

Capstone Project:
Emergency Management 101
Toolkit

Prepared by:
Ashley Bernal
Jorge Chamorro
Molly Fitzpatrick
Pat Jones

Leadership ICMA
Capstone Project
2025 – 2026

Introduction

Local governments are the front line of emergency response. Whether responding to severe weather, infrastructure failures, cyber incidents, or public safety emergencies, municipal leaders are often required to make rapid decisions with limited information and resources. In many communities—particularly smaller municipalities—emergency management responsibilities are not handled by a dedicated department but are instead shared among staff who balance these duties alongside their primary roles.

In recent years, communities across the country have experienced an increasing range of emergency events, from extreme weather and natural disasters to cybersecurity threats and infrastructure disruptions. These incidents highlight the importance of preparedness at the local level and the need for practical tools that help municipal leaders respond effectively when emergencies occur.

Emergencies rarely unfold in predictable ways. Municipal officials may suddenly find themselves managing events they have never encountered before, coordinating across departments, communicating with residents and the media, and navigating complex state and federal response systems. Without clear guidance, defined roles, or accessible planning resources, these situations can quickly become overwhelming.

The Emergency Management 101 Toolkit was developed to help local governments address this challenge. Designed with practicality and accessibility in mind, the toolkit provides municipal leaders with a structured starting point for emergency planning.¹ Rather than serving as a technical manual or a jurisdiction-specific plan, it offers foundational guidance, adaptable templates, and proven practices that communities can tailor to their own needs and capacity.

Organized around the three critical phases of emergency management—Preparedness, Response, and Recovery—the toolkit emphasizes actionable steps local governments can take before, during, and after an emergency. By consolidating best practices from federal guidance, municipal case studies, and practitioner experience, the toolkit aims to help communities improve coordination, clarify responsibilities, and strengthen resilience.

¹ This toolkit reflects current best practices and available resources at the time of its development. As technologies, threats, and emergency management practices continue to evolve, it is intended to serve as a flexible foundation that communities can adapt and build upon to meet future needs.

Ultimately, the toolkit seeks to empower municipal leaders with practical tools that make emergency planning more approachable and achievable. By providing a clear roadmap and accessible resources, the Emergency Management 101 Toolkit helps ensure that municipalities—regardless of size or staffing—are better prepared to protect their residents, infrastructure, and operations when emergencies occur.

CHAPTER 1:
PLANNING, BEFORE AN EMERGENCY

Preparing is Critical

Planning for a disaster is a continuous process that requires communities to dedicate time outside of normal operations to organize plans, train staff, and document processes that provide a high level of readiness. For government officials, this means establishing policies, budgets, contingency plans and solidifying relationships before an incident occurs, as the public often looks to their local government for support.

This section explores the recommended approach to effective preparation included in FEMA's Comprehensive Preparedness Guide (CPG) 101, taking small community leaders through a 6-step planning process.

Guidelines, forms, and examples of recommended documents are listed in Appendix A.

Build a Collaborative Planning Team

Preparation begins by assembling a team that has broad representation of the community, including municipal agencies, private business, and non-profit partners.

- **The Core Team:** This group should include representatives from law enforcement, fire and EMT services, public works and health officials; if the municipality has an individual acting as emergency manager, they would be the lead on this group on the creation of an Emergency Operations Plan.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** It is important to include advocates for individuals with disabilities, access and functional needs, as well as senior citizens to ensure planning covers all demographic requirements. Their input is crucial in broadening response and support to emergency survivors.
- **External Partners:** Relationships should be established with State emergency management agencies and neighboring jurisdictions to bridge local capability gaps. The best approach to mitigate the impacts of disasters that are not contained within boundaries is a well-coordinated resource sharing plan.

Risk Assessment and Capability Analysis

Once roles and partnerships have been identified, the next step is to assess the specific threats facing the community.

- **Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA):** Local governments use this process to answer "What do we need to prepare for?" by identifying hazards, giving them context (such as time and location), and establishing capability targets.
- **SPR (Stakeholder Preparedness Review):** This is an annual self-assessment that identifies gaps between current capabilities and the targets set in the THIRA.

- **RAPT (Resilience Analysis and Planning Tool):** This GIS-based tool allows leaders to map community characteristics, such as population density and infrastructure, to visualize potential disaster impacts.
- **Community Lifelines:** Responders use this construct to focus on essential services like safety, food, water, and energy, ensuring that preparation efforts prioritize the most critical services for survival.

Formalize the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)

The Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) is the centerpiece of local preparation. It should be structured with a Base Plan and supported by Functional and Hazard-Specific Annexes.

- **Base Plan Elements:** This must include a Promulgation Statement signed by senior officials to give the plan legal authority, a Situation Overview of hazards, and a Concept of Operations (CONOPS) that explains how the jurisdiction will act.
- **Emergency Support Functions (ESFs):** Many local governments align their plans with the 15 federal ESFs, grouping resources for missions like transportation, communications, and mass care.
- **Pre-Disaster Recovery Ordinance:** Leaders should adopt a Recovery Ordinance pre-incident to authorize a recovery management organization and provide the legal authority for post-disaster interventions, such as temporary development regulations.

Resource Identification and Management

Resource management and preparedness involve typing, qualifying, and inventorying everything a community might need.

- **Resource Typing:** This is the process of defining resources by capability, ensuring that when a jurisdiction requests a "Type 1" engine, they receive a standardized piece of equipment with known performance levels.
- **Mutual Aid Agreements (MAA):** These formal agreements allow jurisdictions to share personnel and equipment; they are essential for smaller communities that cannot afford to maintain specialized resources for every potential disaster.
- **Inventory Systems:** Communities can use the IRIS (Incident Resource Inventory System) to track their assets and the RTLT (Resource Typing Library Tool) as a catalog for national typing definitions.

Official Preparation and the "Go Kit"

Senior officials must also prepare personally to lead during a crisis. Just as it is important to carve out the time to develop these plans, it is crucial that those individuals with roles in responding to an emergency develop a full understanding of their responsibilities and the structure of the operations during the response phase.

- Training and Exercises: Participating in Tabletop Exercises (TTX) and full-scale drills helps officials practice their legal and leadership responsibilities.
- Official "Go-Kit": Leaders should maintain a kit for their disaster work location containing essentials like a copy of the EOP, contact lists, chargers, maps, and personal supplies.
- Continuity Planning: A Continuity of Government (COG) plan must be in place to ensure the succession of leadership and the performance of essential functions if primary facilities are compromised.

Implement and Maintain the Plan

Plans and documents created during this phase should not be static; revisions must be made whenever necessary.

- Ownership: Assign responsibility for the upkeep and distribution of the plan to a specific group or position.
- Version control and accessibility: Implement a "review and audit" cycle (annually or even quarterly if changes and revisions are common).
- Interjurisdictional coordination: Regional meetings with adjoining communities could ensure consistency on the response and support expectations.

Once a community has established strong preparedness planning, defined roles, and identified key resources, it must be ready to activate those systems when an emergency occurs. The next chapter outlines the key actions local governments should take to coordinate an effective response during an active incident.

CHAPTER 2:
RESPONSE, DURING AN EMERGENCY

Immediate Response Actions

When an emergency strikes a small community, its safety and security depend primarily on the capacity of their local government to quickly provide the resources needed to stabilize the situation and prevent further losses.

Local governments are the backbone of the emergency response; the execution of their plans is critical, from deploying a rapid damage assessment team to requesting additional resources to nearby municipalities under the terms of a mutual aid agreement.

This section outlines the basic actions to follow when an emergency occurs in your community.

Activate Command and Coordination

The first priority during an incident is to establish an Incident Command or Unified Command to coordinate on-scene activities.

- Establish the Emergency Operations Center (EOC): The EOC should be activated to serve as the physical or virtual location where staff consolidate information, support decision-making, and coordinate resources.
- Implement the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP): The EOP guides responders in performing four basic functions: emergency assessment, hazard operations, population protection, and incident management.
- Assess Community Lifelines: Responders should use the Community Lifelines construct to rapidly determine the scale of the disaster by identifying disruptions to critical services like safety, food, water, and energy.

Leverage Mutual Aid Agreements (MAAs)

For many jurisdictions, particularly smaller communities, a disaster will quickly overwhelm local resources. Mutual Aid Agreements are essential tools that allow one party to send personnel, equipment, and supplies to another.

Purpose and Importance for Smaller Communities:

- Resource Augmentation: Most smaller jurisdictions do not maintain sufficient resource levels to handle extreme events independently. MAAs provide a mechanism to quickly obtain assistance.
- Economic Efficiency: Owning and maintaining every piece of specialized equipment is cost-prohibitive for small communities; MAAs offer logistical and economic means to fill capability gaps.
- Pre-established Terms: These agreements resolve issues regarding liability, compensation, and procedures before a crisis occurs, ensuring that help can be dispatched without delay.

Utilize Standardized Documentation and Forms

Effective management depends on accurate record-keeping to ensure accountability and facilitate future financial reimbursement.

Key ICS Forms for Incident Management:

- ICS Form 201 (Incident Briefing): Used by the initial Incident Commander to capture vital information and support the transfer of command.
- ICS Form 202 (Incident Objectives): Defines the goals for the operational period and serves as the opening of a written Incident Action Plan (IAP).
- ICS Form 204 (Assignment List): Details specific actions for a division or group, including assigned resources and supervisors.
- ICS Form 214 (Activity Log): Crucial for recording notable activities and events during the response.

FEMA Declaration Forms:

- FEMA Form 010-0-13 (Request for Presidential Disaster Declaration): This is the essential form used by state or tribal leadership to request a major disaster or emergency declaration from the President. It requires a concise description of damages and the resources already committed by local and state authorities.

These forms are included in Appendix B.

Manage Public Information and Warnings

During a disaster, risk communication is vital to prevent panic and encourage adaptive responses.

- Public Information Officer (PIO): The PIO must gather and disseminate meaningful, timely information through the Joint Information System (JIS).
- Warning Systems: Utilize multiple channels, such as the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) and the Emergency Alert System (EAS), to ensure that non-English speaking populations and those with disabilities receive life-saving instructions.

Conduct Continuous Assessment and Triage

As the incident evolves, the Operations Section must manage tactical activities, while the Planning Section collects data to forecast future needs.

- Triage: In mass casualty events, the health providers must apply triage principles to do the "greatest good for the greatest number".

- Situational Awareness: A Common Operating Picture (COP) must be maintained so that all responding jurisdictions act on shared intelligence.

As immediate threats are stabilized and response operations begin to wind down, communities must shift their focus toward restoring services, supporting residents, and rebuilding infrastructure. The following chapter explores the critical steps local governments can take to guide recovery and strengthen long-term community resilience.

CHAPTER 3

RECOVERY, AFTER AN EMERGENCY

Recovery and Rebuilding

The process of recovery for a small community requires participation of multiple sectors, including local government agencies, non-profits, volunteer organizations, and the private sector. While state and Federal resources may be available to support recovery efforts, responsibility for long-term recovery remains at the local level. The goal at this stage is to move from restoring infrastructure to rebuilding the community more resilient, transitioning from the “command and control” approach to a collaborative one.

This section describes three major areas of focus to support the recovery and reconstruction of the community. Reference documents, forms, and examples are found in Appendix C.

Establish Leadership and Coordination

As the public relies on local government officials to help guide a successful recovery, effective leadership depends on early organization:

- a) **Appoint a Local Disaster Recovery Manager (LDRM):** This individual organizes and advances recovery at the local level, acting as the primary point of contact for state and federal partners. The LDRM must have the authority to convene stakeholders and the aptitude to think strategically over the long term.
- b) **Convene a Recovery Task Force:** This is a team of experts in planning, housing, public works and economic development. If the local jurisdiction has limited staff available to support this team, a regional approach could be considered.
- c) **Implement a Recovery Ordinance:** Although this ordinance should be written and adopted during the pre-disaster stage, at the time of recovery the ordinance must be executed to allow more expedited zoning and building code modifications if needed.

Seek Federal and State Funding

Securing financial resources is one of the most critical components of a successful recovery. Local officials must understand the triggers for assistance under the Robert T. Stafford Act, which dictates that damage must outstrip both local and state resources before a Presidential Disaster Declaration is issued.

- a) **FEMA Public Assistance (PA):** This program provides grants for the repair or replacement of public facilities (e.g., water plants, roads) and certain nonprofits. The federal government typically covers 75% of the costs, requiring local officials to maintain meticulous records and receipts for every expenditure.
- b) **FEMA Individual Assistance (IA):** Designed for residents, this supports food, temporary housing, and serious unmet needs. It is intended to supplement, not replace, private insurance.

- c) Small Business Administration (SBA): The SBA provides low-interest disaster loans for homeowners and businesses to repair physical damage and cover economic injury.
- d) Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs): Administered by HUD, these funds support long-term revitalization, affordable housing, and infrastructure restoration, often serving as a flexible funding source for low-income areas.
- e) FEMA Community Disaster Loan Program: This program assists local governments that have experienced a significant loss of property tax base or revenue due to the disaster.

Supporting Residents and Vulnerable Populations

A resilient community ensures its recovery process is inclusive and accessible.

- a) Disaster Case Management: In accordance with the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, local governments should coordinate with NGOs to track survivors' needs and develop individual recovery plans.
- b) Crisis Counseling: Leaders should leverage the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program to provide mental health support for survivors suffering from trauma.
- c) Housing Solutions: Recovery plans should differentiate between short-term sheltering and permanent housing reconstruction. Local leaders should incentivize the construction of energy-efficient and affordable housing to support marginalized residents.

Building Back More Resiliently

The recovery stage offers a unique window of opportunity to apply lessons learned and rebuild and restore regular operations in a better, more resilient way to reduce future risk.

- a) Integrate Mitigation: Under the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, communities must have a FEMA-approved Hazard Mitigation Plan to be eligible for most federal assistance.
- b) Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP): Once a major disaster is declared, HMGP funds can be used for projects like elevating homes, purchasing open space in floodplains, and retrofitting critical facilities.
- c) Smart Rebuilding: Use the Community Lifelines construct to ensure essential services like energy, water, and health systems are stabilized quickly and rebuilt to modern standards

Conclusion

Emergencies place extraordinary demands on local governments. In moments of crisis, municipal leaders must make critical decisions, coordinate across departments and jurisdictions, communicate clearly with the public, and manage complex operational and financial challenges. For many communities, particularly smaller municipalities, these responsibilities fall to staff who may not have formal emergency management training or a dedicated department to support them. Despite these constraints, residents still rely on their local government to provide leadership, stability, and effective response during times of uncertainty.

The Emergency Management 101 Toolkit was developed to help bridge this gap. By compiling foundational guidance, practical tools, and widely recognized best practices, the toolkit offers municipalities a clear starting point for strengthening their emergency preparedness and response capabilities. Rather than presenting a rigid or one-size-fits-all solution, the toolkit is designed to be flexible and adaptable so that communities of varying sizes and capacities can tailor the guidance to meet their local needs.

Throughout the toolkit, the phases of Preparedness, Response, and Recovery highlight the importance of planning ahead, acting decisively during emergencies, and rebuilding thoughtfully afterward. Preparedness efforts help communities identify risks, define roles, and establish partnerships before disaster strikes. Effective response relies on coordinated leadership, clear communication, and the use of standardized systems to manage incidents and deploy resources efficiently. Recovery, while often the longest and most complex phase, provides an opportunity not only to restore what was lost but also to strengthen community resilience for the future.

A key theme throughout this project is that emergency management is not the responsibility of a single department or individual. It requires collaboration across municipal departments, regional partners, nonprofit organizations, and residents. By encouraging proactive planning, clear role definition, and inclusive recovery strategies, the toolkit emphasizes that resilient communities are built through shared responsibility and coordinated effort.

Ultimately, the goal of the Emergency Management 101 Toolkit is to make emergency planning more approachable and actionable for local governments. By providing accessible guidance, customizable templates, and practical examples, the toolkit aims to equip municipal leaders with the confidence and structure needed to navigate emergencies effectively. With thoughtful preparation and collaboration, communities can reduce risk, improve response coordination, and recover more quickly when disaster occurs.

While no plan can eliminate the uncertainty of emergencies, strong preparation can significantly improve a community's ability to respond and recover. This toolkit is intended to serve as a starting point—one that municipalities can build upon, refine, and adapt as their communities grow and their risks evolve.

APPENDIX A

Documents:

- [Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans](#)
- [Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment \(THIRA\) and Stakeholder Preparedness Review \(SPR\) Guide](#)
- [Local Elected and Appointed Officials Guide: Roles and Resources in Emergency Management](#)
- [NIMS Guideline for Mutual Aid](#)
- [Pre-Disaster Recovery Planning Guide for Local Governments](#)
- [Supply Chain Resilience Guide](#)

Forms:

- [Non-Federal Continuity of Operations Template](#)
- [Mutual Aid Agreement Template](#)

Examples:

- [Emergency Designation Assignments](#)
- [Threat Assessment](#)
- [Community Preparedness Brochure](#)

APPENDIX B

Documents:

- [Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide](#)
- [Integrated Public Alert and Warning System Overview](#)
- [National Incident Management System](#)
- [Community Lifelines Implementation Toolkit](#)

Forms:

- [ICS 201, Incident Briefing](#)
- [ICS 202, Incident Objectives](#)
- [ICS 204, Assignment List](#)
- [ICS 214, Activity Log](#)
- [FEMA, Request for Presidential Declaration](#)

Examples:

- [Emergency Operations Center Guide](#)
- [Assignment of Roles and Responsibilities](#)
- [Regional Mutual Aid Agreement](#)
- [Public Information Plan](#)
- [Modified Activity Tracker](#)

APPENDIX C

Documents:

- [National Disaster Recovery Framework \(NDRF\).](#)
- [Public Assistance Policy and Program Guide \(PAPPG\).](#)
- [Individual Assistance Declarations Factors Guidance.](#)
- [Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery: Next Generation.](#)
- [Community Lifelines Implementation Toolkit.](#)
- [Preliminary Damage Assessment Pocket Guide](#)

Forms:

- [CFR 200 – Checklist for Reviewing Procurement](#)

Examples:

- [Public Assistance Damage Assessment](#)
- [Inventory of Assistance Programs](#)
- [RFP for Debris Management and Monitoring Contract](#)
- [Debris Management Contract](#)