

Okaloosa Walton Homeless Continuum of Care Emergency Management Plan

Emergency Preparedness for Persons Experiencing Homelessness

Operating Procedure for Okaloosa and Walton Counties

Overview

Purpose: This plan sets forth the requirements for implementing, activating, and operating the evacuation and shelter assistance plan for individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Okaloosa and Walton Counties.

Scope: This plan will be implemented in Okaloosa and Walton Counties to assist those experiencing homelessness to respond to the need for evacuation assistance and shelter during a hurricane. It includes education, notification, transportation assistance, sheltering for persons experiencing homelessness, and recovery. Parts of this plan will be implemented throughout the year for education purposes. The actions contained within the plan will be implemented once a threat has been identified and will be in coordination with other community/ county emergency actions.

Background: The 2025 Point-in-time Count results indicate that there are 402 individuals experiencing homelessness in the two-county catchment area, a majority of whom were unsheltered. Although the highest concentration of individuals experiencing homelessness is in Fort Walton Beach proper, the population is distributed across the two-county catchment area.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, a person or family is considered homeless or at imminent risk if following definitions are met:

Category 1: Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes a subset for an individual who is exiting an institution where he or she resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution;

Category 2: Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence;

Category 3: Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; or

Category 4: Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member.

Recent research around vulnerability science offers compelling evidence of the correlation between poverty and disaster vulnerability. People experiencing homelessness may be unable to engage in self-protective activities such as choosing a residence in a safe area, stockpiling food and supplies, and early evacuation once a threat to safety is evident. Homeless people who are undocumented or have a history of detention or incarceration may be hesitant to participate in disaster services for fear of deportation or arrest. Factors associated with mental illness and substance use disorders may interfere with the ability to cope with the trauma of disaster (Tierney, 2006).

Households experiencing homelessness are typically defined in emergency plans within the “special needs populations” category. FEMA describes the task of defining special needs populations as a critical first step in the planning process. The definition of “special needs population” used by the federal government as it appears in the National Response Framework (NRF) does not specifically mention people experiencing homelessness:

Populations whose members may have additional needs before, during, and after an incident in functional areas, including but not limited to: maintaining independence, communication, transportation, supervision, and medical care. Individuals in need of additional response assistance may include those who have disabilities; who live in institutionalized settings; who are elderly; who are children; who are from diverse cultures; who have limited English proficiency; or who are non-English speaking; or who are transportation disadvantaged.

Persons experiencing homelessness are implicit in the NRF definition based on their need for transportation assistance. According to FEMA (2008), “Populations that will require transportation assistance during emergency response and recovery include... individuals who are transient, such as people who are homeless, and have no fixed address.” States and local governments are free to make their own definition of “special needs populations” more explicitly inclusive of homeless people.

This document will address four main Action Items to ensure those experiencing homelessness have adequate time to prepare through education, appropriate and effective notifications, easily accessible transportation to shelter, and safe low barrier emergency shelter during a disaster.

Planning Considerations: There are several challenges with providing services to this often-transient population during a weather emergency, including hurricanes.

Communication: Messages communicated through the mainstream media may not reach those who have no permanent residence. Many of these individuals have no access to television, and some may be illiterate or non-English speaking, so that written communications may also be ineffective with a subset of this population. Some homeless individuals may be able to be reached through radio, but the most common form of communication in this population is word-of-mouth, leading to the spread of inaccurate rumors and misunderstandings that may have serious consequences during an emergency.

Transportation: Although about 3% of homeless individuals live in their cars or vans, most have difficulty with transportation and may not be able to reach a hurricane shelter in a timely manner without transportation assistance.

Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Legal Issues: Mental illness may make communication with some members of this population more difficult. Other homeless individuals with substance abuse problems or legal issues may make their safe integration into a mainstream risk shelter environment difficult.

Interpersonal Issues: Many homeless individuals may have difficulties interacting with a mainstream shelter population due to the issues already discussed or related to other lifestyle/cultural issues. In the stressful and (relatively) intimate setting of a disaster shelter, the consequences of such issues may be amplified.

Valid personal identification: Most emergency shelters request personal identification and county law enforcement conducts background checks on those checking in to the shelters with or without valid personal identification. Many homeless individuals lack identification cards. Individuals checking into county-run emergency shelters who have active felony warrants will be taken into custody; those with minor warrants are unlikely to be arrested. Identification and ongoing legal trouble may prohibit homeless from seeking or utilizing available emergency shelters.

Operating Procedure

Education/ Awareness

Training on guidelines for treatment of persons experiencing homelessness will be provided to general risk shelter workers prior to the beginning of hurricane season by HHA. Hurricane information materials will be prepared and distributed to agencies prior to the start of Hurricane Season (June 1st) and distributed to unsheltered persons through a mass campaign during the month of May, as well as throughout the hurricane season, as appropriate. (see *Notification/Communication* below)

Notification/ Communication

A flier containing hurricane season information, including pick-up points, homeless-friendly and general populations shelters will be distributed to homeless persons through food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, drop-in centers, etc. by HHA.

Posters and fliers will be posted at parks, shelters, food pantries, shelters, drop-in centers, free clinics, etc., by outreach service agencies.

When evacuation zones are called by County Emergency Management, “bright colored” emergency notification and response cards will be distributed, by the staff of partnering agencies to notify homeless citizens that it is time to evacuate. These will list pick-up points where households experiencing homelessness in need of transportation can be picked up and taken to an evacuation shelter.

Law enforcement will provide notification to unsheltered households in areas where persons typically congregate through posting of fliers and distribution of emergency notification and response cards.

Cards and fliers will be printed by HHA prior to the start of hurricane season.

Transportation

Pick-up locations will be named prior to the storm by HHA on www.hhalliance.org. These few designated spots will be noted throughout the two-county area as soon as the storm is predicted to make landfall to ensure that when or if the time comes to evacuate, all persons experiencing homelessness will be fully aware of the pick-up times and locations.

HHA or a designee will call Okaloosa County Transit and Walton County Emergency Management for the pick-up locations and times.

Sheltering Support for Homeless Persons

Homeless individuals may go to any county shelter. The following is a list of shelters that may be open in the event of a hurricane:

Okaloosa County

Davidson Middle School- pet friendly
NW Florida State College- pet friendly
Antioch Elementary- pet friendly

Walton County

Freeport High School

County shelters will not provide toiletries or bedding. Basic shelter supplies, such as blankets, towels, and items for personal hygiene (soap, toothpaste, deodorant, etc.) will be coordinated by HHA or a designee. Showers and kits will be available at the pick-up points, if applicable.

Recovery

Under normal conditions for closing county risk shelters, homeless citizens will be returned to pick-up points as appropriate by Emergency Operation Center dispatched buses.

Responsibilities

Okaloosa/Walton County Board of County Commissioners

- Declare and announce State of Emergency

Okaloosa/Walton County Emergency Management

- Ensure overall sheltering plan is updated and in place prior to the beginning of hurricane season each year
- Coordinate public transportation to shelter locations
- Coordinate public communications regarding shelters and transportation

Okaloosa County/Walton County Sheriff's Offices

- Coordinate training and information for in-house personnel about this procedure and to assign responsibility for law enforcement agencies to provide handouts to street homeless, as appropriate
- Assist with distribution of hurricane warning cards and make drive-by announcements

Okaloosa Walton Homelessness and Housing Alliance:

- Act as liaison between Okaloosa/Walton County homeless services providers and Okaloosa/Walton Emergency Management Departments on sheltering issues
- Distribute informational fliers and cards to appropriate locations
- Obtain and distribute, as needed, blankets and personal hygiene items as homeless individuals depart for shelters
- Publicize procedures throughout the homeless community and providers
- Provide contact information to shelter staff/EOC/ law enforcement for municipalities in the event of an issue with a person/household experiencing homelessness

Review Process: To enhance this program over time and ensure that it is meeting the needs of households experiencing homelessness, an after-action meeting and report will follow the activation of this plan.

Hurricane Evacuation Timeline

Hurricane Season Prep- Prior to June 1 st	
Responsibility	Partner Agency/ Designee
Post Preparedness Flyers in pre-determined locations to reach the most citizens	HHA/ CCNWFL/ CASH/ OHP/Matrix/C&S

Prepare to deploy 50 “go-bags” to the designated pick-up locations	CCNWFL/Matrix/C&S
Coordinate with EOC to share with Stakeholders	HHA

72 Hours (3 days) Prior to Landfall

Responsibility	Partner Agency/ Designee
Post Updated Flyers in pre-determined locations to reach the most citizens	HHA/ CCNWFL/ CASH/ Others of Destin/ OHP/Matrix/C&S
Pre-stage “go-bags”	CCNWFL/Matrix/HHA
General alert/awareness to partner agencies	HHA
Deploy a word-of-mouth campaign to ensure the maximum number of at-risk citizens are aware of the shelter options and pick-up points	All Stakeholders
Coordinate with EOC to share with Stakeholders	HHA

After BOCC makes the call: 48-36 Hours prior to Landfall

Responsibility	Partner Agency/ Designee
Post Evacuation Flyers in pre-determined locations and provide flyers to LEAs for distribution once BOCC has made the call	HHA/ CCNWFL/ CASH/ OHP/Matrix/C&S
Deploy “Go-bags” to pick-up locations	CCNWFL
Activate Pick-up locations if BOCC has made the call to open shelters	HHA/ Location Specific Designees
Request pick-up from Okaloosa/Walton County Transit if BOCC has made the call to open shelters	HHA or Location Specific Designee

24 Hours to Landfall

FULL EVACUATION as determined by BOCC	
Activation of pick-up points	Pick-up point designee

Post-emergency

Coordinate with Red Cross for long-term shelter	HHA/Red Cross
Coordinate drop-offs from Okaloosa/Walton County Transit once county shelters close	Pick-up point designee