

Five Strategies for Managing Hurricane Response During COVID-19

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The 2020 hurricane season will not elicit a typical disaster response – and certainly not the response that that your Emergency Management Agency has meticulously planned. COVID-19 impacts have added layers of complexity in terms of human response – rescue and evacuation due to distancing requirements, plus the added costs of the disease itself – the lost revenue and subsequent personnel drain from shutdowns.

There is an incredible compounding effect from these and other pandemic realities. Still, your community can increase its ability to respond effectively during hurricane season by proactively re-working your response measures to integrate COVID-19 response guidelines. Below are five essential actions you should take.

Update Emergency Plans to include COVID-19-specific factors

Emergency Plans should reflect social distancing and quarantining requirements, the virus' impact on staff resources, and the financial strain resulting from lost revenues. Specifically, your plans must identify additional non-congregant sheltering opportunities that could be used for quarantine and social distancing during evacuations, as options for congregate shelters will be diminished because of six-foot distancing restrictions. For example, using schools to house large numbers of people in close quarters won't generally be feasible.

Leverage business relationships to secure hotel use for non-congregate shelter

Evacuation routes should be evaluated in terms of their access to non-congregate shelter facilities such as hotels/motels. Local governments and emergency managers should establish and leverage relationships with area business leaders and economic development agencies to help secure commitments for beds at reasonable, market rate pricing. You should not expect to block an entire property at zero cost. Rather, seek a commitment that ensures rooms will be available if you must evacuate people to a property that is located on the evacuation route.

Communicate early and often with your community about its responsibility in a crisis. COVID-19 restrictions will likely diminish in-person emergency response to a hurricane. You need to ensure that your Disaster Communications Plans address COVID-19-related guidance on shelter in place as well as a strategy for enough food, water and other essentials to survive one to two weeks.

Clearly articulate proactive measures residents, businesses and community organizations can take to support the response effort, and how to work together with your emergency departments to ensure community safety while avoiding additional strain on first responders.

Optimize your community's opportunity for government funding

When disaster strikes, saving lives is the top priority. When a disaster hits your community, you won't have time to be concerned about whether you will be reimbursed for subsequent costs during the response efforts. Understanding your funding options and taking proactive steps to assess, plan and document your response actions will ensure you are in the best position to receive assistance and will therefore alleviate some of the added stress.

There are six processes that take a jurisdiction from a request for public assistance to actual funding. These first three are within your control:

- On time completion of your Request for Public Assistance (RPA)
- Assessing and securing documentation for damage and emergency response costs, including reimbursable COVID-19-related costs for grant Applications.
- Ensuring the Application is cohesive and concise to help ensure the approval process is seamless

Focusing on cost assessment, tracking and documentation ensures you a greater opportunity of receiving funding as quickly as possible and allows you to quickly assess how costs fit within FEMA guidelines or whether you need to seek other CARES Act funding sources (if specific to COVID-19 event).

Document everything. If you cannot back up an application with the appropriate documentation you will delay or possibly derail your opportunity to receive funding and keep it. The key is to have accurate fund coding for expenses – related to both labor and hard costs. For labor costs, track the work, status of the actions performed, job titles involved and actual tasks. Make sure labor claimed is aligned with HR policies for regular and overtime hours so they can be synthesized relatively quickly to determine what is eligible within the policy. Finally, track hard costs by project and task.

An organized documentation method makes it easier to catalog and consolidate actions and costs into the format FEMA and other funding agencies require for them to be for reimbursement. Another advantage of coding every expense is that even if you have not mapped it to the CARES Act in advance, you can reverse engineer it into the right funding stream after the fact.

Get help when you need it

Most jurisdictions have few or no disaster funding experts in house and cannot train their staff in the hope that they may pick it up on the fly, to include navigating the newest COVID-19 funding rules can be even trickier. The good news is that expert firms can jump in at any stage of your response planning or execution. Moreover, FEMA will reimburse for most of these consultant costs. It is wise to pick a firm that also has intimate knowledge of FEMA and other Federal and State funding and reimbursement programs. The best firms will help build internal capacity through knowledge sharing and training.

Hurricanes and other major natural disasters create dynamic and volatile crisis scenarios. A pandemic will act as a force multiplier. The current hurricane season presents daunting, but not insurmountable challenges. The communities that work proactively to identify risks, remedies and costs, then align those with agency funding requirements, will be able to respond effectively and sustain community resilience.

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About Bill Roche

As is with every disaster recovery expert at Witt O'Brien's, Bill has deep rooted experience as an emergency manager, leading programs and projects alike in various disaster planning, response and recovery operations. He draws on his experience working with FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security when facing a disaster. Bill has held key executive leadership roles, focusing on change management, team building, budgetary preparation and reporting, strategic management planning, and the implementation of federal grants on disaster response and recovery operations.

Experienced in both the public and private sector, Bill is an integral part of Witt O'Brien's growth and strategy.

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