

ICF Podcast Series Navigating COVID-19 Aid—FAQs

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Episode 7: [Handling Concurrent Disasters](#)

1 How should state and local governments be thinking about practicing social distancing while continuing work on existing projects, like site inspections?

A: If we are to continue practicing safe and effective social distancing as a result of COVID-19 we must rethink the way we do business. This includes how we prepare for and respond to disasters. Technology platforms such as Zoom, used for communication and collaboration, have become more critical and we need to take advantage of these platforms. We also need to rethink the disaster recovery process in general and in terms of how states and agencies traditionally respond. Preliminary damage assessments (PDAs) and site inspections have typically involved a large gathering or pairing of professionals as needed (e.g., environmental reviews and hazard mitigation). However, being near one another is not going to be as common going forward. Along with relying on technology, states have, for example, tried conducting remote PDAs to conserve resources. We are going to have to continue such practices in a post-pandemic process.

2 What are examples of technologies that can help transition from working in person to working remotely?

A: We have started using technologies like drones and 3D imaging that have helped us reduce the risks associated with sending individuals into damaged buildings and dangerous areas. We use drones to get into remote locations, and only one or two people are required to obtain and process 3D imagery. These images provide more detailed information for review and, overall, make the process more efficient. These types of tools are very effective in keeping our teams safe and healthy, and they provide high-quality and accurate data to help inform decisions by management.

3 What should state and local governments be thinking about in terms of using the data they collect?

A: Applicants of federal funding should always prepare ahead of a disaster by building out their database with the information they will need, like the types of facilities that may be at risk. For example, ICF uses a system called DisasTRAX to collect and provide data to partners to help track and report out on the information that will help inform decisions.

4 How do you foresee evacuations occurring from a coastal state during concurrent disasters (e.g., a pandemic and a hurricane)?

A: Coastal states will have to consider reassessing their relationships with adjoining states through current or newly executed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) whether or not they will be willing to accept citizens from another state, which may enhance the spread of COVID-19. Evacuees may reside within the adjoining state for an extended amount of time before returning (or not returning) to their home state, which will significantly increase the need for social services.

Also, adjoining states will need to consider sheltering individuals and maintaining social distancing standards by utilizing facilities such as hotels or university dorm spaces. Such facilities will also need to enforce quarantine/shelter-in-place standards and deliver meals to rooms (rather than meals being available in the style of a banquet). Coastal states and localities should also begin performing evacuation exercise scenarios with adjoining states now—prior to the next event.

Finally, emergency managers need to think about how they communicate with their communities. Specifically, they should work through how they will convince residents to evacuate to a neighboring state, if needed, rather than remaining at risk of a disaster at home.

5 What is the most critical issue within a community if asked to evacuate due to an oncoming natural disaster?

A: Local and state emergency managers will likely have a difficult time convincing residents to evacuate if they have been told to shelter in place due to the pandemic. Residents will be left with the decision to either ride out the oncoming natural disaster or leave the safety of their home and potentially be exposed to COVID-19. With mixed messaging from federal and state governments, residents are often left feeling they cannot trust anyone with such a significant decision. If steps are taken now to develop plans to account for such a scenario, residents can take the time now to prepare and develop their own plan to make a more informed decision.

States should also consider that, once individuals leave the safety of their home, they may ultimately be faced with the decision of whether or not to return to their home state which will ultimately affect the state's tax base.

6 What are the financial risks a locality may be faced with during concurrent disasters (e.g., a pandemic and a natural disaster)?

A: Now that businesses are facing the fact that their employees can and might have to work remotely, they need to rethink their plans for accommodating this change in the long term. This could include shifting their investments in office space and workforce from what they had planned previously to accommodate this new reality.

Facing a loss in tax revenue, localities will need to figure out how to convince residents it is worth the effort to continue to live within the locality. The past few weeks have taught individuals how they can adjust to work outside the office and have forced them to consider whether they will continue residing in a high-risk area or if they should move somewhere that will keep them and their families safer.

To help plan, local jurisdictions should forecast their financial vulnerabilities in the event of another disaster and begin to develop economic strategies that are more resilient. They may consider exploring and investing in public-private partnerships and should look to their state or local economic development or resiliency agency for guidance.

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<https://www.icf.com/insights/covid-19>

7 States and localities are still managing past disasters from prior years. As they assess their current financial situation, what should they be thinking about with regards to these financial issues, especially around grants management?

A: Some Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) applicants have facilities that are currently being repaired and rebuilt, and some of the construction costs are starting to increase as a result of COVID-19. The cost of materials is going up as the availability of materials and labor is going down. These applicants are trying to balance those costs with the pre-determined funding amounts that have been capped. These increases in cost were unforeseen, so local officials are now working with FEMA to address them. Thus, it is critical to document all related additional costs they have incurred and to continue to communicate regularly with their FEMA administrators.

8 How can a locality take advantage of the time we have available during the pandemic to prepare for future disasters?

A: Localities will need to rely on their residents to assist during future and concurrent disasters. There has been an outpouring of support from communities. For this reason, it has been suggested that local emergency management agencies should be promoting things like their Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) programs and should give people the opportunity to be involved with assisting their community during this current disaster. The emergency management discipline is all about timing, and now is the time to increase localities' volunteer cadres. This will help communities become trained and will help them understand how to give back to and serve their communities. Jurisdictions should take this time to look at how they can prepare to become more resilient communities.