



# Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: Leading Your Agency Through a Disaster



Capacity Building  
CENTER FOR STATES

Child welfare leaders play a critical, collaborative role in effective disaster planning, response, and recovery. This tip sheet helps leaders understand specific actions to take in preparation for and in response to disasters. More detailed guidance is provided in the *Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide*, which offers tips, tools, and examples to support agencies in planning, response, and recovery across different types of disasters.

## Adapting Elements of Leadership for Disaster Management

You may ask yourself how leadership in disaster management looks different from your day-to-day work. While the elements of leadership may remain the same, preparing for and responding to crises require new approaches. The following table illustrates common elements of child welfare leadership and an example of action during each different phase of disaster management. These are single examples intended to prompt thinking about possible approaches and may not apply to all agencies or disasters.

Common Elements of Leadership	 Examples of Action During <b>Disaster Planning</b>	 Examples of Action During <b>Disaster Response</b>	 Examples of Action During <b>Disaster Recovery</b>
<b>Prioritizes</b> the well-being of children, youth, families, and staff	Ensures that the plan includes updated contact information and steps to reach out and provide support to youth, families, and staff	Quickly establishes feedback loops with families, youth, and staff to understand what is working well and what needs adjustment	Works with data managers and external partners to identify and target resources toward the most affected families and communities
<b>Adapts</b> to changing circumstances and unique needs	Makes a plan for how resources, people, and funding could be allocated in different ways when disaster strikes	Acts quickly and decisively, understanding that unilateral decisions will need to be made with limited to no feedback	Takes time to address and acknowledge ongoing trauma and concrete needs without reverting too quickly to practice as usual
<b>Coordinates</b> with a wide range of partners, including public systems, community-based services, and youth and families	Establishes agreements with Tribal governments on roles and relationships in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters	Coordinates with state, Tribal, and local policy-makers to ensure that all families in need, including undocumented or mixed status families, can access services	Coordinates with partners to ensure the availability of trauma-informed therapeutic supports for youth, families, and staff
<b>Communicates</b> authentically and visibly, listening and inspiring while prioritizing clarity	Develops a communication plan to prepare for disruption in communication systems and ensure that responsible staff are ready to act	Speaks honestly and clearly, reassuring staff and families while remaining transparent throughout changing circumstances	Models, normalizes, and provides space for continuing conversations about staff and community trauma

# Considerations for Effective Leadership Across Phases of Disaster Management

Ask yourself the following questions at each different phase of disaster management to ensure you are centering youth and families in your process, empowering and deploying staff effectively, and aligning in partnership with other organizations. Asking these questions may reveal gaps or areas for renewed focus. Review the *Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide* for concrete strategies to help teams take action.

## Centering Equity in Disaster Management

Disaster planning, response, and recovery efforts should consistently seek to advance equity. Effective leaders routinely examine practice to protect against unintended impacts that widen economic and racial or ethnic disparities. See the *Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems Guide* for key considerations for an equitable approach.



**Youth and families:** Does your agency recruit youth and families, beyond those that are typically invited, to participate in disaster planning? Do you consider trauma history and the impact of involvement in disaster planning on youth and families? Do you expect—and empower—the team to overcome barriers to youth and family participation?

**Staff:** How do you identify staff strengths and skills to effectively deploy them during response and recovery? Do they have the time and decision-making power to lead the way? Are lead staff represented in planning and aware of their role? Is the plan presented, reviewed, and updated on a regular basis?

**Organizational partners:** Does your team reach out to and build relationships with new partners, such as emergency response agencies, while considering how to engage traditional partners, such as Tribal leaders and schools? Do you look for ways to lean on others' expertise, increase efficiencies, and reduce duplication?



**Youth and families:** Does your agency ask youth and families—and trust that they know—what they need? Have you aligned your response with other family-serving organizations?

**Staff:** Do you have the right staff in the right place for response and do they have what they need to act quickly? Do you set up daily check-ins with your lead staff to discuss their key responsibilities, as well as their own well-being? Do you keep continuous quality improvement at the forefront, documenting actions and results for use in future planning?

**Organizational partners:** Are you working alongside and supporting the organizations leading disaster response? Are families connected to service delivery organizations that are prepared to meet their needs? Do you keep your response efforts focused on the children, youth, and families you serve?



**Youth and families:** Do you avoid blanket policies when possible, recognizing the individual needs of youth and families? Are families involved in and consulted about programmatic changes that result from disasters?

**Staff:** Are there new ways of structuring the agency that became evident as you managed the disaster? How flexible can you be in responding to the individual needs, and possible trauma, of staff? Do you review data and documentation, updating your plan with lessons learned? Do you ensure that the agency's actions through the response and recovery phases are guided by clear objectives and priorities, such as equitable access to recovery services (e.g., technology resources)?

**Organizational partners:** Do you continue to align your efforts with community-based, state, Tribal, and federal agencies during the recovery phase? Are you strategically planning for how to use recovery-based economic resources (such as federal disaster relief funds) to improve youth and family outcomes?

While child welfare leaders are accustomed to prioritizing, adapting, coordinating, and communicating in a fast-paced, unpredictable environment, disaster management requires new approaches and skills. Refer to the [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems](#) webpage for more detailed information on how to approach disaster planning, response, and recovery. Reach out to the Center for States capacity building team for additional support. Visit the [Child Welfare Capacity Building Liaisons](#) webpage to find your state's Tailored Services Liaison.

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