



Homeless Emergency and Active Readiness Toolkit (HEART): Take Action

Riverside Case Study:

Pop-Up Shelters During Hurricane Hilary

RIVERSIDE COUNTY AT A GLANCE

- Population: 2,510,643
- Location: Urban/Desert
- Median Income: \$103,900 (2025)
- Sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January (2024): 3,990

SUMMARY

The Riverside County Homeless Continuum of Care (CoC) demonstrated a proactive and comprehensive, “take action” approach to meeting the unique needs of people experiencing homelessness while preparing for and responding to Hurricane Hilary. The CoC partnered with various agencies to provide emergency shelter and support services to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The CoC swiftly activated temporary pop-up emergency shelters, leveraged existing contracts and reimbursable funds, and collaborated with service providers to offer vital on-site support. The flexibility of providers and on-site services from various departments fostered a culture of collaboration. The CoC also established new relationships and expectations with contracted service providers and learned valuable lessons for future disaster preparedness around building partnerships, pre-disaster planning, continuous improvement, resource allocation, effective communication, and implementing a housing-first, low-barrier approach.

RAPID RESPONSE AND COLLABORATION

In 2023, Hurricane Hilary threatened Riverside County with devastating floods. The Housing and Workforce Solutions - Homeless CoC in Riverside County swiftly partnered with various agencies to provide emergency shelter and support services to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Strong communication and coordination between the CoC, county emergency management services, outreach teams, and county departments ensured a comprehensive response. In Riverside County, the CoC is an active member of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), along with aging services, in-home supportive services, public health, social services, and other partners. As a critical partner, the Office of Emergency Services contacted the CoC to devise a plan for people living on the river bottom. Similar to the EOC, the CoC activated a centralized command center and held an emergency meeting with their street outreach teams and homelessness service providers. The CoC provided updates on the weather conditions and safety concerns, areas affected, and support needed.

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Leveraging existing contracts and reimbursable funds (FEMA, Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG), and Homeless Housing Assistance and Prevention (HHAP)), the CoC activated temporary emergency pop-up shelters within a day by negotiating with existing providers that offered emergency shelters but were not contracted to do so during the time of the Hurricane. Temporary emergency pop-up shelters included gymnasiums, auditoriums, and other buildings that already exist and are either owned or operated by service providers, such as Salvation Army, and annexes of congregate emergency shelters like Coachella Valley Rescue Mission (CVRM). Street outreach teams played a crucial role in informing people experiencing homelessness about the emergency shelters and the impending danger. Collaboration with service providers offered vital on-site support, including meals, benefits enrollment, mental health and trauma counseling, and connections to permanent housing.

FLEXIBILITY AND RESOURCE INTEGRATION

The flexibility of providers and on-site services from Public Health, Department of Social Services, and Behavioral Health (brought together within the Emergency Operations Center) fostered a culture of collaboration within the EOC, the CoC, and its partners.

The pop-up emergency shelters adopted a low-barrier approach, such as lifting curfews, revising check-in procedures, creating additional space, and relaxing rules (e.g., for people who smoke or those with unconventional sleep schedules). This flexibility has extended into their regular operations at existing shelters. The CoC's contracted providers also extended emergency shelter operations beyond the immediate crisis and actively connected residents with permanent housing resources utilizing all available resources.

The CoC established new relationships and expectations with contracted service providers. For example, a contract with a local kennel to house people's pets safely was developed. Service agreements now contain language that includes an emergency services provision. Providers understand that there is an expectation to step outside of their regular role during a county-wide emergency event – this may include asking providers to secure a vehicle, offer transportation, provide food, or set-up emergency shelter.

SAMPLE SERVICE AGREEMENT CONTRACT LANGUAGE:

In the event of a County declared emergency, natural disaster or event that presents immediate threat to unsheltered homeless people, SUBRECIPIENT will be required to have emergency procedures in place to provide staff coverage for night and weekend street outreach. SUBRECIPIENT will work alongside CoC to identify, respond, and provide services to meet the needs of unsheltered individuals during said event and its immediate aftermath.

LESSONS LEARNED AND EVOLUTION OF PRACTICES

- **Building Partnerships:** Pre-existing involvement in EOC activities and the COVID-19 response strengthened relationships with emergency management and homelessness service providers.
- **Pre-Disaster Planning:** Integrating a disaster clause into all contract agreements with shelter providers and outreach teams allowed for swift activation during emergencies. Proactively identifying safe sites to deploy and working with providers on what activation looks like ahead of time ensured an emergency shelter plan was in place and that providers were aware of their roles during disaster and emergency.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Partnering with animal services during Hurricane Hilary exemplified the importance of adapting and adopting new approaches and the need for continuous assessment and improvement.
- **Resource Allocation:** Identifying that there will be upfront costs for providers when establishing pop-up emergency shelters, with the understanding that emergency expenses are reimbursable and can be billed back to FEMA or other grant programs such as ESG or HHAP, ensured that expectations were clear and helped providers better plan for disasters and emergencies.
- **Communication:** Creating an EOC-style command center for homelessness service providers and outreach partners ensured a consistent and coordinated message about the disaster and services available for people experiencing homelessness. This included the development of a contact list that was shared with all organizations and providers.
- **Low-Barrier Approach:** Implementing low-barrier options in emergency shelter operations supported accessibility and flexibility for residents, including in data collection practices.
- **Training:** Providing multidisciplinary training on cultural sensitivity and serving people experiencing homelessness empowered staff, contractors, and volunteers to deliver effective services and combat discrimination and bias.
- **Collaboration:** Maintaining clear communication channels with partners throughout disaster response was critical.

Riverside County CoC's use of pop-up emergency shelters during Hurricane Hilary offers other communities an example of the effectiveness of a collaborative, well-planned approach to disaster response for people experiencing homelessness. By prioritizing flexibility, resource integration, and transition planning, the CoC ensured the safety and well-being of residents experiencing homelessness, some of the most vulnerable community members, during a disaster.

CONCLUSION

By proactively “taking action”, the CoC strengthened its disaster preparedness strategies, integrating disaster clauses into service agreements, building partnerships, and setting up pre-disaster planning frameworks for resource allocation and rapid activation. This approach has not only improved Riverside County's immediate disaster response but has also laid the groundwork for continued support and transition to recovery, providing a model for other communities to follow. By embedding flexibility and cultural sensitivity training into their operations, the CoC ensured that contracted providers were prepared to respond effectively and inclusively, with expectations to extend beyond their regular roles during emergencies.

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

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