

BLUE BOOK PLANNING GUIDE FOR LOCAL JURISDICTIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) recognizes the importance of consequence management research and collaboration to increase state agency readiness for the unexpected in today's unpredictable environment. This planning guide and associated tools serve as important vehicles to share valuable lessons learned and best practices with localities to enhance the existing resilience and consequence management planning practices already in motion under the Blue Book Project.

In summary, this guide and the associated tools focus on the following five concepts:



Establish a catastrophic risk assessment process that is both collaborative and analytical.



Examine critical infrastructure vulnerabilities and associated dependencies and interdependencies.



Assess multiple timescales to provide a dynamic view of evolving consequences and impacts on community lifelines.



Consider how Continuity of Operations (COOP) plans may be inadequate in their current form and determine which Mission Essential Functions (MEFs) could be paused or delayed by examining factors such as Recovery Time Objectives (RTOs) and service delivery modifications.



Develop crisis communications strategies to provide accurate and reliable information to the public.

OVERVIEW

PURPOSE

Provide a framework for localities to understand risks to critical infrastructure and consequences for community lifelines during incidents that extend beyond typical response durations.

This planning guide integrates concepts of critical infrastructure, community lifelines, continuity, and consequence management, while highlighting the role of collaborative risk assessment. The accompanying planning support tools will help localities to identify relevant risks, analyze the impacts of prolonged disruptions, and plan for practical strategies to protect community lifelines, which are core services that must remain stable to allow society to function. These efforts will assist planning for essential service that prioritize life safety during incidents that extend beyond typical response durations.

SCOPE AND APPLICABILITY

This local-level planning guide is based on state level research and findings from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management's (VDEM) Blue Book Project, incorporating local government perspectives and recommendations for resilience planning. It provides a foundation to examine essential services, anticipate cascading impacts, and plan for adjusted continuity during long-duration, high impact events. In doing so, localities can better mitigate the effects of disruptions that impair community lifelines.

This guide does not replace existing resilience planning practices used in the Commonwealth including the *Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA)/Stakeholder Preparedness Review (SPR)* and the *Hazard Identification, Risk Assessment (HIRA)*. Instead, it supplements those efforts with approaches for locals to adjust their preparedness lens for worst-case scenario planning relevant to the communities they serve.

SITUATION

Prolonged disruptions to community lifelines can create severe and complex response and recovery challenges. Critical infrastructure systems such as power, water, transportation, communications, and finance are highly interdependent, and the failure of one can quickly cause cascading impacts across others. Local jurisdictions depend on these systems to sustain daily life and ensure public safety, making them especially vulnerable to sustained impacts. Although 16 critical infrastructure sectors are recognized at the national level, localities may prioritize them differently based on their community profiles. Risk assessments support this prioritization by evaluating how threats, vulnerabilities, and potential consequences interact. Natural hazards, technological failures, and human-caused incidents can destabilize essential services, threatening the resilience of community lifelines. Collaborative risk assessments enable local government, private sector, and nonprofit partners to share information, align priorities, and develop continuity strategies for operating under degraded conditions.

Although the causes of these disruptions are widely distributed across multiple hazard types, cyberattacks represent one of the most rapidly escalating risks. In recent years, adversaries including nation-states, organized criminal groups, and independent actors, have increasingly exploited

vulnerabilities in networks, systems, and supply chains to compromise critical infrastructure, steal data, and disrupt operations. Nation-state actors such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea continue to employ increasingly sophisticated tactics. Successful cyberattacks on critical infrastructure may result in weeks or months of service disruptions, produce cascading consequences across multiple sectors, and be paired with information operations to amplify their disruptive effect. When combined with false and misleading information campaigns, cyberattacks can further undermine public trust, complicate crisis communications, and exacerbate response and recovery challenges.

In addition, Virginia's risk environment is uniquely complex, requiring strong emphasis on consequence management planning (*Commonwealth of Virginia Hazard Mitigation Plan, 2023*). With 95 counties, 38 independent cities, and 190 towns (each with distinct governance) in the Commonwealth, coordination and partnerships are critical. More than eight million residents live across regions facing diverse hazards: flooding and winter storms in the mountains, hurricanes and sea level rise along the Atlantic coast, and cascading interdependencies in dense urban areas. Proximity to Washington, DC and the presence of critical federal facilities, military installations, ports, and major private-sector infrastructure further amplify the Commonwealth's exposure to physical and cyber threats, making it vulnerable to disruptions that strain jurisdictional coordination and statewide resilience.

UNDERSTANDING RISK, DEPENDENCIES, AND CASCADING IMPACTS

RISK BASICS

Risk is the likelihood of an incident occurring and the magnitude of its impacts on people, property, services, and the local economy. An effective risk assessment is inherently collaborative, requiring government, private sector, and nonprofit partners to share hazard, vulnerability, and consequence information to ensure that no sector is assessed in isolation. By identifying overlapping areas of concern and resource dependencies, stakeholders can better anticipate cascading failures, prioritize lifeline continuity, and allocate resources strategically. In addition, to be considered eligible for federal disaster assistance and grant funds, local jurisdictions must have a Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) with risk assessments as a core element (*Commonwealth of Virginia Hazard Mitigation Plan, 2023*).

Risk is the potential for damage or loss created by the interaction of threats or hazards with assets, such as buildings, infrastructure or natural and cultural resources.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) *Local Mitigation Planning Policy Guide* emphasizes that risk assessments must engage community leaders, stakeholders, and the public to gain broad support and ensure long-term effectiveness. Cross-sector participation is particularly critical for catastrophic planning, because consequences extend beyond the immediate emergency into economic development, housing, health and human services, education, infrastructure, and natural and cultural resources. FEMA's *National Response Framework (4th Edition)* also highlights the centrality of community lifelines. Because lifelines align with the *National Mitigation Framework* and the *National Disaster Recovery Framework*, agencies responsible for mitigation and recovery also play a direct role in sustaining lifelines. Incorporating this perspective into local planning strengthens the connection between risk reduction strategies and the systems most vital to community stability and long-term recovery.

CONDUCTING RISK ASSESSMENTS FOR LONG-DURATION, WIDESPREAD INCIDENTS

Catastrophic Incidents cause widespread impairment, interruption, and/or harm (up to and including death) to people, materials, economics, and/or the environment. They affect the institutions, communities, societies, and people required for civil society functions and effective citizenship. They share the following characteristics, which present unique challenges for emergency planning and risk assessment:

- A duration measured in weeks and months rather than hours or days
- Impact to a significant part of your population
- Significant disruption or cessation of lifeline goods and services

Traditional risk assessments identify threats and hazards, determine where and when they are likely to occur, and estimate the assets and populations at risk. These assessments often focus on the most likely events and near-term impacts. In contrast, **risk assessments for long-duration, widespread incidents emphasize lower-probability but higher-consequence incidents that could overwhelm local capacity**, trigger long-term outages, and cascade across multiple lifelines simultaneously. This approach requires jurisdictions to examine not only hazard probability, but also worst-case impacts, prolonged recovery timelines, and cross-sector dependencies. It challenges planners to ask three questions:

- *What if critical infrastructure remains inoperable for weeks or months?*
- *What if cascading failures extend beyond jurisdictional boundaries?*
- *What if resource demand far exceeds availability?*

Answering these questions requires a deeper look at how systems connect, where essential services rely on one another, and how disruptions in one sector can quickly propagate through others. Understanding these dependencies and interdependencies is central to recognizing the true scope of risk to critical infrastructure.

DEPENDENCIES AND INTERDEPENDENCIES

Dependency	Interdependency
A connection between two infrastructure systems or components, in which the state of one infrastructure influences or is reliant on the state of the other.	A bidirectional relationship between two infrastructure systems or components, in which the state of each is reliant on the state of the other.
Example: Many transportation assets are dependent on power.	Example: Nuclear power and water are interdependent; water is required to cool a nuclear power plant, and power is required to pump water to where it is needed.

Understanding dependencies and interdependencies allows emergency managers to anticipate the consequences of an infrastructure outage and proactively plan for consequence management. When assessing infrastructure dependencies, planners should identify the primary and secondary providers of the resources and services needed for infrastructure to operate. Planners should also identify available backup sources that can ensure functionality during disruptions and consider the potential impacts on downstream assets and essential services if those resources are compromised.

IDENTIFYING CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Critical infrastructure (CI) refers to the assets, systems, and networks—physical or cyber—that are so vital that their incapacitation or destruction would have a debilitating effect on security, economic security, public health and safety, or community well-being. State and local emergency managers may focus on a subset most vital to the unique community profiles that inform their resilience planning activities.

LOCALITY CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE RISK ASSESSMENT TOOL

The *Locality Critical Infrastructure Risk Assessment Tool* is intended to help Commonwealth localities to assess and prioritize risks to critical infrastructure from significant cybersecurity incidents. It provides a foundational understanding of local critical infrastructure assets—focusing on five key sectors: Financial Institutions, Energy, Telecommunications, Transportation, and Water/Wastewater—and generates a relative risk ranking based on potential impacts. This comparative assessment will help planners identify high-priority assets for further detailed evaluation, emphasizing consequences without the need for an exhaustive risk analysis.

Users should follow these basic steps to use this tool:

- **Identify assets.** Select the critical infrastructure sector(s) and subsector(s) to assess, using local resources such as existing plans and coordination mechanisms with infrastructure owners.
- **Choose assessment option.** Use the “Individual CI Asset” sheet to evaluate single or multiple subsectors within one sector, or use the “Multiple CI Assets” sheet to compare sectors or subsectors.
- **Input ratings.** Rank each asset in the user input fields (No Impact, Low, Medium, High) for factors including Asset Vulnerability, Outage Duration, Community Lifelines Impact, Interdependency, and Financial Impact.
- **Review results.** The tool automatically calculates a Relative Risk score in the final column, allowing quick prioritization of assets for follow-up actions.

Access the *Locality Critical Infrastructure Risk Assessment Tool* for more detailed instructions and to get started.

STABILIZING COMMUNITY LIFELINES

VDEM's Blue Book Project emphasizes that impacts of widespread disruptions on community lifelines will vary across different regions of the Commonwealth, requiring flexible and scalable response strategies. Because no one-size-fits-all approach will work for every locality, individual jurisdictions should follow their existing response and recovery protocols and consider the information presented in this section to enhance decision-making when cascading impacts threaten community stability.

COMMUNITY LIFELINE BASICS

FEMA developed community lifelines to provide a framework for understanding and communicating how incidents affect the government and business functions that are essential to human health and safety or economic security. They provide an outcome-based, survivor-centric frame of reference that better enables responders to identify root causes, analyze interdependencies, prioritize resources, and facilitate communication with the public. VDEM has adapted these lifelines to fit Virginia's needs. The seven Virginia lifelines are captured in Figure 1.



Figure 1: VDEM Community Lifelines (2025)

CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE DISRUPTIONS AND IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY LIFELINES

Disruptions to critical infrastructure can have immediate and cascading consequences on local community lifelines, disrupting the delivery of essential services. For example:

- An energy outage may simultaneously impact hospitals, water treatment facilities, and communications systems.
- Water service loss creates sanitation challenges, heightens health risks, and limits the ability to sustain shelters or provide basic community functions.
- Transportation failures can delay fuel deliveries, complicate evacuations, and interrupt supply chains for food, medicine, and other critical resources.
- Communications outages can reduce coordination, allow the spread of false and misleading information, and isolate vulnerable populations who rely on timely alerts.

To mitigate the impacts on community lifelines, localities can use layered strategies to sustain operations and maintain resilience. Redundant communication systems, such as satellite phones and radios, preserve situational awareness when primary networks fail. Mutual aid agreements for fuel and water delivery can support continuity of essential resources, while pre-identified restoration priority sites (e.g., hospitals, nursing homes, and emergency shelters) can ensure that limited response capacity is directed where it is most critical. Clear and consistent public messaging strategies can further manage expectations, maintain trust, and reduce uncertainty during extended disruptions, reinforcing the community's overall capacity to respond and recover.

LOCALITY COMMUNITY LIFELINE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

The *Locality Community Lifeline Self-Assessment Tool* enables localities to inventory critical infrastructure assets and evaluate the time-phased impacts of critical infrastructure sector outages on community lifelines. Focusing on the five Blue Book Target Sectors (financial services, energy, communications, energy, transportation, and water/wastewater), this tool emphasizes the cascading effects of disruptions on essential community services across immediate, short-term, and long-term time frames. It generates qualitative overall estimates and a heatmap visualization that highlights vulnerabilities, helping localities build resilience and prioritize mitigation strategies for lifeline stability. Users should follow these basic steps to use this tool:

- **Inventory assets.** On the "CI Inventory" sheet, list relevant local assets under each critical infrastructure sector.
- **Select affected lifelines.** On the "CI Lifeline Assessment" sheet, for each critical infrastructure sector outage, select all impacted Community Lifelines from the dropdown menu, considering subcomponents from the "Reference" tab.
- **Rate time-phased impacts.** Input severity ratings (None, Low, Medium, High) for each selected lifeline, based on potential disruption levels and time phases.

- **Review outputs.** The tool calculates qualitative impacts and generates a heatmap showing summed scores across sectors and lifelines for quick visualization of high-risk areas.

Access the *Locality Critical Infrastructure and Community Lifelines Self-Assessment Tool* for more detailed instructions and to get started.

FACILITATING SCALABLE CONTINUITY

Local jurisdictions across the Commonwealth understandably vary in terms of continuity of operations (COOP) planning progress and follow-on training and exercise outputs—not only in terms of department and agency leadership but also of operational leads responsible for executing on COOP decisions. This section briefly reviews COOP fundamentals that provide context for scaling continuity to a prolonged critical infrastructure outage.

COOP PLANNING GUIDANCE AND PLANNING TEMPLATES

FEMA's Continuity Guidance Circular (2024) establishes the foundational doctrine for continuity planning by outlining the principles, requirements, and best practices necessary to sustain essential functions under a broad range of circumstances. FEMA's Continuity Plan Template and Instructions for Non-Federal Entities and Community-Based Organizations operationalizes this guidance by supplying a standardized methodology and structured format for developing continuity plans at the local level.

MISSION ESSENTIAL FUNCTION REASSESSMENT AND TRIAGE TOOL

The Commonwealth of Virginia COOP Plan Template (2023) defines mission essential functions (MEFs) as high-level functions based on an agency's goals and its mission. During a long-term critical infrastructure outage, localities may need to reassess their department and/or agency MEFs if the size, scope, and duration of an incident exceed internal capabilities. Figure 2 shows a high-level decision matrix that COOP planners can use to analyze options for operational adjustments by considering immediate resource availability and life safety requirements.

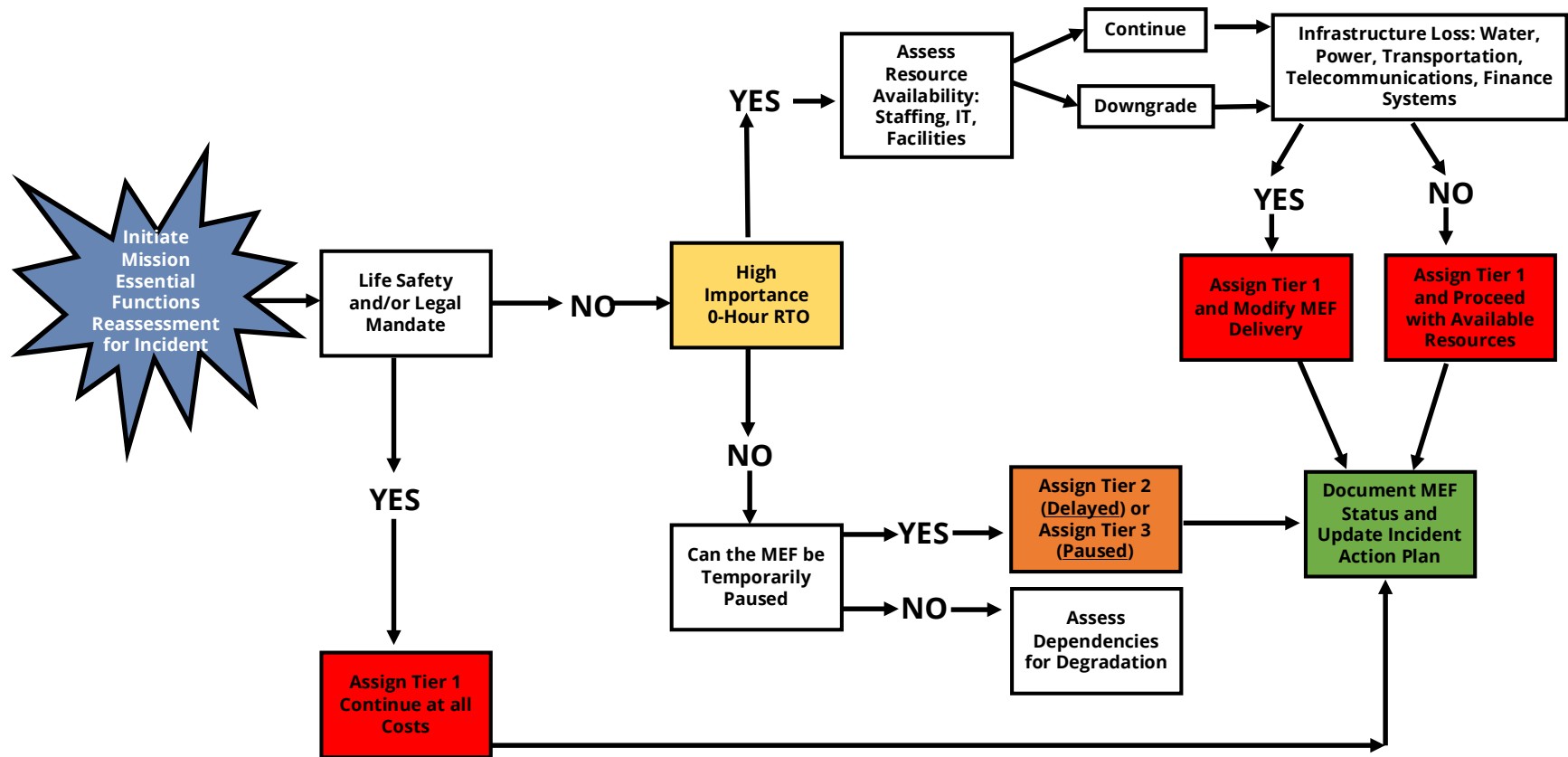


Figure 2: Mission Essential Function Reassessment Decision Tree

The *MEF Reassessment and Triage Tool* provides COOP planners with a structured tool to assign priority tiers (Tier 1: critical, Tier 2: delayed, Tier 3: paused) for each MEF and develop modified delivery strategies based on incident severity and resource constraints. The tool designates three tiers for MEF triage consideration.

Tier 1	Critical
Tier 2	Can be delayed during an incident that exceeds internal capabilities
Tier 3	Can be paused during an incident that exceeds internal capabilities

Users should follow these basic steps to use this tool:

- **Initiate reassessment.** Begin the process when an incident triggers a MEF reassessment, especially if life safety or legal mandates are involved.
- **Evaluate importance.** Determine whether the MEF has high importance with a 0-hour Recovery Time Objective (RTO). If *yes*, proceed to the resource and infrastructure checks; if *no*, consider pausing or downgrading the MEF.
- **Assess resources and infrastructure.** Check the availability of staffing, information technology, and facilities. If resources are adequate and no critical infrastructure has been lost, continue MEF delivery. If infrastructure has been lost, proceed based on available resources.
- **Decide Tier Assignment:** Assign Tier 1 (critical), Tier 2 (delayed), or Tier 3 (paused) based on inputs. Tier 1 MEFs are critical and need to be continued at all costs.
- **Document and update.** Record the MEF's status and update the agency and/or department's Incident Action Plan (IAP) to reflect decisions and ensure coordinated response efforts.

Access the *Mission Essential Function Reassessment and Triage Tool* for more detailed instructions and to get started.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

During an emergency, the words of local officials carry enormous weight; community members look to their leaders for calm, for clarity, and for direction. The way in which information (especially that which is new or complex) is presented during a major incident is of critical importance. This section provides an outline of best practices and practical methods that local officials may use during an unprecedented emergency. Appendix A provides a crisis communication toolkit and playbook.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES

Clear, consistent, and transparent communication is one of the most powerful tools local officials have during an emergency. Research shows that how messages are delivered directly affects whether people take protective actions, whether they trust leadership, and how effectively communities respond and recover. Appendix A provides some common, research-driven best practices for public communications, which may support officials who are not trained public information officers.

COMMUNICATING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Communicating about complex, controversial, or politically sensitive topics during emergencies requires transparency and consistency. Difficult topics such as rationing, curfews, public health restrictions, and enforcement measures may be met with resistance, anger, or public opposition. Emergencies that require such actions can quickly become polarizing if not handled carefully. The best

practices in Appendix A can help officials communicate more effectively to maintain public confidence and ensure compliance.

PUBLIC INFORMATION PLAYBOOK FOR CATASTROPHIC INCIDENTS

A public information playbook can help local officials communicate quickly and accurately; however, it should be built before a crisis occurs, regularly updated, and accessible to anyone tasked with public communication during an emergency. The goal is to have clear, ready-to-use communication tools that align with official guidance but reflect the unique needs of the local community. Maintaining both a digital version (editable and shareable) and a paper version of this toolkit is crucial to ensure readiness even if power, internet, or cell service fails. Appendix A provides localities with guidance on developing a public information playbook to support crisis communications during incidents.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

As local jurisdictions approach consequence management planning for long-term critical infrastructure disruptions that affect community lifelines, they should consider how to integrate this guidance into existing planning and preparedness efforts, following these three steps:

- **Step 1.** Evaluate ongoing planning efforts to determine when and how to integrate Blue Book tools, findings, and approaches.
 - Identify existing preparedness efforts that align with the type of catastrophic event the Blue Book project is designed to address.
 - Leverage tools to further advance planning (for example, during a COOP plan update consider reviewing the MEF Reassessment Tool).
- **Step 2.** Include Blue Book guidance in ongoing training and exercise activities.
 - Consider including findings or tools from this guide in future exercises (such as including lifeline impacts based on the Locality Community Lifeline Self-Assessment Tool).
 - Provide tools or develop discussion questions around topics presented in this guide.
 - Develop training opportunities for personnel to use tools, ask questions, and learn the Blue Book planning approach.
- **Step 3.** Consider future preparedness activities.
 - Identify opportunities to conduct dedicated catastrophic incident planning.
 - Coordinate with critical infrastructure owners and operators to better understand infrastructure and the implications to lifelines if infrastructure is impacted.
 - Update and maintain plans and procedures with ongoing use and refinement of provided tools.

FOR FURTHER READING

1. Cyber Security and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), “Critical Infrastructure Sectors,” 2025, <https://www.cisa.gov/topics/critical-infrastructure-security-and-resilience/critical-infrastructure-sectors>.
2. CISA, *Infrastructure Resilience Planning Framework (IRPF)*, version 1.2, Feb. 2024, https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-02/Infrastructure%20Resilience%20Planning%20Framework%20v1.2_JAN2024_508c.pdf.
3. Commonwealth of Virginia, *Emergency Operations Plan*, Oct. 2021, <https://www.vaemergency.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021-coveop-final-approved-102021-1.pdf>.
4. Virginia Department of Emergency Management, “Published Plans: Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan (COVEOP),” 2025, <https://vdem.virginia.gov/divisions/preparedness-bureau/planning/published-plans/>
5. Department of Homeland Security, “Supplemental Tool: Executing a Critical Infrastructure Risk Management Approach,” 2013, <https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/NIPP-2013-Supplement-Executing-a-CI-Risk-Mgmt-Approach-508.pdf>.
6. FEMA Office of National Continuity Programs, *Continuity Guidance Circular*, Feb. 2018, updated 2024, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_continuity-guidance-circular_082024.pdf.
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8. FEMA, *Community Lifelines Implementation Toolkit*, version 2.1, July 2023, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_lifelines-toolkit-v2.1_2023.pdf.
9. FEMA, *Local Mitigation Planning Policy Guide*, Apr. 2025, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_hmd_local-mitigation-planning-policy-guide_2025.pdf.
10. FEMA, *National Response Framework*, 4th ed., Oct. 2019, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/NRF_FINALApproved_2011028.pdf.
11. FEMA, *National Mitigation Framework*, 2nd ed., June 2016, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_ors_national-mitigation-framework_042025.pdf.
12. FEMA, *National Disaster Recovery Framework*, 3rd ed. (amended), Dec. 2024, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_national-disaster-recovery-framework-third-edition_05062025_0.pdf.

APPENDIX: CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT, BEST PRACTICES, AND PLAYBOOK FOR LOCAL JURISDICTIONS

CHECKLIST FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

The checklist below provides a quick-reference card for developing and communicating information in a crisis.

Before speaking or posting:	
	Determine approval process for incident updates.
	Validate information. Identify the information that is unknown or unsure.
	Identify three to five main takeaways for the public.
	Prepare one to two simple, actionable steps that the public can take to ensure their safety.
	Select and prepare spokesperson(s) to deliver messaging. Prepare talking points for them.
	Ensure that the information is consistent with any partner agencies.
	Confirm the accessibility of messaging (American Sign Language, video captions, language considerations).
	Identify any false information or rumors currently being spread, and prepare rebuttals.
	Identify trusted messengers and community partners to help amplify the message.
Crafting the message:	
	Lead with empathy, acknowledge fears and hardships, and communicate uncertainties.
	Ensure that language is straightforward and nontechnical.
	Be transparent about what is known, what is unknown, what is currently being done, and what is going to be done.
	Repeat critical details and action steps three times.
	Direct the public to official information channels.
	Balance urgency (e.g., “this is serious”) with reassurance (e.g., “we are strong”).
	Emphasize community values and solidarity.
	Be concise; include no more than three key messages per update.
	Consider tailored messages for specific audience segments (e.g., the elderly, medically vulnerable individuals, those in the disaster zone versus outside).
	Be clear about when the public should expect updates (e.g., every X hours, once a day).
Ongoing communication:	
	Continue updates at the intervals that were previously communicated, even if there is no new information.
	Monitor social media and local networks for rumors and correct them promptly.
	Take note of key questions and feedback from the public and address them promptly.
	Coordinate with trusted messengers and community partners to ensure consistent follow-up.
	Thank the community for its efforts.
	Reinforce action steps and shared resilience.
	Evaluate communication effectiveness and adjust the message in response to public sentiment.

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC DURING CATASTROPHIC INCIDENTS

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Be first, accurate, and credible. The public expects rapid updates and very quick information during emergencies. Being the first to share important information demonstrates leadership and reduces the space for rumors. However, speed must be balanced with accuracy—if facts are uncertain, say so openly. Credibility comes from honesty—explain what is known, what is unknown, what is being done to find answers, and when more information is expected. However, do not speculate. Share the reasoning behind decision-making.

Plan for uncertainty and communicate transparently. During a crisis, information moves rapidly, and there are many unknowns. Acknowledging unknown, uncertain, or conflicting information and setting clear expectations that information and recommendations may evolve reduces the likelihood of rumors and mistrust from the public toward local officials. Set expectations about when updates will come, and follow them exactly so that residents can be assured that communication is continuous. If asked a question that cannot be answered, validate the question, be honest about gaps, provide an expected timeline for that information, and pivot to information that can be shared. Avoid speculation, false reassurance, deflection, obfuscation with jargon, over-promising, and minimizing.

Some examples of how to communicate uncertainty transparently are as follows:

1. “We are still determining the cause of the water contamination. Our teams are conducting tests right now, and we expect preliminary results within two hours. Until then, do not drink tap water. Use bottled water or boil water for one minute before use.”
2. “At this time, we cannot confirm the number of injuries. Emergency responders are still on scene conducting assessments. We will provide an update at 3:00 p.m. Right now, please avoid the area of Main Street and Oak Avenue.”
3. “The situation is still developing. Here’s what we know so far: [facts]. Here’s what we’re working to confirm: [unknowns]. We will update you every two hours, with our next briefing at [time], even if we don’t have new information.”
4. “The fire perimeter is changing rapidly because of wind conditions. The information we’re sharing is accurate as of [timestamp], but conditions may change. Monitor our official channels for real-time updates every 30 minutes.”
5. “We are still assessing the full extent of the chemical release. Out of an abundance of caution, we are asking residents within a one-mile radius to shelter in place while we gather more information. This is a precautionary measure, and we will lift it as soon as we confirm it is safe.”
6. “We cannot yet estimate when power will be fully restored. Crews are assessing damage to the grid. We know this is incredibly difficult, especially for those with medical needs. Call 211 for assistance accessing cooling centers and charging stations. We will provide our next update on restoration estimates at 6:00 p.m.”
7. “We’ve seen reports on social media claiming [rumor]. We have not been able to verify this information. What we can confirm is [verified facts]. We take all reports seriously and are investigating. If you have information, please contact [number].”
8. “Earlier, we reported [initial information]. As we’ve gathered more data, we now understand [corrected information]. We apologize for any confusion and are committed to providing the most accurate information as we learn more.”

9. “This is an active investigation, and we cannot share certain details that might compromise our ability to hold those responsible accountable. What I can share is [safe-to-release information]. We’re committed to transparency and will provide more details when we are able.”

Show empathy and humanity. Acknowledging fear, frustration, grief, and loss can make messages more relatable and therefore more likely to be perceived as trustworthy. Research shows that empathetic communication resonates deeply with audiences and encourages compliance. Simple phrases such as “We understand the sacrifices you are making” and “We know that this is very difficult” can reinforce solidarity and show empathy to constituents. Leaders who express concern for and share community values, such as family, safety, and neighbors, are more likely to gain cooperation from the community.

Highlight community values to encourage compliance. Framing actions as protecting family, neighbors, and community, rather than simply following government orders, increases compliance with emergency actions and protective behaviors.

Anticipate and counter rumors. Provide proactive, evidence-based corrections of false and misleading information (FMI). These corrections, known as “debunking,” should be structured as a “truth sandwich”: fact first, then a warning about the myth, then an explanation of how the myth or false claim misleads, and then reinforcement of the fact as the final layer. This method is an effective way to address FMI without inadvertently reinforcing or amplifying it. However, providing a correction—regardless of format—is far more important than presenting it in a particular way. When possible, dedicate staff time to monitoring internet sites for FMI, and work with local partner agencies to increase agency ability to find and respond to FMI. When possible, dedicate staff time to monitoring for FMI online and work with local partner agencies to increase your bandwidth to find and respond to FMI. A framework for deciding which FMI to respond to will support these efforts, and an example can be found [here](#).

Use plain, accessible language. Avoid jargon, acronyms, or technical phrases. People under stress often struggle to process complex information, and many residents are not experts in emergency management language or may have limited literacy or English proficiency. Messages should be short, clear, and designed around one action per statement (e.g., “Boil your water for at least one minute” instead of “Implement potable water sterilization measures”). To be accessible, messages should also include translations and be presented in multiple formats (e.g., print, audio, video, pictures, diagrams).

Repeat across multiple channels. Share consistent messages at regular intervals via social media, TV, radio, text alerts, and websites. Use community networks and trusted community partners to get information out. Leverage trusted partners who have had a long relationship with the agency.

Tailor messages to the affected audience. Consider the affected audience and the characteristics of the community (e.g., culture, language barriers, age, socioeconomic status, access to technology) when creating messaging to ensure that communications are received well and that action items are appropriate for the intended audience.

COMMUNICATING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Be transparent about rationale and decision-making. Explaining *why* a policy or directive exists is one of the most effective ways to reduce outrage and increase compliance. Whether announcing a public health mandate, rationing order, or curfew, clearly communicate the reasoning behind the

decision, who it protects, and how it will be enforced to help constituents feel both respected and informed.

Prioritize clarity and consistency. When communicating about sensitive topics, clarity is the strongest tool for maintaining trust. Use simple, direct language to explain what is happening and what actions residents should take. Avoid jargon, speculation, or contradictory updates as much as possible. Consistent messages delivered across various communications methods and from multiple trusted sources can help counter confusion and rumors. Every message should include at least one clear action step and an explanation of what comes next, so that residents know both what to do, and why it matters.

Provide actionable information and manage expectations. Messaging about complex, unwelcome, restrictive, or controversial public safety directives should always explain their purpose and anticipated duration and include concrete instructions on how to follow the directives. Be honest about what is known and what is still being decided and prepare the public for change as the situation evolves to avoid frustration, discontent, or rumors.

Be proactive and honest about uncertainty. Acknowledge what is unknown, explain how information is being verified, and commit to regular updates. If details change, clearly state why. Transparency can preserve credibility even when the message itself is unwelcome. Regular, predictable updates can prevent rumors or speculation from filling the gaps.

Balance urgency with reassurance. Fear-based messaging can be counterproductive and can create resistance, apathy, or even panic—all of which are contradictory to compliance with emergency measures. Instead, balance urgency with reassurance. Acknowledge the seriousness of the situation while emphasizing that officials are acting to protect the community. Explain what is being done, what residents can do, and what resources are available. Use a calm tone when communicating to reassure the community.

Integrate preparedness and resilience messaging. Link controversial topics to collective resilience. Pair controversial announcements with messages that empower residents, such as about how they can help their neighbors, reduce strain on systems, and contribute to community safety.

Encourage dialogue and public participation. When possible, include opportunities for community members to ask questions or express concerns. Feedback mechanisms such as town halls or social media Q&As can reduce false and misleading information and can help officials gauge public perception. Listening openly to the concerns of the public also reinforces the message that leaders are accountable and committed to fairness.

Use trusted messengers and community partners. Trusted messengers and community partnerships are essential when addressing sensitive issues. Work with nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and local leaders who are already trusted within their communities; these individuals can help adapt official messages into language consistent with the values of their communities and subcommunities, and they can lend credibility.

Avoid militarized or punitive framing. When communicating controversial enforcement measures such as curfews or restrictions, avoid militarized language, aggressive imagery, or punitive framing. Instead, emphasize safety, fairness, and community protection. Law enforcement may not be the best voice for announcing restrictions; instead, these may be better coming from elected officials, subject matter experts, or public health authorities.

“PUBLIC INFORMATION PLAYBOOK” FOR CATASTROPHIC INCIDENTS

Define Objectives

Clear communication objectives can guide decisions during a crisis. Use jurisdiction-specific objectives to establish intended goals for communication efforts.

1. Identify your primary goals, such as ensuring life-safety outcomes, maintaining trust, and reducing panic.
2. Set secondary goals, such as correcting rumors, ensuring access to services, supporting vulnerable populations, or promoting community unity.
3. Write a short mission statement, such as the following: “The purpose of this playbook is to support emergency response by ensuring coordinated, timely distribution of information to the public about the incident. It identifies agreed upon and preapproved steps to be taken during the first critical hours while a Joint Information Center (JIC) is standing up.”
4. Align objectives with the jurisdiction’s emergency operations plan.
5. Set a schedule to review and update objectives to reflect new threats or community needs.

Identify Plausible Catastrophic Incidents

Identifying plausible catastrophic incidents for your unique area and community may help your team practice for and prepare messages for different types of likely threats and crises. Use these scenarios to anticipate the tone, needs, and focus for different emergencies.

Identifying plausible catastrophic incidents for each unique area and community may help teams practice for and prepare messages for different types of likely threats and crises. Use these scenarios to anticipate the tone, needs, and focus of different emergencies:

1. Create short narrative descriptions for high-probability emergencies in the area (e.g., severe weather, wildfires, public health emergencies, infrastructure failures, terrorism).
2. For each incident type, identify:
 - Likely public concerns or emotions
 - Key incident-specific protective actions
 - Information gaps that may arise
3. Draft “First 24-hour” messaging needs for each incident (i.e., what the public needs to know immediately).
4. Keep threat language broad enough that it can easily be adapted as needed.

Outline a Communication Strategy

A crisis communication strategy will ensure specific, consistent, and coordinated outreach. Use the strategies offered below for various types of communication as a blueprint for how and where messages are shared.

Social Media:

1. Identify specific accounts that will be included in messaging.
2. Assign personnel to monitor and address rumors on official social media accounts.
3. Establish the desired tone (e.g., factual, calm, compassionate).

News Media:

1. Maintain a list of local outlets and reporters.
2. Designate trained spokespersons and backups, and ensure that they receive the proper training.
3. Create press briefing templates for rapid release.

4. Prepare talking points for leadership that explain any complex or technical details and anticipate likely media questions.

Direct Public Contact:

1. Prepare a script for town websites or robocalls.
2. Plan how and how often updates will occur on community boards.
3. Plan which local leaders can serve as trusted partners.
4. Include contingency planning for public messaging during power and internet outages.

Emergency Contact Information:

1. Include the agency's emergency contact information.
2. Maintain a contact sheet for public information officers, emergency managers, partner agencies, interpreters, and media partners.
3. Include key social media handles, email addresses, and alternative communication methods.

Coordination Across Agencies:

1. Discuss how information will flow between the local emergency operations center (EOC), JIC, and partner agencies.
2. Establish a process for centralizing messaging approval.
3. Determine who needs to approve information and the order in which it will be reviewed so the process can move quickly during a crisis.
4. Establish clear decision-making authority.
5. Determine escalation procedures for sensitive or complex information.
6. Establish a process to collaborate on messaging and avoid contradictory messaging.
7. Discuss how information will flow in the event of a critical utility outage (e.g., power, telecommunications).

Create Pre-Approved Messaging Templates

Having messages ready to go will save time and prevent errors under stressful circumstances. Use these templates to enable immediate public communication when an emergency situation begins. Keep all templates editable (in a Microsoft Word or shared document format), and store both digital and printed copies. Agencies can use the [FEMA IPAWS Message Templates](#) to get started.

These messages should be pre-translated into languages commonly spoken in the jurisdiction and pre-approved by leadership to prevent delay in issuing important messaging immediately after an incident.

Below are several examples:

1. Do not call 911 seeking information about #hashtag. Lines are needed for life-threatening emergencies. Follow @officialaccount for CONFIRMED news and information.
2. To help you stay safe, @officialaccount is sharing news, tips and resources on our official website: [www.link.com](#).
3. Emergency personnel are currently responding to _____ at _____. Avoid area until further notice. #hashtag

Develop message banks that include the following resources and information:

1. Social media templates—posts with a maximum of 280 characters for fast updates. A helpful resource is [FEMA Interactive Templates: 90 Characters and 360 Characters](#).

- Example: If you've been affected by #hashtag, register with @RedCross Safe and Well site to let family and friends know your status. www.link.com.
 - Example: Tweet using #hashtag if you see problems related to [Emergency]. Provide location. If safe, share a photo.
2. Emergency alert templates—clear, concise instructions for the public in an emergency.
 - Example: Rapidly moving wildfire reported in [Location]. Mandatory evacuation in [Area]. Monitor for updates at www.link.com and local media outlets.
 3. Press briefing templates—short, adaptable statements for press briefings and interviews that include key information:
 - What has happened
 - What is being done
 - What the public should do
 - Where to find updates
 4. Holding statements—statements often issued shortly after an incident has stabilized that provide credible (even if incomplete) information and indicate that more information will be forthcoming. These statements demonstrate responsiveness and acknowledge uncertainty while information is gathered for a fuller response.
 5. Resources for anticipated ongoing messaging needs, such as those that address controversial topics or counter false and misleading information.

Prepare Answers to Likely Questions

Anticipating public and media questions can prevent confusion and build confidence. Use this sheet to ensure leaders or officials are ready to respond, even in the event of limited information.

1. Brainstorm likely questions for each anticipated scenario or hazard type:
 - "Is it safe to drink the water?"
 - "Where can I get emergency shelter or medical care?"
 - "When will power be restored?"
2. Draft factual, plain-language answers for each question, emphasizing transparency and empathy. If the answer to a particular question is unknown, use the scenarios to talk through the scenario with teams or partners.
3. Include a pre-vetted "We don't know yet" phrasing (e.g., "We are still confirming that information and will share it as soon as it is verified. Our next update is scheduled for [time]"). Remember that acknowledging what is unknown is okay. Honesty establishes and retains trust.
4. Develop a schedule for reviewing and updating answers regularly and update it for accuracy after any major emergency or event that may affect answers.

Compile Helpful Terms and Facts

Create a glossary to help prevent confusion and ensure that all communicators are using consistent terminology. Use this list to provide ready references for officials and spokespeople when drafting crisis communication:

1. Define common emergency management terms (e.g., EOC, JIC, curfew, shelter-in-place).
2. Include scenario-specific definitions for likely hazards in each of the scenarios (e.g., flood, cyber incident, contamination).
3. Add a list of official and national agencies and resources (e.g., FEMA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO)).
4. Include translations in commonly spoken languages in the locality.

Create Resource Lists

A strong toolkit should include a resource hub to guide both officials and the public. Use this list to ensure knowledge of and access to verified, up-to-date resources before and during an emergency. Include the following resources, and develop a schedule for reviewing and updating resources regularly:

1. Local emergency and nonemergency hotlines (e.g., 911, 211)
2. Local shelters, hospitals, food banks, and assistance programs
3. State and federal resources (e.g., FEMA, CDC, local departments of emergency management)
4. Trusted news sources and social media channels
5. Local disability access partners

RESOURCES FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Preparing Before a Crisis

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ATTACHMENTS

1. *Locality Critical Infrastructure Risk Assessment Tool*
2. *Locality Community Lifelines Self-Assessment Tool*
3. *Locality Mission Essential Function Reassessment and Triage Tool*
4. *Crisis Communications Toolkit Resources for Local Jurisdiction*