



Integrating Family Reunification Planning Before, During, and After an Emergency into the School Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

In the context of school safety, family reunification means to reunite children with verified and authorized family members after a critical and often highly stressful incident (e.g., a fire, a natural disaster, a school bus accident, a situation involving weapons or violence at school, etc.) that disrupts the school day and prompts the need for a school dismissal to protect the school community. Unfortunately, a quick reunification between families and children will not always be possible due to situations such as students needing hospital treatment, damage to roads and routes of transportation, and the need to securely protect children and have them [shelter-in-place](#) prior to beginning the reunification. If the incident is large enough to impact the entire community, reunification may require coordinated activities and use of resources with local, state, regional, and, sometimes, Federal efforts.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide information and resources related to the school's and school district's plans for reunifying children with their families after an emergency event. This fact sheet will provide information to consider for addressing, managing, and facilitating successful family reunification before, during, and after an emergency event within a school emergency operations plan (EOP).

Understanding Family Reunification as an Emergency Management Function

School safety practitioners are frequently called on to perform various functions, including those related to family reunification. School EOPs outline [emergency management functions](#), which are the critical operations and courses of action that teams need to carry out before, during, and after an emergency event. Functional annexes contained within the EOP detail the courses of action to be taken for a critical function. Reunification is a critical function that applies to all possible emergencies, no matter the threat or hazard; other annexes have unique considerations based on the [specific hazard or threat](#). Therefore, having a comprehensive school EOP that includes a Family Reunification Annex, along with staff who are trained to carry out the process, is essential for the safe and timely reunification of students with their families.

"Implement annual drills and exercises, in collaboration with your community partners, local law enforcement, local fire, and with staff. Conducting drills and exercises and having people carry out their roles and responsibilities allow you to identify any gaps and weaknesses in your plan, and to assure that everyone knows what their roles and responsibilities are so that they have practiced before an actual event."
(Virginia)

“Separation from one’s family during or after an emergency can have mental and physical effects on children. The faster children reunite with the people they know and love, the better their outcomes will be.”

<https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/reunification.html>

Before Family Reunification Is Necessary

A key strategy for developing an annex is considering the necessary courses of action to be prepared to carry out family reunification and the critical steps to take in advance of a possible emergency. The Family Reunification Annex equips the school community to carry out an orderly reunification under high-stress conditions. The planning team should address the following to be prepared before an emergency event where family reunification is necessary:

- Develop
 - A plan and design for the reunification site, including on-campus and off-campus reunification locations, the site’s components, and logistics;
 - Processes for comprehensively closing the reunification site, including courses of action for caring for children who are still waiting for a caregiver to arrive; and
 - A checklist to identify, monitor, and replenish, as applicable, the emergency supplies, equipment (including signage and barriers, such as temporary fencing), and information necessary to carry out an orderly reunification under potentially high-stress conditions.

“We really encourage regularly keeping emergency contact information updated with all schools, as well as the list of people that caregivers are allowing us to release their students to in an emergency situation. We really need to know who we can release students to, and we have a very thoughtful process for doing that.” (Oregon)

- Create
 - Courses of action to connect the related functions necessary to carry out reunification, such as communications, transportation, communications, and psychological first aid for schools;
 - Procedures for establishing the site and activating the process with families and the community; and
 - Communication strategies providing families with critical information and action steps.

[Access the REMS TA Center’s [Sample Family Reunification Annex](#) to learn more about courses of action specific to family reunification and the [REMS TA Center Tool Box](#) for sample tools and resources from practitioners in the field.]

During the Family Reunification Process

The Family Reunification Annex should address courses of action, goals, and objectives to support the response phase of an emergency and to initiate a systematic release of students to family members once they are verified by student records. There are various elements to plan for in collaboration with community partners in advance, including command and management (read more about the National Incident Command System), communications, safety protocols, etc.

“The reunification process, start to finish, may take several hours, or even require overnight coordination, depending on the nature of the emergency, the location and accessibility of the reunification, and the level of disruption that the precipitating event has caused in the surrounding community. The Incident Commander and all assigned personnel must be prepared to maintain responsibilities until the event has concluded or their responsibilities have been transferred to other personnel. And if there is a community-wide incident, it will require additional coordination and communication.” [REMS TA Center, Sample Family Reunification Annex](#)

The following action steps are addressed during the family reunification process:

- Prepare
 - For the arrival of parents/caregivers;
 - To engage the person responsible for managing reunification to initiate the reunification; and
 - To set up and staff the site, including the family reunification center.
- Provide
 - A thorough process to check documentation to release students to parents/caregivers;
 - Support to reunite families;
 - Critical information to families regarding a missing or injured student or the loss of a student, and ensure appropriate emotional support for families as they process the traumatic information; and

“Where you’re talking about families that have students with disabilities, there are certain additional things that should be in place, to ensure the safety of special populations.” (Arizona)

- Mental health and counseling support to students, families, teachers, and other key response team members.
- Communicate
 - Appropriate, timely, and adequate information to the media; and
 - With the response team to enact the reunification annex.

[Need support with thinking through the development of a Family Reunification Annex? Learn more about our [Virtual Training by Request](#) on this topic.]

After the Family Reunification Process Successfully Concludes

“Try very diligently to conduct after-action reviews for incidents, major incidents within your own state, and also to learn from what worked and what didn’t work in the form of after-action reviews from other states, other national incidents related to your state context.” (Idaho)

The Family Reunification Annex should also address the recovery phase of emergency planning to comprehensively close the reunification location and ensure continued care for students and staff not yet reunified (e.g., students at the hospital, delayed arrival of family, etc.). Consider the following when developing courses of action for after the conclusion of the family reunification process:

- Coordinate
 - The transfer of operational control back to those people responsible for developing strategies and overseeing the implementation of tactics, while providing for the safety of the public and all personnel assigned to the incident;
 - Temporary supervision for those whose parents or guardians cannot be contacted;
 - Necessary photographing or note taking of any damage to property; and
 - The return of the building to pre-reunification condition.
- Provide
 - Any necessary transportation to those who must return to school for vehicles or require transportation home, such as school staff;
 - Ongoing mental health support for students and staff by the Guidance Director, with Guidance staff and community mental health partners; and
 - Ongoing public information updates to parents and the media.



- o Convene the school safety team as soon as possible, but within 2 weeks of the event, to debrief the event and adjust the Family Reunification Annex as needed, based on lessons learned.

[View the REMS TA Center’s [Families as Partners in School Emergency Management \(Helpful Hints Volume 2, Issue 7\)](#). This publication provides considerations for the development of a Family Reunification Annex, identification of reunification sites, and maintenance of emergency information cards and student release forms.]

Conclusion

The overarching goal of a Family Reunification Annex is to reunite children with verified and authorized family members. By preparing in advance, a school or school district can develop, train, and mobilize a reunification team and implement effective on-site and off-site reunification plans while supporting the whole community. It is important to collaborate in the development of a Family Reunification Annex and to engage stakeholders, including families, to help maximize efficiency and effectiveness of implementation of the reunification process, should implementation become necessary. School leaders and community partners have a direct connection to the families and communities they serve, and their insight is invaluable at all stages of the reunification process — from planning through implementation.

Please see the list below for further reading suggestions provided on the following page for more information about family reunification and other emergency management planning.

Key Reunification Resources

Several Federal Websites are available that provide resources to help with reunification planning. These include the following:

[Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach, Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(HHS\), American Red Cross, and National Center for Missing & Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#)

This publication, published jointly by FEMA, HHS, the American Red Cross, and NCMEC, with contributions from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, provides a comprehensive overview of the coordination processes necessary to reunify children separated from their families in the event of a disaster. Included are the roles of various agencies responsible for the temporary care of children and oversight of reunification efforts at the local, state, and national levels, including tribes, territories, and nongovernmental and private sector organizations.

[Unaccompanied Minors Registry, NCMEC](#)

This online platform collects information from the public related to children who have been separated from their families due to a disaster. NCMEC then uses this information to expedite the reunification process by providing assistance to local law enforcement and by cross-referencing the information about the child against information provided by families who have contacted NCMEC to report their child missing. The public, including education facilities, may report basic information about unaccompanied minors directly into the tool in the aftermath of a disaster.

[Multi-Agency Reunification Services Plan Template, National Mass Care Strategy](#)

This document provides guidance and sample procedures for multiple agencies within a community to consider as they each develop coordinated Reunification Annexes. This resource was developed in coordination with NCMEC, FEMA, HHS, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the American Red Cross, and other state agencies and national organizations.

Key Reunification Resources for Presidentially Declared Disasters

The REMS TA Center Website also provides several resources that can help schools and institutions of higher education with inclusive planning efforts. These include the following:

[National Emergency Child Locator Center \(NECLC\), NCMEC](#)

This disaster call center assists local, state, and tribal governments, as well as law enforcement agencies, with the location of children under the age of 18 and reunification with their families. NECLC is activated only through a request by a state agency during a state-declared disaster or by FEMA upon a request from a state, tribe, or territory during a presidentially declared disaster. When NECLC is activated, the toll-free number (1-877-908-9570) is staffed 24 hours per day.

[National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System \(NEFRLS\), FEMA](#)

This online platform and call center allow displaced individuals to report their current location and well-being, as well as communicate with and provide personalized messages to specified family members or individuals. NEFRLS is activated only in cases of presidentially declared disasters and facilitates the reunification of adults over the age of 21. When NEFRLS is activated, the toll-free number (1-800-588-9822) is staffed 24 hours per day.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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