

Collaborating With Faith-Based Organizations to Enhance School Emergency Operations Plans

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Collaboration is the key to a balanced and well-planned response to an emergency and subsequent recovery. Schools and school districts should explore existing resources within their communities that can provide services to their students during and after an emergency that negatively impacts school operations. One such resource to consider is local faith-based organizations, which generally involve three classifications:

- **Houses of worship**—Churches, mosques, temples, meeting houses, cathedrals, shrines, parishes, synagogues, chapels, and sanctuaries represent physical locations where congregants meet for scheduled worship. Many have ministries that address the needs of the congregants and community.
- **Denominational social services**—These include Catholic Charities, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Adventist Community Services, Episcopal Relief and Development, Islamic Relief USA, Latter-Day Saints Charities, Lutheran Disaster Response, National Baptist Convention, United Methodist Committee on Relief, and others.
- **Religious-oriented organizations**—These may include groups like the Salvation Army, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD), Jewish Community Centers, and local interfaith alliances. Many tend to have regular meetings that afford the opportunity to have face time with all the religious leaders in one place.

Faith-based organizations can play a role in the six-step planning process as identified in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) and [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#). Faith-based organizations should be viewed as “force multipliers” and partners before, during, and after emergencies.

The Value of Engaging With Faith-Based Organizations

Many faith-based organizations focus on serving, ministering, and helping others in the local community and often have a pulse on distinct community needs. They are an excellent source of information for understanding the culture and practices of students and parents at the grassroots level.

Before an Emergency

Prior to an emergency, faith-based organizations, including their leaders and members, can be instrumental in many ways, such as

- **Emergency operations plan (EOP) development**—Serve as ad hoc or core planning team members and contribute to the development of annexes within school EOPs, such as the Continuity of Operations Annex and Recovery Annex.
- **Exercises and drills**—Learn about courses of action outlined in the EOP to increase their contributions during an emergency.
- **Equipment and supplies**—Provide equipment, supplies, and emergency-related items, such as food canteens, vehicles, barricades, furniture, water, tarps, technology, hard hats, and medical and sanitation supplies.

During and After an Emergency

Faith-based organizations can provide volunteers to K-12 schools to assist in these areas:

- **Reunification**—Provide locations and staffing to reunify students with their parents and guardians, such as gymnasiums, sanctuaries, and classrooms.



This fact sheet was developed in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

PLEASE NOTE: The tools, resources, and organizations identified in this document are not intended as endorsements and are merely offered as examples that you may consider in your own planning efforts.

- **Counseling**—Offer counseling and social work services using their membership who hold appropriate licenses, such as grief counseling when there has been loss of life and consultation for planning memorial services for victims.
- **Communication**—Help disseminate information and give advice on the best communication modalities for citizens. They can also proofread and edit communications in other languages that are dominant in the community.

Conducting Needs Assessments With Faith-Based Organizations

Before reaching out, conduct a needs assessment to determine whether there is a large number of religious groups residing in the area. The needs assessment can also identify gaps in planning, resources, talent, facilities, equipment, and other areas. For example, there may have been a recent large influx of families of a particular religious affiliation. Connecting with the religious leader(s) of those families can provide insight into cultural and religious practices, which is not only useful in planning for, responding to, and recovering from disasters and other types of emergencies, but also useful in orienting students and parents to the school district.

Identifying Local Faith-Based Organizations

School staff, teachers, and administrators can serve as resources for identifying [houses of worship](#) for partnership opportunities. Ultimately, a visit to an advertised meeting, program, or service will be beneficial to see the house of worship in action. Local emergency managers can help identify faith-based organizations that are involved in emergency response and recovery as they tend to know the organizations that have provided assistance or have been involved in trainings and exercises. Emergency managers may also be members of [VOAD](#) or other volunteer-oriented organizations, and have developed contacts with faith-based organizations through regular meetings held by the local or regional VOAD group.

Interfaith ministerial alliances led by religious and community leaders can also be called on to aid in recovery, reducing community violence to support prevention, and overall emergency preparedness and mitigation efforts.

Partnership Considerations

All federal programs and services must be provided in accordance with all program requirements, constitutional requirements, applicable statutes, and federal civil rights laws. It is therefore important to identify appropriate roles and responsibilities involving partnerships with faith-based organizations to avoid unintended violations of these requirements. The school or school district must clearly delineate its responsibilities as recipients of federal funds and its expectations and limitations. Tabletop exercises will help the school and faith-based organizations plan ahead. The Basic Plan section of the EOP is a potential location for outlining partnerships and collaboration with faith-based organizations.

Conclusion

Faith-based organizations often provide helpful resources when preparing for and responding to emergencies. Members of these organizations have technical skills and knowledge they have gained in their daily occupations that can be leveraged to increase the resiliency and response/recovery capacity of schools and school districts during and after emergencies. However, be mindful that recipients of federal funds, including elementary and secondary schools, must carry out eligible activities in accordance with all program requirements.

Resources

- [Collaboration and Community Partnerships: Strategies for Effective School and Higher Ed Emergency Operations Plan Development](#), Fact Sheet (REMS TA Center)
- [Enhancing Collaboration With Key Community Partners to Support Emergency Planning](#), Web Page (REMS TA Center)
- [Building Private-Public Partnerships](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA])
- [Engaging Faith-Based and Community Organizations: Planning Considerations for Emergency Managers](#), Publication (DHS, FEMA)
- [Cultural and Religious Literacy Tip Sheets](#), Web Page (DHS, FEMA)