

Emergency and Disaster Planning in the North



What is Emergency and Disaster Planning?

The Alberta Emergency Management Agency defines an emergency as “an adverse condition requiring prompt response to save lives and protect property using existing resources and procedures.” In contrast, disasters are “much more serious events that threaten or cause widespread losses and damage, and disrupt social structure and essential functions.” Disasters involve a coordinated response from multiple actors and agencies. **Needs exceed the capacity of local resources.** Situations that are emergencies in one area easily become disasters in others where the resources needed to deal with the emergency do not exist locally.

This fact sheet focuses on emergencies and disasters that are caused by environmental conditions, technological/infrastructural failure or human error. Other types of emergencies and disasters can be considered community crises or social emergencies, which require substantially different responses. The emergencies and disasters referenced here can become crises if responses do not allow for recovery.

Emergency and disaster planning is a four phase cycle:

- **Mitigation** – Ongoing risk management to reduce potential impacts of a disaster or emergency.
- **Preparedness** – It is the responsibility of both individuals and communities to be prepared for potential emergencies and disasters.
- **Response** – The actions taken after an emergency or disaster occurs. The physical wellbeing of individuals is the primary concern.
- **Recovery** – The process of returning the community to its pre-emergency or disaster state or ensuring infrastructure improvements.

Possible Emergencies in the North:

- Mine collapse or mining accident
- Dam failure or flooding
- Plane crash or transportation accident
- Blackout or generator failure
- Prolonged, severe weather or forest fire
- Disease epidemic or medical evacuation
- Avalanche or mudslide
- Industrial accident or chemical spill
- Climate change related disasters
- Exposure to unsafe radiation levels
- Road access cut-off

Northern women have many strengths when it comes to emergency and disaster planning. They are experienced in responding to local emergencies with limited resources. Their social networks allow them to identify who needs help during emergencies, quickly pass along information, and organize a response. Women also hold important knowledge about the land and environment surrounding their communities, which can be useful during emergency planning and rescue operations. Finally, women’s crisis management and care work are vital to community recovery after emergencies or disasters.

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Disaster Concerns in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador

The construction of the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric dam has caused women in Happy Valley-Goose Bay to voice concerns about the potential of a dam failure. Women living in poverty and without private transportation want to know what plans are in place for emergency evacuation in the event of a flood.

Why Is Emergency & Disaster Planning Important for the North?

The North faces some unique planning challenges:

- **Northern communities are often remote.** Some are accessible only by plane year round. Others are hours away from neighbouring communities, complicating evacuations or bringing in outside help. For example, Thompson, Manitoba is 8 hours from Winnipeg, the closest hospital trauma centre.
- **The climate is cold for much of the year.** Labrador West had an average temperature of -24°C in December 2013. Disaster plans must prioritize warm shelters.
- **Many people are dependent on imported food.** Shipping to remote locations is already difficult, expensive, and often contingent upon weather. Ensuring an adequate food supply in emergencies is a challenge.
- **Emergency response infrastructure is limited.** Communities often do not have local fire, police, ambulance, hospital or Red Cross services. If they do, these services are often limited and not equipped to deal with serious disasters. The hospital in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador only has 25 beds, limiting the number of patients who can receive treatment locally.
- **Telecommunications infrastructure is fragile in much of the North.** Communication is critical to efficient responses in an emergency or disaster situation. Northern systems get easily overloaded and shut down. During Operation Nanook in 2009, Nunavut's telecommunications infrastructure was overwhelmed.
- **Aerial search and rescue equipment is stationed in the South.** It can take 6-12 hours for equipment to travel to the far North. Therefore, local resources are the first response in many Northern communities.

Where is the North?

FemNorthNet partners with and researches the experiences of women who live in both Canada's "near North" (the northern parts of the provinces) and "far North" (areas above the 60th parallel including parts of Quebec, Labrador, and the Territories). Our research also draws upon studies and models from other countries within the northern circumpolar region.

Uneven Response Capacities Among Communities in the North

Communities have different services, infrastructure and transportation mechanisms available in the event of an emergency or disaster. Some are dealing with social crises, often a legacy of colonization and displacement, which increase their vulnerability to disasters. However, others have local ground search and rescue teams or Rangers, which are of great help in the response phase of emergencies and disasters. A strong grounding in culture and traditions may be an advantage during the recovery phase.

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Who Gets Left Out of Community Emergency & Disaster Planning?

Intersectional analysis highlights the experiences and needs of people, specifically women, who may be forgotten during emergency planning. A few of the populations that should be considered in planning are:

Aboriginal Women: Aboriginal women have some of the highest rates of poverty in Canada, which limits their capacity to recover quickly after an emergency. Many live in communities with overcrowded housing, a situation often worsened by disasters. In addition, government jurisdictional issues around emergency management can delay response times in Aboriginal communities during disasters.

Migrant & Immigrant Women: Temporary foreign workers are increasingly employed in the North. Newcomers can face language barriers that complicate communication in emergencies. They may not know how to access help. Insecure employment and low wages can limit their ability to prepare for or recover from disasters. Isolated work camps create additional challenges, like access to emergency medical care.

Women with Disabilities: A range of disabilities should be considered in disaster planning. Emergency information must be shared using plain language and in multiple mediums. Access to supports, such as caregivers, service animals, and medication, needs to be maintained. Disasters can exacerbate symptoms of mental illness, so support plans are important. During evacuation, accessible transportation is critical.

Young Women & Girls: Young women in the North are vulnerable to homelessness and may have trouble finding shelter during disasters. They also face increased levels of gender violence in the wake of disasters, so creating emergency shelters that are safe for young women should be a priority. Girls can come to harm when they get lost or separated from family members and are highly susceptible to infectious diseases.

Senior Women: Senior women may live alone, have mobility limitations, and/or chronic health concerns, which cause challenges for evacuations or temporary relocations. Even long-term care facilities with dedicated care staff are difficult to evacuate quickly. Senior women are also more vulnerable to contracting diseases, which spread rapidly if hygiene, sanitation, or emergency accommodations are not planned well.

Women Living with Low Incomes: Poverty increases vulnerability to emergencies. Women who have low incomes often have poorly structured housing and live in areas more likely to experience a disaster, such as lands contaminated by industrial operations. In cases of relocation or loss, these women often do not have the economic means to get by while waiting for government services or for insurance reimbursements.

Women belong to multiple groups, for example, senior women with disabilities. Emergency and disaster planning must account for the complex needs of women at the intersections of multiple inequalities. **This will allow for more inclusive practices, which will ultimately benefit all members of the community.**

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Upagiatavut – Nunavut’s Climate Change Strategy

The government of Nunavut has collaborated with other governments, scientists and communities to create a comprehensive strategy for adapting to the changing climate in Nunavut. Building upon Inuit traditional knowledge, it maps potential impacts of climate change in multiple areas including: culture, health and wellbeing; traditional activities; food security; heritage and special places; infrastructure and transportation; and, resource development. By planning ahead in a holistic way, Nunavut is well prepared to respond to emergencies or disasters caused by climate change related events.

What Can I Do?

Individual preparedness is critical to safety and recovery during emergencies and disasters. It can take up to 72 hours for community or government emergency response plans to be fully implemented. Here are some things you can do to ensure that you, your family and friends are prepared for an emergency or disaster:

- Have a 72-hour supply of non-perishable food, water and essential medications or supplies for all members of the household (including pets) on hand at all times.
- Have an emergency kit ready. Consult the Resources below to learn what you should include in that kit.
- Have a household and workplace emergency evacuation plan. Practice, practice, practice!
- Work with your community council, municipal government and police to create an emergency and disaster plan that uses an intersectional analysis that meets the needs of diverse community members.
- Work with other community members to identify diverse community needs in and for an emergency and disaster plan.
- Support the work of local emergency response groups, such as the Red Cross.

Emergency & Disaster Planning Resources for Individuals, Communities & Businesses

[Disaster Forum](#)

[Government of NL’s Guide Municipal Planning – Emergency Management Plan](#)

[BC Coalition of People With Disabilities – Creating Safe Communities](#)

[Independent Living Manitoba – Disaster and Emergency Management Network](#)

[Women and Health Care Reform – Gender and Disaster Management](#)

[Emergency Management Ontario – Be Prepared](#) (including multilingual resources & emergency kits)

[First Nations Emergency Services Society of British Columbia – Emergency Preparedness and Response](#)

[Canadian Red Cross – Emergencies and Disasters in Canada](#)

[University of Toronto – Disaster Recovery Planning for Businesses](#)

[World Health Organization – Disaster Risk Management for Health Fact Sheets](#)