systemic barriers that could impact our response (to COVID).”

Christine Silva, Massachusetts DPH, MIECHV Lead

by advocating for a family-focused response. Families enrolled in home visiting programs are a source of valuable information on challenges and barriers they face in preparing and recovering from a disaster or public health threat—and can help formulate solutions to address them.

At the Local Implementing Agency (LIA) Level

Networking, educating, and advocating by LIAs involves connecting with emergency planning activities in their [communities](#) and networking with other local agencies responsible for assisting families. Local [American Red Cross](#) chapters, [United Way](#) affiliates, interagency coordinating councils, home visiting task forces, and early childhood agency partners can help identify how local family-serving agencies are planning and coordinating around emergency planning and response. LIAs should consider getting involved with a local [Community Organizations Active in Disaster \(COAD\)](#) program. [State/Territory Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters \(VOAD\)](#) can help in connecting to local groups.

Planning & Coordination

Emergency planning and response requires **planning** and **coordination** at both the state agency/ awardee and LIA/ community levels. Alignment of emergency plans and response by MIECHV awardees and LIAs will contribute to coordination and support for both organizations and the families served by home visiting programs.

Clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of staff who will both take the lead and be involved in disaster planning and response can help ensure alignment. It is also important to share this staffing information within your programs, and with

Emergency Planning & Coordination:

Tips for MIECHV Awardees

- Designate staff to coordinate emergency preparedness and response.
- Liaise with awardee agency representative, state or territory Emergency Management Agency, and LIAs.
- Develop list of key state/ territory partners to support LIA emergency preparation and response.
- Review contract language to facilitate LIA emergency planning and response.
- Plan and collaborate with home visiting models.



“We had a gas pipeline leak. . .and then COVID. No one could have predicted either one of them. There is going to be a lot more effort put into pre-planning as a result of both of these (emergencies).”

Amy Ackroyd, Children’s Friend & Family Services PAT, Lawrence, MA

state and community partners, so everyone knows who to turn to when an emergency occurs. Programmatic monitoring and site visits then offer a ready opportunity for designated staff to review plans collectively and make any necessary adjustments.

State Coordination

[State/territory emergency management agencies](#) are responsible for inter-governmental planning and coordination efforts for public health, child welfare, and other state/territory agencies that administer home visiting programs. Understanding the expectations, roles, and responsibilities of these different state/territory agencies and programs will strengthen the ability of MIECHV awardees to support home visiting programs working directly with families before and after a crisis event. Consider designating staff to work on inter-agency emergency planning groups; this will provide a direct line to information about processes, protocols, and contacts for accessing needed resources during emergencies. These staff members can also coordinate with LIAs to facilitate and support their emergency planning and response. Examples of key state/territory agency partners include the WIC and food stamp programs, public health departments, unemployment, legal services, and housing services. A comprehensive list of helpful state/territory-specific resources and agency contacts is available from [FEMA](#).

The agency responsible for MIECHV contract management and oversight is another important partner for awardees when it comes to emergency planning. Emergency planning can be reflected in contract language to ensure LIAs develop plans



"We work hard to listen to communities and be responsive to their needs. We developed consistent guidance across home visiting services while recognizing that communities have unique needs. At one point, we had some programs under strict emergency protocols due to high numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases, and at the same time, home visiting programs in other areas of the state were still in the office."

Christine Silva, Massachusetts DPH, MIECHV Lead

for their organizations and participate in local emergency planning activities. Contract provisions can be crafted to provide home visiting agencies with needed flexibility in responding to disasters and public health threats, while maintaining accountability.

[Home visiting models](#) can also assist awardees in emergency planning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many models provided LIAs with training and resources, such as cell phones, to build their capacity for reaching and serving families remotely. MIECHV awardees can benefit from identifying an emergency contact for each home visiting model implemented in the state/territory and coordinating emergency preparation and response.

Community Coordination

Planning and coordination are also critical at the local level. LIAs and other community-based organizations are often the first point of contact for families seeking help to meet immediate needs after a disaster. Designating staff to coordinate emergency planning and preparation within the agency, as well as with state, territory, and community partners, will contribute to an effective response. Experts recommend local agencies develop [three types of plans](#) to prepare for emergency events:

- An **Emergency Safety Plan** to ensure that in an emergency staff know what to do to keep themselves safe;
- A **Business Continuity Plan** to ensure that time-sensitive and critical organization processes can continue or be resumed quickly, and
- A **Mobilization Plan** to outline internal and external action after an emergency.



"We were able to create some flexibility in budgeting in current Local Implementing Agency contracts in response to COVID-19. These provisions turned out to be critical during the winter storms that knocked out power throughout the state in 2020. We are working with our contract office to incorporate flexible language and emergency provisions in all future contracts so we are prepared for any emergency."

Sarah Abrahams, Texas DFPS, MIECHV Lead

National, state, territory and local emergency management groups offer guidance, templates, and tools to aid in developing these plans. FEMA provides valuable comprehensive training and tools for community-based organizations through its [OPEN initiative](#) that outline 10 preparedness actions in developing emergency response plans.

Home visiting programs offer experience and expertise in outreach and case management that are critical in dealing with disasters and public health threats. Involvement in local emergency planning activities and coordination with community agency partners can leverage program services and avoid duplication of effort in areas such as case management.

Assessing and coordinating the capacity of local organizations to deliver [case management services](#) following a disaster can avoid duplication and reduce the frustration of families in responding to multiple assessments and referral processes.

LIAs will also be called upon to meet the immediate needs of participating families during times of crisis. Key partners in this effort include [diaper banks](#), [food banks and food pantries](#), [emergency shelters and housing](#), [crisis counseling](#), and [other services](#). Local organizations and agencies that provide health, childcare, and related services as part of your early childhood system are important collaborators in emergency planning. MIECHV awardees can help LIAs connect with state agencies like WIC and [ECCS initiatives](#).

Home visiting models and local home visiting coordinating groups can also help LIAs in planning and preparing for emergencies. Mutual aid agreements, both formal and informal, offer valuable back-up and support in local and regional

Emergency Planning & Coordination:

Tips for LIAs

- Designate staff to coordinate emergency planning and response.
- Ensure plans for emergencies, business continuity and mobilization are in place and shared with staff, MIECHV awardee.
- Conduct agency preparedness training.
- Participate in community planning efforts.
- Identify local partners and resources to meet immediate needs of families.
- Explore ways to support and provide mutual aid within home visiting networks.
- Review and align emergency plans with MIECHV awardee.

“Our biggest success is primary prevention—getting clients information and helping them prepare before disaster hits . . . We give out Zika information, mosquito repellent and netting, condoms, and check for standing water . . . We help with emergency planning for hurricanes—what documents they need, who they will call, the shelters. It is part of our practice.”

Adriana Hurley, Health Choice Network NFP, Miami-Dade

disasters. This is especially important for LIAs in public health agencies as staff may have additional responsibilities following a disaster, such as assisting in special needs shelters.

Communications

Establishing clear plans for communicating during times of crisis is an important part of emergency planning and preparation. Effective communication—both internally and externally—contributes to staff safety, timely mobilization, and successful collaboration with state, territory, and community partners.

MIECHV awardees should be part of communications planning through their work with the state or territory emergency management agency. Access to accurate information about the crisis, as well as contacts with key state agencies and programs, can help support recovery efforts by local home visiting programs. Emergency contact information should also be maintained for each LIA as well as the home visiting models implemented in the state. A process for regularly reviewing emergency contact lists and communications protocols will contribute to a successful response.

Emergency communication plans for LIAs should similarly specify a key point of contact with the MIECHV awardee and establish clear processes for exchanging information during a crisis. Internally, phone trees can be used to check on staff and keep them informed of mobilization efforts. Cell phones with texting capability are essential tools for communicating with both home visiting staff and program participants. However, loss of power and cell phone service frequency often occur during a disaster, so home visiting programs should brainstorm back-up plans with staff, participants, and the state MIECHV awardee.

The Role of the Project Officer

The MIECHV Project Officer will play a key role in supporting awardees during times of crisis. Expectations for the timing and frequency of contact should be established with state, territory, and community partners. Designated staff can also provide status reports, information, and updates to HRSA and other program funders.



“Our state and local (home visiting) advisory groups include representatives from different organizations that can help with the immediate needs of families after a disaster—food, loss of homes. Members communicate about available resources and our Program provides the information and support to the families.”

Mariana D. Padilla Velazquez, Puerto Rico DPH, MIECHV Lead

Home visiting programs frequently use a “buddy system” for providing peer support to staff and for ensuring coverage during illness and other absences. This system can be a valuable tool in an organization’s emergency communication planning and outreach efforts.

Home visiting programs also play an important role in helping families communicate during emergencies and think ahead about the information they would need—and what they would need to do—if a disaster strikes. Tools and checklists for assisting families are widely available and can be tailored by home visitors to accommodate the individual needs and resources of families. The American Red Cross also offers an [app](#) and other help with reconnecting and communicating to families.

Supporting Staff

The ability of home visiting programs to effectively support families during public health threats and disasters depends on the resiliency and commitment of staff at all levels of the organization. Building resiliency and utilizing a trauma-informed approach in mobilizing home visiting staff after an emergency will contribute to a successful response.

MIECHV awardees and LIAs should work to ensure that all staff and their families are personally prepared for emergencies and have the tools and information they need to [recognize and manage](#) their own stress during an event. As COVID-19 and recent natural disasters have demonstrated, many home visiting staff are personally impacted during an emergency occurrence. Supporting staff and their families, recognizing signs of trauma and stress, and helping them access services is an important part of emergency planning. Developing the

Check Your Communications Plans

- Communication roles & responsibilities are clearly outlined and shared with staff.
- Frequency, content, and manner of communication are addressed in plans.
- Needed equipment, technology and support is available to staff.
- Phone trees, other emergency contact tools are regularly reviewed and updated.
- Back up strategies are outlined.
- Families are provided with tools and help to develop plans for connecting during emergencies.



“Resource insecurity was the biggest problem we faced. Programs and families needed concrete supports—PPE, food, utility supports, housing . . . Staying connected with families was our primary objective.”

Steven Pascal, Massachusetts Children’s Trust

capacity to [identify and respond](#) to staff needs and concerns—every day and during emergencies—will contribute to the agencies’ recovery and resumption of services to families. This includes encouraging self-care through mindfulness and other stress management techniques, as well as providing access to Employee Assistance Programs and counseling services.

It is important to recognize that because home visitors are often the first point of contact for many families during times of crisis, they are especially at-risk for similar stressors. Home visiting programs should be familiar with signs of stress and be prepared to provide aid and support to their staff.

A Final Word

Home visiting programs provide a lifeline for families every day, but especially during times of crisis. Having plans and protocols in place at the state/territory, tribal, local, and agency level contributes to the success of home visiting programs in supporting participating families and high-need communities during emergencies. MIECHV awardees and LIAs can benefit from integrating emergency preparedness and response into their ongoing organizational planning activities.

Tips for Supporting Staff

- Encourage all staff to develop a family emergency plan.
- Provide ongoing training in self-care and resources to manage stress.
- Incorporate stress assessment, management strategies in emergency plans for your organization.
- Provide home visitors, supervisors and program administrators with technology and tools to reduce stress before, during, and after emergencies.
- Share links to disaster stress hotline and other services.

“We supported staff through professional development and social connections. We co-sponsored with the Boston Public Health Commission a ‘Conversation on Trauma-Informed Practices during COVID.’ We also held regular meetings with supervisors across home visiting models, providing a space for peer sharing and to learn about staff needs and strategies for staff support like flexible work schedules.”

Emma Posner, Massachusetts DPH, MIECHV Lead

“We’ve had to deal with a chain of disasters—hurricanes, storms, and, in 2020, earthquakes. During all these disasters, we lost power and communications which was a challenge to provide our services. We have to be resilient and maintain unity, support each other, and validate the emotions of staff because things that are happening to the participating families are happening to them too.”

Mariana D. Padilla Velazquez, Puerto Rico DPH, MIECHV Lead

Tools & Resources

For Families

[Are You Ready?](#)

These are free, comprehensive, downloadable fact sheets and resources for public health threats, natural, and man-made emergencies developed by the American Public Health Association as part of its Get Ready! campaign. Includes material for pregnant woman and families with infants, as well as people with disabilities. Available in both English and Spanish.

[Disaster Safety for Expecting and New Parents](#)

Developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Office of Reproductive Health, this resource provides general tips to help pregnant women and families with young children get prepared before a disaster and what to do after a disaster occurs.

[Make A Plan!](#)

Here you can find downloadable templates and tips for creating a family emergency plan from the American Red Cross. These can be tailored to address specific disasters and emergencies and are available in English and Spanish. Includes a link to a free Emergency App.

[Family Communication Plan](#)

This is a simple, downloadable card for collecting family contact information developed as part of the national Ready.gov public awareness campaign. Available in multiple languages.

[Show Me for Emergencies Mobile App/Booklet](#)

This free communication tool for people with communication challenges was developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and allows for communication at shelters dispensing sites, evacuations, shelter-in-place, and other emergency situations. Available from [Google Play](#) or [Apple Store](#).

[Disaster Distress Hotline Wallet Card](#)

This is a downloadable, reproducible card from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) with toll-free phone number and texting information to access counseling after a disaster. Includes information on warning signs of stress in children, teens, and adults.

[Helping Children Cope During and After a Disaster](#)

This links to the CDC webpage on supporting children before, during and after an emergency. Includes activity sheet and downloadable fact sheet developed with the Puerto Rico Department of Health. Features age-specific information. Available in English and Spanish.

[Food Safety Before, During and After a Power Outage](#)

This reproducible poster offers tips and guidelines on food safety during a power outage. Developed by US Department of Agricultural, US Department of Health and Human Services, and the Ad Council.

[Emergency Supplies: A Checklist for Families](#)

This downloadable brochure provides a basic emergency supply checklist for families. Developed by the national Ready.gov campaign and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

[Stay Aware. Be Prepared.](#)

Here are downloadable resources and checklists for families, those with access and functional needs and pets from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

[Tip Sheets on Preparing for Specific Weather-Related Events](#)

This comprehensive list of tip sheets for natural and man-made disasters was compiled by the CDC. Includes links to advice for specific groups, including expecting and new families, people with disabilities, homeless people, and tribal communities. Available in English and Spanish.

[Help After a Disaster](#)

Available in 27 languages, FEMA's "Help After a Disaster" brochure is a tool that can be shared in your community to help people understand the types of Individual Assistance support that may be available in disaster recovery.

For Programs

[Building Alliances for Equitable Resilience](#)

Developed by FEMA and the Resilient Nation Partnership Network, this program addresses strategies for promoting equity and community resilience in emergency planning and preparedness.

[Guidance for Home Visiting During COVID-19](#)

This common guidance for home visiting programs was developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to ensure an equitable response and overcome systemic barriers in service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Preparing Your Organization for Disaster](#)

Here is a recorded Zoom presentation sponsored by Nonprofit Center of Northeast Florida, Jacksonville Chamber, and Duval COAD offering tips and resources for emergency planning and preparation.

[Ready Rating](#)

Here is a free online assessment and emergency planning resource from the American Red Cross to determine organizational readiness.

[Disaster Planning, Emergency Preparedness & Business Continuity](#)

This downloadable guide was developed by Nonprofit New York to aid organizations in preparing a disaster recovery plan.

[Disaster Planning Toolkits for Business](#)

These disaster preparedness toolkits and guides were developed by FEMA and federal Department of Homeland Security for businesses/organizations for various types of disasters, including hurricanes, tornadoes, power outages and more, as well as exercises to test/evaluate plans.

[Disaster Planning and Recovery](#)

Sponsored by TechSoup, this link offers to guides and training resources specifically addressing information technology issues during and after a disaster.

[Responder and Community Resilience](#)

Here is a comprehensive collection of resources and links for supporting staff experiencing disaster-related trauma and stress. Addresses supervisors, as well as front-line staff stress and trauma. Compiled by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, SAMHSA, and others. Materials available in English and Spanish.

[Assistance for Governments and Private Nonprofits After a Disaster](#)

This links to FEMA information about help available to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, and certain types of private nonprofit organizations in responding to and recovering from major disasters or emergencies.