

# RELIEF AND RECOVERY ON THE FRONTLINES OF DISASTER

A rapid response toolkit for immigrant and refugee organizations responding to extreme weather



From the **Climate Justice Collaborative** at the  
**National Partnership for New Americans**

**NPNA**  
NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP  
FOR NEW AMERICANS

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## About the National Partnership for New Americans

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) is a national network that unites more than 60 of the country’s most powerful state-level immigrant and refugee justice organizations with reach across 40 states. Our mission is to advance an immigrant equity and inclusion agenda at the state, local, and federal level through policy, advocacy, and service programs that create vast opportunities for immigrant and refugee communities to achieve full civic, social, and economic justice.

## About the Climate Justice Collaborative

Founded in 2022, the Climate Justice Collaborative at the National Partnership for New Americans is working to create the transformative changes we need at the intersection of climate and immigration. The Collaborative works to build the capacity of NPNA’s member organizations to powerfully engage in the fight for climate justice through base building, policy advocacy, and narrative change. One of the Collaborative’s key priorities is to advance racial equity, economic justice, and immigrant inclusion in our nation’s disaster recovery systems and resilience investments.

## Acknowledgements

This toolkit was produced based on a series of interviews and input from member and partner organizations of the National Partnership for New Americans, including:

- Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (California)
- Familias Unidas Por Justicia (Washington)
- Florida Immigrant Coalition
- Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama
- Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants
- Make the Road New York
- MinKwon Center for Community Action (New York)
- One America (Washington)
- Organizing Resilience
- Pineros Y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Oregon)
- National Korean American Service and Education Consortium
- Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition
- Unite Oregon
- Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network
- Woori Juntos (Texas)

# INTRODUCTION

As climate change accelerates, extreme weather events like storms, floods, and fires are becoming more frequent and intense. Immigrants and refugees are among the communities hit first and worst by climate disasters in the U.S. and are often left behind in response and recovery efforts. Lack of language access plans in emergency management can mean Limited English Proficient residents are left in the dark when it comes to critical information and warnings. Relief funds and services can be denied due to immigration status. And a militarized response involving uniformed officers can discourage many from seeking help. Just like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disasters can expose and exacerbate existing inequities in our communities.

Across the network of the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA), immigrant and refugee-led organizations have been on the frontlines of these increasingly common climate disasters – stepping in to fill in gaps in government response and ensuring that critical resources and services are available and accessible to all communities.

When disasters strike, many grassroots organizations do not have rapid response plans in place, but will spring into action –

creating new infrastructure as they respond and leveraging existing infrastructure to meet the needs of their community. Often organizations will temporarily divert staff to respond to a climate disaster and when the emergency passes, will return to their existing organizing efforts or policy campaigns. But just like many of our member organizations prepared for raids and other enforcement actions, we can prepare to respond to climate disasters in a way that keeps communities safe, builds power, and transforms systems.

This toolkit is designed to share experiences and approaches from the NPNA network when responding to disasters. Each disaster is unique and there is no one-size-fits-all campaign or response. Similarly, organizations all play different roles in their communities and have different capacities. This toolkit is not designed as a blueprint for a comprehensive response to an extreme weather event. Rather it should be used as a guide to support immigrant and refugee-led organizations thinking about how they can most strategically jump into action after a disaster to support their communities and advocate for policies and resources to keep them safe from the climate crisis.

***Immigrants and refugees are among the communities hit first and worst by climate disasters in the U.S. and are often left behind in response and recovery efforts.***

# ANATOMY OF DISASTER RESPONSE

For many communities, disasters are regular and seasonal occurrences. Often communities are still reeling and rebuilding from the last storm, flood, or fire when the next one hits. While overlapping, the cycles of disasters can generally be understood in three phases:



This toolkit focuses on the rapid response phase of a disaster – in the hours and weeks following a major climate disaster. Many of the strategies outlined in this toolkit can be applied to preparedness strategies (e.g. community education about evacuation or safety plans, advocacy for more inclusive emergency management) and may lay the groundwork or expose the most urgent campaigns for more just and equitable long-term recovery.

## Rapid Response Roles

After a disaster, government agencies, faith-based institutions, non-profits, businesses, and informal networks of neighbors all spring into action. There are many roles and areas of work in the wake of extreme weather. Few organizations that are not dedicated to disaster response will have the capacity to engage in all of these areas of work. Your organization may choose to lean into one specific role where you have infrastructure, expertise, or see the most need in your community. Many immigrant rights organizations also choose to play a supportive role to governments or other organizations who are leading these strategies, ensuring that they are inclusive and accessible to immigrant victims of the disaster.



# RAPID RESPONSE

In the immediate aftermath of an extreme weather event, there is a period of rapid response that lasts from a few days to a few weeks. This is the period when emergency rescue and life-saving operations are underway, when people are evacuated or displaced, damage is assessed, and when governments and residents are working to stabilize the situation so they can begin the long-term recovery and rebuilding processes.

Local and state governments activate emergency response systems, while larger aid organizations like the Red Cross stand up services. There is often an extraordinary moment of volunteerism and solidarity within communities, as neighbors come together to offer whatever they can to each other.

Each type of extreme weather event will have a different timeline – the onset, duration, and early warning systems all vary from hurricanes, to tornadoes, to wildfires. The timeline for rapid response and ability of organizations to enter disaster zones to organize and respond will also vary.

## Sharing Emergency Information

One of the first roles for many immigrant rights organizations is ensuring that critical information reaches your community, including emergency warnings, evacuation orders, safety information and details about emergency services. Many local and state governments lack language access, knowledge about immigrants and refugees in their communities, and other cultural competencies that leave many communities without critical safety information. These linguistic and cultural barriers are compounded by general mistrust in government agencies, especially in emergency contexts when uniformed law enforcement, national guard, and even Border Patrol and ICE agents may be deployed for disaster response.

Many immigrant rights organizations have spent years developing communications systems to quickly communicate with leaders and members across their city and state, whether to share the latest information about DACA or to respond to immigration enforcement operations. Before, during, and after a disaster, organizations can leverage these networks and systems to ensure critical safety information is reaching all members of your community.



Staff and members of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition distribute resources following a tornado in March 2020. (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition)

- **Text and Phone Bank Members:** NPNA member organizations used staff and volunteers to call and text individual members, organizational members, and other community leaders in affected areas to share evacuation information, assess damage, identify needed resources, and spread the word about their hotline/helpline and other services. When phone networks are overloaded or damaged, texting programs may be more effective than calling members. While more labor intensive than mass-text tools, peer-to-peer texting allows recipients to have extended conversations with your staff/volunteers.

For example, in California during the 2020 wildfires, CHIRLA used their mass text message system to communicate critical information to members living in evacuation zones.

- **Equipping Trusted Messengers with Information:** In addition to your members in affected areas, you can also get in touch with established community leaders who many will turn to for information (e.g. faith leaders). You can help make sure these leaders have access to the most updated information from government agencies and know where to direct their communities for critical information and services. Maintaining communication with these leaders can also help ensure your organization is up to date on the needs and experiences of communities in affected areas.

## Leveraging Organizing Networks

The **Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (HICA)** connected with an alumna from their leadership development program who lived in an area that was devastated by a tornado. The leader was deeply rooted in her community and was able to quickly connect individuals to needed services. As HICA described, the community is already organized – organizations can tap into existing communication networks and equip trusted leaders with information and resources.

- **WhatsApp, Group Chats:** Many immigrant communities rely on group chats in apps like WhatsApp, or Facebook groups for information. These are both a good way to share your information, and to hear about the experiences community members are having. Make sure to check the information others are sharing in these groups to add any new resources to your materials, and dispel any false information or myths. If your organization has not already mapped out these group chats, when calling/texting your members you can ask them if they have any forums where they can share this information with others. For example, the **Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants**

(LORI) shared that, where possible, they send voice messages to ensure critical information reaches members who are unable to read.

- **Working with Ethnic Media Outlets:** Ethnic media outlets can be essential partners for disseminating information widely, as well as informing your response strategy by monitoring their reporting. Your organization can help ensure that these outlets are getting up-to-date information from government agencies, are sharing information about your hotline/helpline and services (see below), and are sharing trends and information from the field to guide your response strategy.

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## Assessing Community Impact

In the immediate aftermath of extreme weather your organization will likely be assessing whether or not your members or constituencies were impacted by the disaster, the severity of the crisis, and the most urgent needs of the impacted community. Government agencies and relief groups will conduct official damage assessments, but as a trusted resource with community roots, your organization can advocate to ensure these agencies are responding to the needs of immigrant communities, connect people to resources and identify unique challenges.

In addition to the outreach methods described above, many organizations find a dedicated hotline/helpline, and community canvasses are the most effective methods to connect with impacted community members.

- **Hotline/Helpline:** If your organization has the capacity, standing up a hotline/helpline during this phase can play a critical role in both intake and resource referral. As a trusted voice and source of information, you can help communities navigate emergency services and resources. In addition to referring callers to services, the hotline/helpline may also serve as a sort of dispatch, to deploy your staff and volunteers to affected areas.

The volunteers and staff answering the calls should be equipped with a continuously updated list of resources and services to refer to callers to. Callers may report a need (e.g. important medicines that were lost or destroyed) that you have not yet identified an existing service for. Depending on your capacity, you can assist the person in finding a solution, give advice on where they might turn, or report the need to other service providers.

In addition to providing essential information to individuals who call, the information gathered on the hotline/helpline can paint a picture of the disaster's impacts and trends in the community – shaping policy and service interventions.



# HOTLINE TIPS

**Picking a Number/Service:** Many organizations choose to use and advertise their existing organizational phone number(s) in disaster-specific advertisements instead of creating a new number. Using a service that accepts text-messages for your hotline/helpline (like Google-Voice) will make it more accessible and texts provide a written record for your data. Be sure to advertise that members can call or text the line if you have this kind of service.

**Spread the Word!** The number can be shared broadly on social media, with ethnic media, and through your organization's membership communication channels like mass text messages. The line should be advertised as a number for non-emergency services.

**Manage Data:** Create a system for the staff and volunteers answering the phone to record as much information as possible about the experience and needs of callers. Make a regular time to evaluate this data.

**Recruit Volunteers!** Hotlines/helplines can be staffed by trained volunteers. After a disaster you may have a lot of people looking for concrete ways to help. Create systems for volunteers to be trained to staff the line or return calls.

**Manage Expectations:** Train staff and volunteers to be clear with callers about what support you are able to provide and on what timeline. Do not create

unrealistic expectations or more hoops for people to jump through. **The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition** calls their line a "helpline" instead of a hotline in part to manage expectations.

**Care for People Answering the Line:** Hearing the trauma of disaster victims can be hard on staff and volunteers. It's important to care for frontline staff by ensuring their emotional and mental health needs are met, including by offering proper training, resources like counseling, adequate breaks and time away from the line, and support in processing and problem-solving.

**Get Good Information and Stay in Touch:** For short-term and long-term follow up and engagement, try to get as much contact information as you can from callers. You can call individuals back to check in on their experiences, connect them to new services, follow up on resource referrals, and/or invite them to join community or organizing meetings.

**Be Ready for Other Calls to Come In:** When your number is shared broadly, you will likely also receive calls from people offering to volunteer, provide support, and make donations, as well as other agencies requesting support as they offer services to immigrants (e.g. asking for volunteer interpreters). Make sure the staff or volunteers who are answering the phone know where to direct requests or offers like this.

## The staff and volunteers who are answering the line should be trained to provide information and resource referrals as well as to gather information from the caller, including:

- Is the caller safe? Do they need emergency services?
- Where do they live?
- What happened? What damage did their home/community/neighborhood sustain? How many homes/businesses/structures near them were damaged? Get a sense of scale and scope of the damage.
- Provide the most up-to-date guidance and information from government officials
- What immediate services and support do they need?
- Make referrals to existing services like emergency shelters, generators, etc.
- What else are you concerned about? (Identifying medium – and long-term service and support needs)



Photo Credit: Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition

■ **Canvassing:** When it is safe to do so, your organization’s staff and volunteers can canvass affected areas. Canvassers can go door-to-door to do wellness checks, find out what individuals need, and connect them to resources. This can be resource referral (e.g. where someone can find free roof tarps or a charging station for their phone), or your organization can make a plan to gather needed resources and return to the community. This may be especially important for households without access to transportation.

■ **Canvassing Tips**

- Set up a centralized location for canvassers to meet that has basic supplies and resources impacted individuals might need (water, food, diapers, masks, etc.)
- Train and equip canvassers to gather data on the impacts and needs of the people they speak to. Like on the hotline, gather contact information so staff and volunteers can follow-up with them.
- Depending on the infrastructure in your community, canvassing can be done in conjunction with larger relief organizations who are conducting door-to-door outreach but may lack linguistic or cultural competencies and do not have a long-term

### Canvassing Impacted Areas

Staff from the **Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition** canvassed an apartment building occupied predominately by low-income and elderly residents, that was not damaged but lost power after a tornado. They identified urgently needed resources like purchasing a cooler and ice to keep insulin cold. In another location, they identified needs that were shared across a large number of households and organized to bring resource distribution to those sites.

powerbuilding approach to outreach and emergency response.

- Identify a safe location nearby to host a community meeting. As part of your door-to-door canvass you can invite residents to attend the meeting, where you can provide updated information, distribute resources, and organize the community (identify priority issues, leaders, etc.)
- In addition to traditional canvass safety precautions, be mindful of disaster-specific environmental hazards, incorporate them into your plan and communicate them to staff and volunteers conducting canvassing.

## Accessing Services and Resources

Resource referral is one of the most common roles played by many immigrant rights organizations during the rapid response phase. These organizations have established strong networks and deep trust in the community and may be the first point of contact for individuals impacted by a disaster. Emergency management agencies and social services providers may also lack linguistic and cultural competencies to conduct outreach or intake directly with many immigrant and refugee communities.

While conducting outreach and intake about the most pressing needs in the affected community, organizations can compile a list of available resources and services, vet whether or not these services are accessible to immigrants and refugees, advocate for expanded access, and stand up services of their own.

## ■ Tracking Available Services and Resources:

To effectively manage a hotline/helpline or conduct other outreach and intake, it is essential that organizations stay up to date on resources and services that are available for victims of a disaster. With a variety of entities offering services with different levels of access, and with information changing rapidly, maintaining an up-to-date list and communicating it out can require significant staff time.

Organizations can develop resource guides that track both large-scale emergency services like emergency shelters as well as informal, pop-up services like a church providing free blue tarps for roofs for one day only. Several groups we spoke to for this toolkit stressed the importance of including mental health and trauma resources in referral guides to connect members with culturally competent, in-language services to respond to the mental and emotional trauma of a disaster.



Staff and members of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition assess damage following a tornado in March 2020. (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition)

Some organizations choose to make this guide publicly available and in multiple languages (and dedicate resources to ensure it remains up-to-date, accurate, and accessible). Others use it more as an internal guide for staff and volunteers answering a hotline/helpline phone or conducting other outreach.

Many guides we reviewed were organized by need (e.g. food banks, emergency shelters), and had a list of all known places where individuals could access that service/resource – including address, hours of operation, and any eligibility requirements. It's helpful to provide as much information as possible about the process of accessing services and prominently dispel any harmful myths circulating (e.g. the presence of ICE agents at a resource distribution center).

As the availability of services rapidly changes, several organizations recommended using a platform like Google Docs to be able to edit and keep the resource guide up to date. However organizations also recommended creating a physical document with the most reliable resources and information that could be handed out at events and distributed while canvassing or distributing aid.

- **Vetting Services for Access:** Many services that are offered during and after a disaster have barriers that prevent immigrant communities from accessing them. Service providers and government agencies may lack translation/interpretation service or may default to asking recipients to provide a Social Security Number, even if they are not legally required to do so. While it is more resource intensive, vetting services to understand how accessible they are both ensures you are giving your members good information, and helps your organization identify where you can intervene to improve accessibility.

You can call service providers to gather as much information as you can about how someone would access a service or resource (e.g. what languages are applications available in, what documents does someone need to bring/show, etc.).

## Case Study: Using a Hotline in Washington

During the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the **Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network (WAISN)** expanded their support hotline to help members navigate services and information. WAISN received a large influx of volunteers which allowed them to meet an enormous volume of calls. Incorporating case management into their hotline program, volunteers would call to check in on people who had received referrals – both to see how they were doing and to evaluate the referrals they made.

Through these follow-up calls WAISN learned that some of their members had been turned away from services they were referred to because of immigration status eligibility requirements, language barriers, and other problems. WAISN used this information to reach out to service providers and work with them to eliminate barriers and expand access. All vetted resources are centralized in the WAISN Resource Finder that is available to all WAISN member organizations, state agencies, community members, and volunteers answering calls on their hotline.

Gathering and sharing this information can reassure families and make them feel confident accessing a service. Organizations also played the role of dispelling myths in the community about eligibility requirements to make people feel more safe accessing services.

Tracking and vetting resources can be an opportunity to build relationships with service providers. Letting providers know they can refer community members they serve to your organization for other needs, strengthening the support immigrants and refugees have after a disaster and strengthening your pipeline from service provision to organizing and powerbuilding strategies.



Staff and members of the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants distribute emergency relief to impacted neighborhoods following Hurricane Ida

■ **Shaping Services:** Because of their immersion and trust with diverse communities, immigrant-serving organizations often learn about resource and service needs, and trends in the community before broader service organizations do. Organizations described how they would lend their expertise and knowledge to help shape services others were offering. For example, the **Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition** ensured that legal clinics helping disaster victims were informed about immigration eligibility requirements for benefits.

After a disaster there is often a coordinated fund, anchored by an organization or community foundation. Many immigrant rights organizations interviewed for this toolkit described the important work they did to shape the application, outreach, and approval process to ensure that immigrants and refugees received critical cash assistance. Some organizations we spoke with developed systems to provide direct cash assistance themselves or managed portions of this fund.

■ **Standing Up Services:** Immigrant and refugee organizations play an essential role in making sure that communities aren't left behind in the recovery process. In addition to serving as a bridge to existing services, many organizations choose to provide direct services and assistance post-disaster. Organizations may stand up their own services to meet a need that isn't being met by other agencies, or as a way to overcome the many barriers that community members face in accessing services.

### On-Site Service Delivery

After a massive tornado in March 2020, the **Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition** canvassed a mobile home park of predominantly Latinx and immigrant residents. Several residents had been injured by the tornado but had been afraid to seek medical attention because of their immigration status and lack of insurance. TIRRC organized a group of medical professionals to make a site visit to the mobile home park to assess injuries, make referrals, and reassure residents about their options to seek treatment.

- **Setting Up On-site Distribution:** Organizations described the many barriers that community members faced accessing services – from language access, to lacking internet service required to access applications, to transportation, to trust. As described above, canvassing affected areas and otherwise deploying resources to communities can be the most effective way to ensure immigrants are receiving services and resources. Several organizations we spoke with combined trips to canvass impacted areas with static resource distribution points.
- **Resource Hubs:** Organizations who have adequate physical space can turn their space into a community hub – where people could access relief and services – including, serving as a cooling or heating shelter or a place to drop off/pick up donations (food, diapers, home supplies, etc.). Organizations can also invite other service providers (e.g. legal services or FEMA) to use their space as a trusted and familiar space for the community to deliver services.
- **Rapid Response Fundraising:** After a major disaster, there is often an influx of donations to a community, both in the form of foundation grants but also small dollar donors from across the country who want to help. These funds are often directed to large national and global aid organizations, not grassroots organizing groups or who have their ear to the ground and are working year round. Often times large aid organizations lack the capacity, expertise, or relationships to ensure the cash aid reaches immigrant communities, or may impose a series of structural barriers that make it more difficult for communities to access (e.g. online application, English-only applications, or requiring Social Security numbers). Depending on your organization's capacity, you can work with the larger aid organizations to shape the application and

outreach process to ensure wider access and/or you can receive subgrants from them that allow you to give direct cash assistance to your members. By having a rapid response fundraising plan that directs funds to your organization or a coalition of allied organizations (and preparing to do so in advance), you can make sure assistance gets to your membership base and the outreach/aid work in the wake of a disaster is connected to a long term power building strategy.

Organizing Resilience is creating resources to help power building organizations in climate prone regions prepare to “flip the switch” on rapid response fundraising during climate disasters. As part of their work they have created a few resources to help educate foundations about the importance of investing in grassroots, power building organizations and how to stand up the infrastructure before a disaster to maximize donations. Find these resources in the appendix.

### Direct Cash Assistance

During the 2020 wildfires, **Unite Oregon** distributed ‘go-bags’ with emergency essentials including masks, toiletries and clothing, as well as direct cash assistance to impacted members in the form of gift cards. While the program was able to support hundreds of households, **Unite Oregon** encountered numerous barriers to scaling their use of cash gift-cards. The process of ordering and distributing the physical cards was slow, and some members experienced challenges activating the cards and accessing the funds. Moving forward, Unite Oregon is exploring using payment apps like Venmo or CashApp to supplement or replace gift-cards in future disaster scenarios.

- **Navigators for Disaster Benefits:** Beyond community education and resource referral, some organizations stood up navigation services to help community members understand their eligibility and complete applications for relief and recovery services. Organizations that provide legal services – like naturalization or DACA applications – can consider temporarily offering services to help people apply for FEMA benefits. Organizations that already have a network of navigators could choose to train some or all of them to provide this service.

## Recruiting Interpreters

In the aftermath of a tornado, the **Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition** quickly learned there was a need for interpreters. They set up a way for bilingual individuals to sign up for a volunteer interpreter bank (using an online form to indicate their contact information, language(s) spoken, and any notes on availability) and coordinated with service providers to confirm volunteers for particular roles and shifts.

## Challenging Citizenship Requirements

During a 2016 drought in California's Central Valley, **CHIRLA** learned that county emergency services were requiring proof of citizenship for residents to receive emergency water distributions. CHIRLA worked with local residents and organizations to launch a campaign that convinced the county to drop these restrictions on emergency water aid.



Staff and members of the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants distribute emergency relief to impacted neighborhoods following Hurricane Ida

## Staying Organized

Organizing in a disaster zone is chaotic and can present many challenges for organizations. Try to stand up systems and processes for key staff and volunteers to share information. Although it can be difficult to prioritize these internal check-ins, it will ultimately strengthen and streamline your response.

- **Streamline Communication:** Consider a special Slack channel(s) or WhatsApp group(s) to stay updated internally. For example, if one staff member or volunteer is responsible for keeping a resource guide up to date, then there could be a channel/group where all staff can drop in new resources/services they encounter on social media, in the news, or out in the field.
- **Frequent Check-ins:** Schedule 15-30 minute meetings at the start and end of a day to share information. This can be a way to identify trends and gaps in services that can inform services you provide, or that you can share with government officials or service providers. These check-ins can also help ensure there is a strong plan in place for the coming day.

## Building Power for the Long Term

Often organizations will temporarily divert staff to respond to a climate disaster and when the emergency passes, will return to their existing organizing efforts or policy campaigns. But there is a way for organizations to respond to climate disasters in a way that strengthens and accelerates long-term campaigns and powerbuilding in organizations, rather than detract from them.

- **Organize:** Through your organization's rapid response efforts you will come into contact with many new community members who can become members and join other campaigns and programs of your organization. Be sure to collect contact information through-

out all of your services and programs in the aftermath of the disaster. As outlined in the next section, your organization may organize or join campaigns to embed justice, equity, and inclusion into long-term recovery. You can organize immigrant and refugee community members who were affected by the disaster to shape and lead these campaigns.

- **Volunteer Recruitment:** During the rapid response phase there is a tremendous outpouring of support. Many members of your community who were not impacted by the disaster will be looking for opportunities to volunteer. Your organization can stand up and scale critical services leveraging volunteer power. These volunteers can also become members, volunteers, and financial supporters of your organization for the long term. You can design volunteer opportunities as an entry point into your movement.
- **Shaping the Narrative:** In the aftermath of a disaster your organization can shape the coverage of the disaster to advance your policy goals and long-term vision, including long-term recovery. Through strategic communications you can ensure that the experience and perspective of immigrant disaster victims is included in press coverage, including how immigrants and other BIPOC communities are disproportionately impacted by disasters and may be left behind in recovery efforts. Just like the COVID crisis created an opening to address health, housing, and workforce disparities, so too can climate disasters.
- **Identify Issues:** Through your rapid response organizing and service delivery, you can recruit members, identify leaders, and identify issues, campaigns, and new services to build power, resilience, and more equitable long term recovery.

# EQUITY IN RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

While the media coverage after a disaster can often last for just a few weeks, the recovery itself can take years. Due to structural racism and systemic inequities, communities of color tend to lose wealth after a disaster while wealth tends to increase in white communities. Gentrification during rebuilding can permanently displace community members, and labor abuses are rampant for workers involved in rebuilding efforts.

Beyond the rapid response phase of a disaster, organizations can lead proactive campaigns to strengthen resilience and preparation to ensure that immigrant, refugee, and other frontline communities are better prepared to withstand the next disaster and are not left behind in the recovery.

What follows are some examples of campaigns and strategies that immigrant rights organizations have led or identified in the wake of extreme weather events in their communities.

## Access to Recovery Benefits

Renters, homeowners, small businesses, non-profits, and other organizations who sustained damage may be eligible for federal recovery benefits. However, “a growing body of research that shows FEMA...often helps white disaster victims more than people of color, even when the amount of damage is the same. Not only do white Americans often receive more aid from FEMA; so do the communities in which they live.”<sup>1</sup> Organizations may work with individuals to navigate the application process, including appeals, and to monitor and hold agencies accountable for equitable distribution of recovery benefits.

Under current law, undocumented people are ineligible for many federal disaster recovery benefits. Just as many states and localities created funds to provide relief to undocumented residents who were excluded from COVID stimulus payments, organizations can advocate to create relief funds for undocumented residents who were impacted by a disaster. For example, MinKwon in New York City worked to support undocumented Korean and Chinese victims of Hurricane Ida apply for relief from the state’s Excluded Resident Fund.

## Winning State and Federal Investments in Hazard Mitigation

Not only are immigrant, BIPOC, and low-income communities left behind in disaster recoveries, they also receive less investment in hazard mitigation, leaving communities more vulnerable to the next disaster. After a major disaster, millions of federal dollars come into a state for rebuilding and resilience investments. Immigrant rights organizations can play a significant role advocating for federal and state disaster preparedness and response dollars to be invested equitably. Similarly, organizations can advocate for equitable investment from other pots of federal money, including the preparedness and mitigation resources allocated in legislation like the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. New federal policies like Justice 40



Staff and members of the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants distribute emergency relief to impacted neighborhoods following Hurricane Ida

direct a portion of federal climate investments to be spent in underserved frontline communities.

## Resist Displacement and Gentrification

Inequitable disaster recovery can lead to permanent displacement, loss of affordable housing, and rampant abuse of tenants’ rights. Landlords sometimes take advantage of disasters to evict tenants, refusing to allow them to return to their homes or pocketing recovery funds without repairing damaged homes. Some developers use recovery funds to rebuild affordable housing as luxury units leading to the phenomenon of ‘disaster gentrification.’ On the other end of the spectrum many developers may rebuild without making any infrastructure improvements to reduce vulnerability to the next disaster. Organizations may, provide legal services for tenants, conduct policy campaigns to preserve/build affordable housing, and/or conduct Know Your Rights training for tenants and homeowners, especially as predatory developers canvass neighborhoods trying to buy damaged properties.

1. Flavelle, Christopher. “Why Does Disaster Aid Often Favor White People?” The New York Times. June 7, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/climate/FEMA-race-climate.html>

## Worker Rights and Economic Opportunity

In the aftermath of a disaster, there is a huge demand for workers in the construction industry to help with rebuilding. Immigrant workers, both locally and others who come from outside of the state to make up a large portion of this workforce. Resilience Force and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network have documented the abuse and vulnerability these workers face while doing the essential work of rebuilding. Organizations can conduct Know Your Rights training, support worker campaigns against wage theft or dangerous conditions, and institutionalize worker protections by requiring that local and state governments only enter into public contracts (e.g. to rebuild schools or public buildings) with “high road” employers who uphold high safety and labor standards. See Know Your Rights resources from Resilience Force in the appendix for more information.

## Language Access in Emergency Management and Response

In an emergency, the government’s lack of language access plans or even familiarity with which languages are spoken and how communities get their information is exposed. Many organizations fill in these gaps in an emergency, but the government should have the capacity to equitably serve all of its residents. In some states, organizations have secured mandates by executive or legislative action for government agencies to provide emergency information and services in multiple languages, and develop specific plans to conduct outreach in Limited English Proficient communities. Where mandates exist organizations may need to work to implement them and participate in the development of language access plans.

## State Relief and Recovery Funds for Immigrant Communities

While there are immigration status eligibility requirements for many federal relief benefits, state and local governments can create funds to

support excluded residents impacted by disasters. After Hurricane Ida, New York State created a \$27 million fund to provide cash assistance to undocumented residents partially administered by community-based organizations including Make the Road New York and MinKwon Center.

## Community Education and Disaster Preparedness

Immigrant and Limited English Proficient communities often do not receive basic disaster preparedness information even when they live in particularly vulnerable areas. Sometimes this is intentional with information about disaster risks withheld from immigrant families so they will be more likely to purchase or rent homes in high-risk areas. Culturally competent, in-language preparedness campaigns can make a significant difference when a disaster strikes. Many organizations who contributed to this toolkit run regular communications campaigns to help communities understand their climate risks, how to prepare, and what to do when disaster strikes.

Given that immigrant and undocumented communities have lower rates of home and rental insurance some organizations like the **Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (HICA)** have launched campaigns to help their members acquire insurance through education and expanded access. HICA is working with local insurance providers with a goal to increase flood insurance coverage in their communities, especially in high-risk areas.

Some states, like California, have invested significant resources in developing culturally appropriate in-language campaigns and involving community organizations. In Oregon, the United Way of Columbia and Willamette is preparing a report on inclusive and culturally competent disaster preparedness messages, as well as supporting learning and resource-sharing spaces in this area for researchers and community organizations.



Staff and members of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition prepare to canvass and assess damage after a tornado in March 2020. (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition)

## Creating Community Resilience Hubs

In California, APEN, SEIU California, and BlueGreen Alliance jointly released *Resilience Before Disaster: The Need to Build Equitable, Community-Driven Social Infrastructure* (included in the appendix), to advance the concept of resilience hubs – community spaces that people know and trust, where community members gather, organize, and access resilience-

building social services on a daily basis, engage in shaping resilience needs and priorities, and obtain response and recovery services in disaster situations. In 2021, APEN, the California Environmental Justice Alliance, and member and ally organizations, successfully secured an initial \$100 million in state budget funding to support this development across the state and are partnering with existing community and public institutions like community centers, clinics, and local non-profits to develop resilience hubs.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## **A New Front Line: Community-Led Disaster Response, Lessons for the COVID-19 Moment**

### **Amalgamated Foundation**

*A report examining community-led disaster responses from the 2017 hurricanes: Harvey (Houston), Irma (Florida), and Maria (Puerto Rico), with a focus on best practices for community-led funds*

[https://www.amalgamatedfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/CommunityLed\\_DisasterFunds.pdf](https://www.amalgamatedfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/CommunityLed_DisasterFunds.pdf)

## **A People's Framework for Disaster Response**

### **Resilience Force and New Florida Majority**

*Report on Florida's disaster recovery system and proposals for how to rewrite the rules of disaster recovery to embed racial equity and economic justice*

<https://resilienceforce.org/framework-for-climate-disaster/>

## **Community-Led Disaster Response: A Checklist for Funders**

### **Organizing Resilience**

*A tool to share with foundations that makes the case for investing in community-led disaster response rather than solely in conventional disaster response.*

<https://waytowin.docsend.com/view/sa8wnjct3cfvmfxw>

## **Disaster Preparedness Cards (Spanish)**

### **Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN)**

*Disaster preparedness checklists created to be posted on social media and/or printed as cards and distributed to farmworkers.*

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Jp3UO0oX6Di5tGVJilsf\\_dWURhjZqM7N?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Jp3UO0oX6Di5tGVJilsf_dWURhjZqM7N?usp=sharing)

## **Establishing and Maintaining Inclusive Emergency Management with Immigrant and Refugee Populations**

### **Welcoming America**

*A checklist designed to help strengthen existing emergency preparedness plans by ensuring immigrants and refugees are part of any emergency response*

<https://welcomingamerica.org/resource/establishing-and-maintaining-inclusive-emergency-management-with-immigrant-and-refugee-populations/>

## **Guide for the Resilience Worker: Know Your Rights**

### **Resilience Force**

*Know your rights guide and resources for disaster recovery workers*

<https://resilienceforce.org/tools-for-workers/>

## **Ida Relief Fund for Excluded New Yorkers – Application**

### **New York State and New York City/New York City/MinKwon Center/Make the Road NY**

*Application form for Ida Relief Fund for Excluded New Yorkers*

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TIpe8BvyZwxia2PamrZIB9xbJR3EkEZt/view?usp=sharing>

## **Infographics on Oregon Heat and Wildfire Smoke Rules (Spanish)**

### **Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN)**

*Flyers and social media graphics created to inform outdoor workers and community members about Oregon's new heat stress and wildfire smoke rules*

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1D9y1134A\\_i6NsTobgIoy0Ct6cyWIEt-B?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1D9y1134A_i6NsTobgIoy0Ct6cyWIEt-B?usp=sharing)

## **Recovering From Climate Disasters: Immigrant Day Laborers As “Second Responders”**

### **Nik Theodore, Center for Urban Economic Development, University of Illinois Chicago and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network**

*A report on the conditions facing immigrant workers responding to climate disasters*

<https://ndlon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Recovering-from-Climate-Disasters-Report-2.26.22.pdf>

## **Resilience Before Disaster: The Need to Build Equitable, Community-Driven Social Infrastructure**

### **Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), SEIU California, BlueGreen Alliance**

*Report making the case for California to make long-term and deep investments in the resilience of its most vulnerable communities*

<https://apen4ej.org/resilience-before-disaster/>

## **Responding to Dangerous Heatwaves: Tips for Immigrant Rights Organizations**

### **National Partnership for New Americans**

*Explainer on the dangers of extreme heat and what immigrant rights organizations can do to protect vulnerable communities*

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1317Sdxq4f9eFxzHvmegVHkEFHKqFl8rc/view?usp=sharing>

## **Storm Survival Kit**

### **Florida Immigrant Coalition**

*Multilingual social media graphics to help community members prepare for a hurricane*

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1a0JD14E1PXSfPdJjEQ8zbELCx4Sbhrs?usp=sharing>

## **The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters**

### **By Sarah Stillman for the New Yorker**

*Article on the emerging workforce that helps communities rebuild after climate disasters*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/08/the-migrant-workers-who-follow-climate-disasters>

## **Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network Resource Finder**

### **Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network**

*Database of resources vetted for accessibility to immigrant community members in Washington State. It contains detailed information about ID requirements, language accessibility, and how immigration status might impact access to the resource.*

<https://resources.waisn.org/>



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