

# Best Practices Checklist for Foster Care

## Introduction

The goal of this document is to offer best practices for improving disaster preparedness in child-serving institutions by using suggestions and resources to achieve indicators of community resilience. This checklist was created by cross-walking actions items with questions from the Community Preparedness Index (CPI) from Save the Children. The best practices and resources are not the only way to help address gaps in the CPI assessment, and some suggestions may be constrained by local or state regulations or laws. The best practices can help guide discussions and plans of which organizations should take on responsibility of improving preparedness in child care serving facilities.

## Intended Audience

This series of best practices for the foster care sector are mainly targeted for decision and policymakers. The best practices serve to provide suggestions about what has worked for other localities and states on how to improve preparedness in the foster care sector. Coalitions are encouraged to provide this information to stakeholders to understand how preparedness can be improved, specifically using the metric of the CPI.

## How to Guide

1. Read up on and fill out the Community Preparedness Index by collaborating with organizations who work in each of the sectors outlined.
  - a. E.g., work with a Child Welfare Agency to know what is required in licensing foster care homes
2. After receiving the score, review the results to determine where the gaps are in CPI. Sections that were not filled out or received a “Don’t Know” response will be considered a 0.
  - a. E.g., not sure if the licensing agency provides feedback on emergency plans or not
3. Check if any of the missing components or “Don’t Know” responses do have programs from the state and/or local government in place.
  - a. E.g., there is an easier process for taking a child across the state border in an emergency

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4. Understand the gaps and form a community resilience coalition of child-serving institutions based on who are good partners and where the areas for improvement are.
    - a. Look at the How to Guide for Community Resilience Coalitions in the Toolkit
  5. Provide these best practices to decision and policy makers and give expertise in helping them understand what can be done to improve it.
    - a. E.g. See if the licensing agency for foster care centers can modify the requirements.
  6. Check off specific components of elements of preparedness as new standards are set and child care centers improve their emergency preparedness.

## Approach to Action

There are 3 major ways to achieving the best practices detailed below and improving the CPI score for child care.

1. State Regulation
2. County or local regulations
3. Best practices through coalition

As you go through the best practices and check off items, keep in mind that legal requirements and actions with a lead organization carry more weight in terms of preparedness than a practice. However, best practices are better than nothing.

## Before You Get Started

Before going through the best practices, you should identify the foster care licensing and regulatory requirements and authorities for your community. Foster care in this context will include foster homes and group homes.

### Licensed foster care guardians in your community must prepare an emergency response plan as a condition of licensure. (Q. 1) (1)

- Licenses provide the ability to standardize the emergency response plan for foster care in the community and can improve coordination and accountability for the agencies. An example of a policy and established license requirement for foster care guardians can be found in the references.<sup>1</sup> An example of a general standard license template can be found in the references.<sup>2</sup> Licensing requirements by state can also be found in the references.<sup>3</sup>

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**A different law or regulation in addition to, or not including a licensing agency, requires a foster care guardian to prepare an emergency response plan. (Q.2) (2)**

- An examples of non-licensing requirement for a foster care emergency response plan can include a state agency regulating local child and welfare agencies to develop and manage emergency response plans. An example of regulations like these can be found in the references. <sup>4 5</sup> Child care providers, including foster care, that receive funding from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) are required to have disaster plan. <sup>6 7</sup> Requirements for emergency plans may also come from placement organizations for foster care. <sup>8 9</sup>

**Foster care guardians are required to share emergency response plans with their assigned social worker. (Q.3) (3)**

- The emergency response plans might be a requirement for licensing and provided to the licensing worker, but not required to be distributed to the social worker. There should be standardization to include both parties in receiving the plans to allow for social workers to be in contact immediately after a disaster. An example can be seen in the references. <sup>10</sup>

**The minimum frequency for testing emergency response plans in all levels of government (state, local, or local municipal) in foster care is: (Q.4) (4)**

**At least once a year**

**At least once every 2 years**

**Less than every 2 year**

- Guidelines and requirements may vary by level of government (state vs. local). Common and suggested guidelines include that emergency response plans for foster care are reviewed every 6 months. <sup>11</sup> Emergency response plans requirements for testing may be limited to fire drills, but should consider other manmade and natural disasters to ensure preparedness. <sup>12</sup>

**Local government foster care agency is required to test their emergency plan: (5)**

**At least once a year**

**At least once every 2 years**

**Less than every 2 year**

- The tests of emergency plans may also include emergency communications with foster care guardians.

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- State, local, or local municipal government reviews foster care emergency plans and provides substantive feedback at the following frequency: (6)**
    - At least once a year**
    - At least once every 2 years**
    - Less than every 2 year**
    - This will usually occur through the licensing authority of the state and it may also be part of the annual inspections. An example can be seen in the references.<sup>13</sup> Guidance or standards may come from associations that deal with foster care.<sup>14</sup> Emergency plans should include fires, but should also include natural (earthquake, fire, tornadoes) and technological disasters (explosion, power outages, or hazardous waste spills). Feedback on emergency plans should preferably be through an emergency management agency.
  - A system or mechanism exists with the State or Local Department of Emergency Management to provide technical assistance on emergency plan creation and maintenance: (7)**
    - Training from the respective Emergency Management Agency is available to the sector as needed.
  - A mechanism exists to help foster care guardians get proper legal authorization to evacuate children across state and county lines promptly after the evacuation. The mechanism will allow a foster care guardian to evacuate a child across state lines before obtaining a court order. (Q.5) (8)**
    - This mechanism may include agreements between specific states or policies set by the respective Child and Family Services Agencies. An example of a disaster plan that includes sharing of information across county and state lines in disaster plans to ensure that there isn't a loss of coordination after evacuation can be seen in the references.<sup>15</sup> The information that is shared during a disaster should include medical and educational records, custody orders, and family and case history across state lines.<sup>16</sup>
  - A lead agency implements the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (CFSIA) (Q.6) (9)**
    - CFSIA requires that states have monthly in-person meetings by caseworkers with children living in foster care and that the caseworker is prepared and focused on the wellbeing of the children among other requirements.<sup>17</sup> Lead agencies are commonly the agencies that license the foster homes. If CFSIA isn't mentioned, the lead agency may instead mention the Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act of 2011 (CFSII). CFSII is an updated version of CFSIA. Links to more information about CFSIA and CFSII can be seen in the references.<sup>18 19</sup>

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- An organization in the community has policies and procedures intended to: (Q.7) (10)**
    - Identify, locate and continue the provision of health care, medical, and other services to children in the child welfare/child protective services system living in your community, who are displaced WITHIN your state or county by a disaster**
    - Identify, locate and continue the provision of health care, medical, and other services to children in the child welfare/child protective services system living in your community, who are displaced OUTSIDE of your state or county by a disaster**
      - These two topics will generally fall under the disaster plan required components of the CFSIA Act of 2006. The agencies that are in charge of managing those funds will likely also be the child welfare agencies that license the foster care homes. Discussion of addressing displaced children living in foster care can be found in the Child and Family Services Plans that are required for CCDF funding. Examples can be seen in the references.<sup>20 21</sup>
    - There are systems or protocols in place in the county or state to respond to new child welfare cases in your community resulting from a disaster.**
      - Responding to new child welfare cases in the community from a disaster is also required under the CFSIA Act of 2006. A good way to consider this issue is to break down the response into different functions to consider how to identify and respond to the cases. An example can be seen in the references.<sup>22</sup>
    - There is a system in place to communicate with staff of child welfare/child protective services organizations that are displaced by a disaster.**
      - One example of ensuring communication is by keeping a communications chain in and between offices to ensure that staff can be reassigned in emergencies.<sup>23</sup> The agency's network should also allow staff to have access to information and the systems outside of their respective jurisdiction.<sup>24</sup> There should also be communication systems in place with all relevant stakeholders (volunteer placement agencies, foster parents, detention facilities, etc.) in case of a disaster.
    - There are procedures to preserve essential program records related to children in the welfare/protective services system during a disaster.**
      - Databases featuring backups of children's records should be contained at a secure off-site location to ensure that records are preserved in a disaster. This will allow continuity of services after a disaster.<sup>25</sup>

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- There are processes to coordinate services and share information with other states and counties during and in the aftermath of a disaster.**
    - In some cases, this will be coordinated through the American Public Human Services Association, but direct agreements between states would help improve preparedness. Sharing information between states can occur through web based servers such as Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) and can increase the swiftness of the response. <sup>26</sup>
  - Ensure that if foster parents guardians evacuate a child across state lines, the guardian will have a valid Medicaid card for the child.**
    - Individual foster family readiness and disaster plans should include a packet of critical information for the children to take in the event of a disaster. The documents in this packet should include a birth certificate, social security card, Medicaid card, the name and phone number of the case worker, and a list of medications and special needs. <sup>27</sup> This best practice to include social security cards and birth certificates may not be feasible in certain municipalities due to confidentiality agreements for the birth parents. <sup>28 29</sup>
  - There are procedures to ensure continuity of revenue to foster care guardians that are displaced from their normal operating locations to another location in your state and county.**
  - There are processes to make sure there is continuity of revenue to foster care guardians that are displaced from your state to a different state.**
    - Preservation of essential records in a secure off-site location is critical to ensure a continuity of revenue. Encouraging or standardizing foster care payments to occur electronically can allow for stability after a disaster. <sup>30</sup>
  - An organization has policies or procedures to facilitate the sharing of case information about children in your community with the following: (Q.8) (11)**
    - Child welfare/child protective services agencies elsewhere in this state**
    - Child welfare/child protective services agencies in other states**
    - Public school systems in your community**
      - Public schools will have their own records on attendance, performance, disciplinary information, and health information. A formal standard of sharing information between caseworkers and the schools should be established. Standards will vary by state, but may include health records to understand special needs. Examples can be found in the references. <sup>31 32</sup>
  - Shelters in your community**
    - Establishing a memorandum of understanding between the organization running the shelters (e.g. American Red Cross) about the procedures and sharing data is an important way to ensure that information sharing occurs. <sup>33</sup> Note: some shelters won't be able to accommodate children with special needs. <sup>34</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> [Nebraska Division of Children and Family Services Disaster Plan \(pg.87\)](#) – Nebraska’s Department of Health & Human Services established a requirement that foster parents had to develop and display a family emergency plan within 6 months and required it be updated every 6 months.
- <sup>2</sup> [National Association for Regulatory Administration \(NARA\)](#) (Evacuation and emergencies is on pg. 27) – NARA, the American Bar Association, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Generations United created a series of guidelines of requirements for states to consider in licensing standards for foster care homes to ensure the home is safe.
- <sup>3</sup> [United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau](#) – This search engine includes publications from all states that describe their services and guidance on child welfare-related topics for all types of audiences. These topics include licensing, child protection, out-of-home care like foster care.
- <sup>4</sup> [New York State Office of Children & Family Services](#) – New York State’s Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) created a policy in response to new federal requirements to have a disaster plan. This policy was not directly enforced through licensing and was instead done by setting requirements to local departments of social services in New York. OCFS also provided recommendations on what to include in disaster plans for the local departments of social services.
- <sup>5</sup> [California Health and Human Services Agency, Department of Social Services](#) –California’s Department of Social Services sent out a letter that requested updates to child welfare agency’s disaster plans. This an example of a regulation that doesn’t directly go through licensing to require foster care guardians to prepare an emergency response plan.
- <sup>6</sup> [United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families](#) – A blog post that documents the statewide child care disaster requirements under Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).
- <sup>7</sup> [United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care](#) – Frequently asked questions about the reauthorization and updates to CCDF.
- <sup>8</sup> [Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Inc.](#) (pg.127) – This non-profit organization coordinates child welfare services for two Florida counties under a [contract with the Florida Department of Children and Families](#). In their handbook for foster parents they specifically state that an evacuation and disaster preparedness plan is required for the annual environmental, health, and safety inspection.
- <sup>9</sup> [KVC Kansas \(pg. 60\)](#) – A non-profit under KVC Health Systems Inc., a private non-profit child welfare organization. Their role as placing children in foster care homes shows they work closely with the licensing agency to make sure the foster parents are licensed properly. A KVC Family Services Coordinator assumes responsibility for completing the initial licensing process with the families.
- <sup>10</sup> [Alaska Center for Resource Families](#) – A training for foster parents about emergency planning and the requirements from the state of Alaska. The training includes a mention of the requirement of foster parents having to share their emergency response plan with the social and licensing worker.
- <sup>11</sup> [Missouri Department of Social Services](#) – The disaster plan component of the 2015-2019 Child and Family Services Plan for the Missouri Department of Social Services. There is an explicit requirement that the disaster plan for the family must be reviewed every six months.
- <sup>12</sup> [Florida Department of Children and Families \(pg.33\)](#) – Administrative code from Florida that includes a requirement for licensed out-of-home caregivers to have an up to date written plan for evacuation for natural or manmade disasters.
- <sup>13</sup> [Nevada Legislature \(NAC 424.615\)](#) – The Nevada Administrative Code contains requirements for foster homes for children to have disaster plans that are updated every year. The licensing authority will do a site visit and provide feedback on the disaster plan every year.
- <sup>14</sup> [Georgia Association of Homes and Services for Children](#) – A guide for disaster plans for foster care homes in Georgia that isn’t legally binding, but provides a great deal of suggestions for a disaster plan for foster homes.
- <sup>15</sup> [Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child and Family Services](#) – Disaster response and recovery plan for Nevada’s Division of Child and Family services, which includes establishing communication and liaisons in neighboring counties and states in the event of an emergency.
- <sup>16</sup> [Contra Costa County Children & Family Services in California](#) – The child welfare disaster plan for Contra Costa county that includes sharing important documents and information with other states.

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- <sup>17</sup> [Virginia Department of Social Services \(pg. 135 and pgs. 180-181\)](#) – A statewide assessment of the Child and Family Services in Virginia. The assessment cited CFSIA requirements for the caseworkers and the resulting policy from VDSS, implying its role as a lead agency for CFSIA. Specific requirements for a written evacuation plan is also mentioned.
- <sup>18</sup> [Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 \(CFSIA\)](#) – The text for CFSIA as published under an amendment of part B of title IV of the Social Security Act.
- <sup>19</sup> [Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act \(CFSII\)](#) – The text for CFSII as published under an amendment of part B of title IV of the Social Security Act.
- <sup>20</sup> [Michigan Department of Health and Human Services \(pgs. 251-256\)](#) – Michigan’s welfare disaster plan includes information about the emergency response plan, procedures for displacement of children within the state, and communication during emergencies.
- <sup>21</sup> [New York State Office of Children and Family Services \(pgs. 165-170, out of state displacement on pg. 167\)](#) – New York State Office of Children and Family services is part of a Regional Catastrophe Planning Team which sets up an agreement between states in the region to collaborate on continuing Human Services and responding to a disaster.
- <sup>22</sup> [Mariposa County in California \(pgs. 6-7\)](#) – Child welfare disaster response plan for Mariposa County in California. The plan is based on requirements from CFSIA, and includes a section on responding to new child welfare cases that are affected by a disaster.
- <sup>23</sup> [Indiana Department of Child Services](#) – This disaster plan documents operations, communications, main areas to focus on, and chain of command for the Indiana Department of Child Services.
- <sup>24</sup> [South Carolina Department of Social Services \(pgs. 3-4\)](#) – The Department of Social Services in South Carolina has a disaster plan that includes maintaining communication capabilities of child welfare and child protective services in the event of a disaster.
- <sup>25</sup> [Indiana Department of Child Services \(pgs. 12-13\)](#) – A section of this disaster plan includes a specific focus on preservation of vital records to ensure that all information is maintained and there isn’t a disruption in services.
- <sup>26</sup> [Illinois Department of Child & Family Services \(pgs. 313 – 318\)](#) – Disaster plan for Illinois Department of Child & Family Services that includes a section of Information Technology services and coordination of information between states. The Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) is one example of information sharing between states. **Note:** If 2016 isn’t available, 2017 can be found [here](#) and information on state agreements starts on page 60. SACWIS mentions can be seen throughout the report.
- <sup>27</sup> [New Mexico Children, Youth & Families Department \(pg.10\)](#) – New Mexico specifically states that foster care providers need to have a readiness plan that includes items for children to take with them in an evacuation. The items include the child’s social security card, medicaid card, special needs, and birth certificate.
- <sup>28</sup> [South Carolina Department of Social Services \(pg. 11\)](#) – South Carolina’s policy for foster care states that the case worker will obtain and hold onto the child’s birth certificate and social security card.
- <sup>29</sup> [Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services](#) – This policy states that adoptive parents cannot be given the child’s birth certificate due to confidentiality of birth parents.
- <sup>30</sup> [Michigan Department of Health and Human Services \(pg. 130\)](#) – Michigan’s foster care program has disaster response procedures that include a focus on preservation of essential records that is backed up and is accessible statewide. The preservation of essential records allows there to be uninterrupted payments to foster caregivers.
- <sup>31</sup> [Maryland Department of Human Resources \(pg.20-22\)](#) – Maryland’s Department of Human Resources has specific protocols for children in state care, such as foster care, and ensuring their access to education. One aspect of these protocols includes information sharing between local school systems and child welfare services.
- <sup>32</sup> [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction \(pgs. 21-22\)](#) – Wisconsin has a publication that contains the procedures and policies for children in foster care and sharing information between human service agencies and schools.
- <sup>33</sup> [San Francisco City and County California \(pgs. 3-4\)](#) – San Francisco has worked with the American Red Cross (ARC) to pinpoint shelters in the city and find has an agreement to share data to identify foster children entering ARC shelters in the event of a disaster.
- <sup>34</sup> [Jackson County, Oregon \(pg. 7-8 and 27-28\)](#) – This workbook on creating a disaster plan for group or foster homes notes that the American Red Cross general population shelters generally don’t take people with special needs.