



FACTSHEETS | DECEMBER 2021

What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Disaster Preparedness and Response Professionals

When preparing for and responding to disasters, child welfare and disaster preparedness and response (DPR) professionals can work together to help ensure the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families in their communities. This factsheet provides an overview of basic child welfare services, describes how DPR and child welfare professionals can support one another's disaster preparedness efforts, and offers additional resources for more information.

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WHAT IS CHILD WELFARE?

Each State or jurisdiction has a public child welfare agency responsible for receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect and assessing child and family needs. Some States also contract with private agencies to undertake child welfare work. These public and private agencies often work together as partners and collaborate with their local community organizations to help keep children safe. State laws define the child protection roles and processes that govern these agencies. (To find specific State laws, search Child Welfare Information Gateway's [State Statutes database](#).)

Child welfare comprises an array of services designed to ensure that children are safe and families have the necessary supports to care for their children. Child welfare agencies typically support children and families in the following ways:

- Coordinate or support services to prevent child abuse and neglect
- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect and assess child and family needs, strengths, and resources
- Provide services to families that need help protecting and caring for their children
- Arrange for out-of-home care (foster care, kinship care, or other planned permanent living arrangement) when children and youth cannot remain safely at home
- Support the well-being of children living with relatives and foster and adoptive families, including ensuring that children's physical health, mental health, and educational needs are addressed

- Work with children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving out-of-home care

Child welfare agencies do not work alone. They often collaborate with other public and private agencies and community organizations that provide families with the services they need, such as supportive child care, parenting programs, in-home family preservation services, mental and physical health care, financial assistance, and advocacy and treatment for issues related to domestic violence and substance use.

During a disaster, DPR staff may work with child welfare agencies to provide additional support to children and families. It is critical for child welfare and DPR staff to work together in planning for disaster response to ensure the safety of children and families involved with child welfare and others who may need child welfare services. An integrated approach to disaster preparedness can help expedite response activities and facilitate the delivery of necessities and services provided by the partnering agency.

This factsheet provides an introduction to collaboration opportunities for child welfare and DPR professionals. For an indepth look at implementing interagency collaboration between child welfare and DPR systems, see [Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: Leading Your Agency Through a Disaster](#) by the Children's Bureau's Capacity Building Center for States.

HOW CAN DPR PERSONNEL ASSIST CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A DISASTER?

Many community organizations have trained responders to help child welfare providers meet the needs of children, youth, and families before, during, and after a disaster. These include a range of public health, behavioral health, and emergency-management personnel such as nurses, doctors, rescue and recovery responders, crisis counselors, emergency medical technicians, and other community-based staff who are trained as responders or volunteer in preparedness efforts. It is essential for all DPR professionals to be aware of the efforts of child welfare staff to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth receiving child welfare services to support families and mitigate an increased risk for maltreatment. DPR professionals may work with child welfare in the following ways:

- **Planning for disaster response.** DPR professionals can help child welfare agencies develop and refine plans to deal with natural, human-caused, and medical disasters (i.e., an all-hazards approach to disasters). [Federal law P.L. 109-288](#) requires States to create and review their disaster plans for child welfare services yearly as part of their Annual Progress and Services Report process. Child welfare plans generally address the needs of children in out-of-home care and those receiving in-home services, those in privatized systems, families and resource families, and child welfare staff. Plans can cover information

and records, communication, equipment, funding, and management and leadership needs over both the short and long term. DPR professionals can help agencies identify their disaster-planning needs, provide input on disaster plans, and help agencies practice drills and make physical preparations. Working together will ensure that child welfare agency plans coordinate with other applicable community, State, and Federal disaster plans.

- **Supporting child welfare agency work during a disaster.** DPR professionals familiar with local child welfare agency disaster plans will be better positioned to collaboratively implement response activities when disaster strikes. As agencies monitor children, youth, and families to assess the availability of communication infrastructure, safe housing, food, medical care, transportation, and other necessities, DPR professionals can provide necessary disaster-specific information and instruction as well as emergency resources, such as emergency medical intervention, nutrition, shelter, and transportation. They can also help connect agencies to Federal and State disaster funds as they become available.
- **Connecting children and families affected by disaster with child welfare services, as appropriate.** After a disaster, children, youth, and families who have never been involved with child welfare may suddenly require child welfare services. Children and youth may be separated from family, orphaned, abused, neglected, or otherwise injured. DPR professionals can help connect children and youth with child welfare staff and services when appropriate.

- **Identifying and reporting abuse and neglect.** Most DPR professionals are mandated reporters and thus required by State laws (after receiving relevant training) to report suspected abuse and neglect to the appropriate child welfare agency (see [Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect](#) for more information). In a disaster, children and youth may be more susceptible to abuse and neglect, particularly if they have been displaced from their homes. DPR professionals should be vigilant in watching for signs of abuse and neglect in both residential and institutional settings, including shelters. For more information on identifying maltreatment, see [What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms](#).
- **Using combined disaster crisis intervention and trauma-informed approaches.** Experiencing a disaster may be expressed by children and youth as stress or trauma reactions; these vary by the age of the child or youth. They often include behavior changes, such as withdrawal or defiance, aggression, or mood swings. Supporting children and youth can reduce these problems; however, when problems persist, they may result in psychiatric diagnoses, substance use problems, social problems, and school problems.¹ Responses to disasters may be exacerbated if a child, youth, or family is already involved with the child welfare system. Both DPR and child welfare staff

may be interested in Psychological First Aid, which is an evidence-informed model used during the acute phase of disaster response. This model teaches workers how to help survivors reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning. See the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Learning Center's [Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) Online](#) web section for more information.

- **Understanding emergency responses in the aftermath of a disaster.** DPR professionals can advise on and model disaster response activities that will help children, youth, and families cope. Furthermore, providing information to parents and other caregivers on ways to protect children from intense exposure to disasters (e.g., evacuating when necessary, limiting television exposure to graphic and disturbing images, using calming techniques if children are injured or afraid) may help children fare better. Children and youth involved with child welfare may already be at higher risk for stress reactions, so it becomes essential that their caregivers respond appropriately. There is no set timeline for reactions and recovery. In general, after approximately 1 month, if children and youth continue to have serious disaster distress responses, screening and referral by trained behavioral and mental health professionals may be necessary.

¹ For more information, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) web section.

HOW CAN CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS ASSIST DPR PERSONNEL BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A DISASTER?

DPR professionals and other emergency staff need to be aware that child welfare staff can offer unique assistance in helping children, youth, and families affected by disasters. Sharing information and looking at the overlap of responses will help provide appropriate support to families in times of disaster:

- **Providing input on State DPR plans.** The training and inclusion of child welfare staff in disaster preparedness planning, integration with emergency management, public health and behavioral health response activities, and the development of information-sharing processes is crucial for the success of overall State disaster planning. Collaboration can begin with child welfare staff and DPR professionals exchanging information and feedback on existing disaster preparedness efforts.
- **Leveraging child welfare agency disaster plans to meet the needs of children and families.** Child welfare agencies can draw on their disaster plans for communication, management, and resources to track the children and families receiving services and arrange for them to continue receiving services and funds—sometimes in a

predetermined alternative location. The required planning by child welfare agencies across jurisdictions may alleviate similar needs at the disaster site.

- **Building on child welfare agency expertise in child maltreatment to enhance child protection.** Child welfare staff can help monitor shelters or other relocation environments and provide expertise on keeping children safe from child maltreatment.
- **Working across agencies to help families receive services.** Child welfare workers have experience working with professionals in related disciplines, such as housing, substance use, education, health care, and community services to support families. They may be able to direct DPR staff to the right resources when needs are identified.

Working together, DPR and child welfare professionals can plan for disaster response and ensure that children, youth, and families receive appropriate supports in the aftermath of disaster. This collaborative approach also increases the likelihood of resilience and an overall healthy recovery. For more information, see Information Gateway's [*Working With Children, Youth, and Families on Disaster Preparedness*](#).

RESOURCES

- [*Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: Leading Your Agency Through a Disaster*](#) (Capacity Building Center for States)
- [Disaster Preparedness & Response](#) [web section] (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [*A Toolkit for Child Welfare Agencies to Help Young People Heal and Thrive During and After Natural Disasters*](#) (Child Trends)
- [*Disaster Preparedness Resource Guide for Child Welfare Agencies*](#) (Annie E. Casey Foundation)
- [Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) [web section] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Ready Kids!](#) [website] (Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families)
- [Prepare, Respond, Recover](#) [web section] (Public Health Emergency)
- [Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery](#) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

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