THE PUBLIC HOUSING DISASTER READINESS GAP

PHAs must be ready to operate—and residents must be ready to respond—before disaster strikes.

THE PROBLEM

When disaster impacts a PHA community, the housing authority immediately assumes emergency management responsibilities while residents face the same crisis.

Guidance exists, but having a plan on paper does not ensure the organization or households are prepared to execute when it matters most.

1. ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Can the PHA continue to operate?

- **Leadership & Command** – Clear roles, decision authority and succession in an emergency
- **Communications** – Timely, accurate information for residents, staff and partners
- **Continuity of Operations** – Maintain critical housing functions and essential services
- **Staffing & Training** – Trained staff with defined roles and practiced procedures
- **Coordination & Partnerships** – Strong relationships with local EM, first responders, HUD and community partners
- **Resources & Recovery** – Equipment, insurance, funding strategies and recovery processes

2. HOUSEHOLD READINESS

Can residents function until help arrives?

- **Emergency Plan** – Households have a plan and know what to do
- **Evacuation & Reunification** – Know where to go and how to reconnect
- **Information Access** – Know how to receive trusted emergency information
- **Basic Needs** – Prepared for power outages, water, food, medications and supplies
- **Special Needs** – Plans for mobility, medical, language and other access needs
- **Important Documents & Insurance** – Know what they need and have it accessible

THE STAKES

1.6M people live in public housing across 770,000 households[1]

870,000 public housing units nationwide[1]

$18,284 average household income[2]

71% of households include children, elderly or people with disabilities[2]

1 HUD FY2024 Data
2 NAHRO 2024 Profile

THE READINESS GAP

A PHA can have an emergency plan and still have an organization—or households—that are not prepared to execute when disaster occurs.

If either side is unprepared, the consequences come back to the PHA through increased resident needs, displacement, higher costs and a more difficult recovery.

EVIDENCE: WHAT HAS HAPPENED

SANDY – NYCHA
New York, 2012

- 402 NYCHA buildings (35,000+ apartments) damaged
- 80,000 residents lost power, elevators, heat and hot water
- Audit found gaps in command structure, communications, staffing, resident information, training and emergency equipment
- Only 25% of residents reported being "very prepared" before Sandy; 56% had a family evacuation plan[3]

KATRINA – GULF COAST PHAs
Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, 2005

- 80% of New Orleans public housing units damaged
- More than 1 million people displaced across the region
- PHAs faced major challenges obtaining recovery funding; limited insurance and insufficient HUD emergency funds
- Older adults and people with disabilities had difficulty evacuating and finding appropriate shelter[4]

IRMA & MARIA – VIHA
U.S. Virgin Islands, 2017

- Severe damage to public housing; 58% of units at one major development became vacant
- Years of rebuilding required to restore housing
- Demonstrates how disaster can remove affordable housing from service for years and reduce community resilience[5]

THE SOLUTION

PUBLIC HOUSING READINESS CHALLENGE

- Assess leadership readiness with a PHA-specific tool
- Identify gaps and strengthen organizational capability
- Empower residents to create and complete household emergency plans
- Build community resilience before the next disaster

OUR GOAL

Shift from reacting to disasters to building readiness every day—so PHAs can protect their operations and residents can protect their families.

1 HUD, Picture of Subsidized Households, FY2024
2 NAHRO, 2024 National Profile of Public Housing Residents
3 NYC.gov, "NYCHA One Year After Sandy," 2013
4 GAO Reports: GAO-13-80 (Sandy); GAO-06-362, GAO-07-88, GAO-12-92 (Katrina/Rita)
5 HUD, PR22-112 (Virgin Islands Housing Authority, 2022)