



Rural Remote Food Bank Module 7: Disaster Planning & Response

Be Prepared: Disaster Planning P1-3

If Disaster Strikes: Lessons Learned About Effective Response P3-4

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Disaster Planning and Response for RRFB: Lessons Learned from the Field in CA.

The basic challenge for RRFBs in disasters is the lack of capacity and resources in all domains. A discussion of issues, lessons learned, and resources are included in the discussion below.

Be Prepared: Disaster Planning

- Having a disaster plan in place is important. This should include an environmental scan of resources and MOUs, if possible. However, understand that flexibility and responsiveness will be the key effective elements when disaster strikes.
- California Association of Food Banks – [disaster planning resource webpage](#) with MOU templates and examples of disaster plans.

Elements to consider in planning:

1. Connect to community partners in planning, especially your county's Office of Emergency Services. Communicate regularly, as staff turnover can result in a significant capacity change. Imperial Valley Food Bank developed a county-wide disaster feeding plan with their County and other local nonprofits. Contact IVFB Executive Director [Sara Griffen](#).
2. If a disaster shifts from a local disaster to a national disaster, new players come on to the scene, and effective communication becomes critical. Join your local county Volunteer Organization Active in Disaster (VOAD). California VOAD websites – [Northern California](#); [Southern California](#).
3. It is important to know about state and federal resources, but also private resources. For example, if the food bank has to be evacuated, who could help with transporting and storing food? If there are widespread power outages, who can help with preparing and distributing perishable food? PG&E offers a food reimbursement program for food banks who deliver food during Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS) Contact [Kasey Olin](#).
4. A plan should include:
 - Roles and responsibilities of the Food Bank.
 - Roles and responsibilities of other local organizations.
 - How to respond to the needs for food, above and beyond normal services, and how to organize emergency kitchen activity.
 - How to access emergency food resources.
 - Known funders/food providers – government and local.

- How to coordinate with 211, if locally available.
- How to handle donor calls: who will collect, organize, and respond to offers for assistance.
- How to handle calls requesting assistance for disaster victims.
- How to have volunteers ready immediately to handle the logistics of the first response.
- How to transition emergency response effectively to Red Cross, and other national responders.
- How to continue to communicate with local media for local needs that may not be reaching the national responders.
- How to protect Food Bank data from infrastructure damage: switch to cloud-based recordkeeping system with an off-site backup of the server.
- How to react if local infrastructure is damaged: is there an option to have cash stored for immediate emergency purchases?
- Process for planning for relocation – planners on board.
- Training for staff on advanced first aid, defibrillation. (Could be useful in smaller emergencies related to food bank operations.)
- Training for staff on personal emergency preparedness (emergency kits for home/car).
- Maintain emergency supplies at the food bank such as flashlights, water, batteries, and generator to ensure basic functioning capacity.
- Infrastructure may be severely damaged or inaccessible in the event of a disaster so it is important to ensure the Food Bank has the basic resources in place to serve clients when phones, internet, electricity, etc. may not be available.
- A plan to have a secondary response to a disaster: for example, if disaster/evacuation strikes a neighboring county and your county is called upon to provide animal shelter, housing, etc. In a small county, national media can quickly fill up available hotels/motels.
- The local OES should remind citizens annually to check on emergency food and water stores at home and can encourage them to refresh food and donate earlier stored food to the Food Bank.

Food Bank partners, pantries, affiliates:

- Access to cell phone numbers of key staff at the affiliated food distribution sites. Text messages can be the most reliable means of communication when infrastructure is compromised, depending on local conditions.
- Program coordinators can develop “go kits” that include hard copies of critical client/program paperwork and contact information for critical community partners along with a copy of the organization’s disaster response plan. This information can be organized in a notebook and should also be stored on a thumb drive in case you have access to a computer and printer. Contents of the kit will vary by staff position but each staff person should have the basic tools and information necessary to distribute food to their target populations. This information will need to be updated on a regular basis.
- Develop an organizational phone tree to pass the word about what has happened and what is needed and check on everyone’s status.

Volunteer and staff roles in disaster response:

- RRFB staff will be managers and coordinators but will need to work closely with volunteers, old and new, for response.
- Look to your current volunteer pool to identify natural leaders who can work under intense situations.
- Some areas have Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD) groups, a coalition of charities, largely faith-based, that respond to disasters.
- Some food banks are looking to recruit retired police or firefighters to help with their disaster plans. Again, choosing natural leaders is important.
- Things to consider: along with logistics of matching donations with need, there will also be a need to effectively utilize volunteers. There will be a lot more food to sort and prep. Families with children will want to donate time. Who organizes and manages this?
- New leaders will emerge in a time of crisis, and it will be important to be flexible and to work with them to enhance their effectiveness.

If Disaster Strikes: Lessons Learned About Effective Response

Immediate Response: First 7 Days

Taking Calls

The California Governor's Office can set up a crisis call center relatively quickly for local use. Calls for assistance can overwhelm small staffs at RRFBs. It is critical to get call centers up and running quickly for an effective local-level response.

If the disaster becomes national, and National Red Cross is called in, the local Red Cross calls get routed to them. If this happens prior to an effective transition with a local presence (which can take up to 7 days), the calls will be answered at a national call center where the responder has no idea of the local geography or resources. Be sure that local media and outreach people distribute a local number for local response and information.

For calls coming in, it is critical to have persons who are very good at logistics and who are knowledgeable about local resources. This person or persons will need to be good at mapping, coordinating, and communicating. Initial calls are from volunteers (who can give time, money, and practical resources such as animal evacuation and shelter, housing, showers.) Calls are also from victims needing these services. A calm, knowledgeable approach is needed to meet needs with available donors.

During the first week of a crisis, leadership makes a huge difference. New leaders emerge from a variety of places to solve immediate problems. Designated leaders may have to catch up and be respectful of the work done.

Food

Feeding America has a disaster response component as part of their work, if more than 250 households are impacted. FA will check in with the certified affiliate member in an area where a disaster takes place. FA can get food donations and water from national donors if necessary. It may not be the best food for responding to a disaster or feeding people large scale but it can be helpful if applied in a targeted fashion.

California Department of Social Services TEFAP has emergency food boxes available. Contact your TEFAP representative.

In the first 3 days, money is needed to buy food before other systems are set up. Good partnerships with local grocery stores are needed, with MOUs ahead of time for purchasing food at cost.

Theoretically, USDA food is to be made available in an emergency, but some counties have had trouble getting permission in a timely manner. Knowing who to call in this situation is helpful - having regional and state connections to communicate the urgency of the need. CAFB may be helpful in this regard.

California Department of Social Services (CDSS) disaster resources:

[Disaster Services](#)

[Food Distribution Unit \(FDU\)](#)

USDA disaster resources:

[Fact Sheet - USDA Support for Food Banks and the Emergency Food System](#)

[FNS Disaster Assistance](#)

Transitioning to state/national resources: Red Cross, Salvation Army, Forest Service, etc.

There are impressive resources at the national level, but it takes some time to get them working effectively on the ground. However, when it makes sense to transition, it is important to do so for economic reasons.

It has been the experience of RRFB in disaster situations that the Red Cross national team may not communicate well with the local organizations that have been the initial responders. They may be giving opposing messages to the media (for example, no more donations needed, when the local volunteers understand that there are still specific needs emerging). Be ready to give out information to your local media for what is still needed for donations and who to contact locally outside of the Red Cross if necessary.

FEMA funds – Local Food Banks should apply for FEMA funds if they are expending funds once the disaster has been declared. It has been the experience of RRFBs that the Red Cross does not utilize FEMA funds from a disaster to reimburse for local costs incurred outside of Red Cross efforts.

Advocacy issue: difficult to get resources immediately to support local efforts. As regional and national resources come in, there is a disconnect between local efforts and regional/national response teams. Coordination needs to be improved.

Post Disaster Issues

Some disasters require families to evacuate for a long period, or they may lose their homes. Insurance may pay for people to relocate to hotel rooms, where they cannot cook, and getting food may be difficult. Or people may want to camp on their land. Issues like this will change the service needs, and additional grant funding may need to be sought to respond.

Although this may not be a RRFB responsibility, there needs to be a county-wide coordination with Behavioral Health services after the disaster. There will be trauma for people directly impacted as well as responders. Additional trauma may come with criminal acts that often follow disasters (theft, scammers, etc.), making people victims twice. The need will outweigh the resources, and service providers may want to organize support groups internally.

There is a general sense of exhaustion after the crisis is over, both for the victims as well as the responders and the community at large. Often Food Banks experience fewer donations and volunteers for their basic safety net activities after a disaster, due to donors feeling that they have given a lot already.

Advocacy Issues for RRFB Staff and Volunteers

No advocacy issues have been identified at this time.