

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

POST-DISASTER REUNIFICATION FACT SHEET

Post-Disaster Reunification and K-12 Schools

Schools and Post-Disaster Reunification

Emergencies are always local events—they affect the individuals and area immediately surrounding them. However, sometimes the scope of an emergency event expands to include entire communities and even whole regions. These large-scale disasters and catastrophic incidents (hereafter referred to as “disasters”) range from natural hazards (e.g., hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, mudslides, tornados, winter storms) to human-caused threats (e.g., terrorist attacks). Furthermore, these disasters present unique challenges, such as the opportunity for children to become separated from their parents or legal guardians (hereafter referred to as “family”). Children may be alone or with someone other than their family at the time of the disaster, and can be either unintentionally separated from or abandoned by their families during or after a disaster, exposing them to such dangers as assault, abduction and exploitation. In some cases, children may be the only surviving family members in disasters involving mass casualties.

As guardians of children, K-12 schools and districts may have a significant role to play in reuniting children with their families. This is especially true when a disaster occurs during normal school hours, before-school programs, after-school programs, or summer programs. In some cases, families may be able to reunite with their children immediately following the disaster. In other cases following a disaster, however, it may take a few days or longer to reunite a child with their family because of a variety of factors that may include communication challenges with legal guardians, custodial disputes (e.g., those that require evidence of legal guardianship, which may have been destroyed in the disaster), the inability to track or locate children (e.g., lack of registration process or other human tracking tools), deceased legal guardians, wandering or abduction, and long-distance displacement that results in the transfer of people to out-of-state shelters. The task of reuniting children with their families is important, as the risk of trauma or danger experienced by children increases with the time that they remain separated from their family. For example, children with disabilities and others with access and functional needs, such as those with autism spectrum disorder, may be non-verbal and/or have a tendency to wander from safe environments and sustain personal and life-threatening injuries. Additionally, opportunistic predators may use disasters as a recruitment tool for human trafficking.

The Establishment of National Post-Disaster Reunification Resources

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita displaced tens of thousands of individuals, including more than 5,000 children reported separated from their families in the Gulf Coast region of the United States. In response to the need for assistance from local, regional, and state agencies, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) tasked the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) with locating missing children and reuniting them with their families (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, n.d.). NCMEC’s work included activating a disaster call center, deploying retired law enforcement officers for Team Adam (<http://www.missingkids.org/TeamAdam>) and Project ALERT (<http://www.missingkids.org/ProjectALERT>), and hosting photo-sharing services on their Website. Both Team Adam and Project ALERT are NCMEC programs that employ teams of retired law enforcement professionals to provide on-site technical assistance to law enforcement agencies and families in long-term missing children investigations and serious cases of missing children. The final displaced child was



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reunited with their family six months after the hurricane disaster. Since then, NCMEC has established two resources to facilitate the reunification of families with their children in the case of disasters—the National Emergency Child Locator Center (NECLC) and Unaccompanied Minor Registry (UMR). For more information on these resources, please see the Key Resources section of this fact sheet.

Methods to Address Reunification in Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) and School Emergency Management Planning

Schools may be seen as a community-wide point of contact by families and children affected by a disaster, due to their everyday communication with these stakeholders. Furthermore, schools regularly collect and store family contact information, which may be useful to local, regional, state, and national agencies leading reunification efforts. Therefore, it is important for districts and schools to incorporate post-disaster reunification into their emergency management planning efforts. To accomplish this, schools and districts may wish to:

- Collaborate with local agencies and community partners on how post-disaster reunification will be coordinated and integrated throughout the community. This may include sharing EOPs with local emergency managers and/or first responders; designating liaisons; and conducting joint local emergency planning drills.
- Develop and maintain a school EOP that addresses post-disaster reunification and is integrated with the local community's reunification plan. This may include identifying and listing reunification hotlines and Websites in the Information Collection, Analysis, and Dissemination section of the EOP's Basic Plan. This may also include determining and documenting how schools and districts will coordinate with all of the appropriate agencies, boards, or divisions within their jurisdiction for post-disaster reunification efforts in the Concept of Operations section of the EOP's Basic Plan: <http://rems.ed.gov/K12BasicPlan.aspx>.
- Create a reunification annex. Reunification is a critical function that takes place every school day. Districts and schools can build from these established policies and procedures to plan for reunification under emergency circumstances, as well as collaborate with community partners to ensure integration. Additional information for developing this functional annex can be accessed at <http://rems.ed.gov/K12FamilyRAnnex.aspx>.
- Train stakeholders on post-disaster reunification procedures as well as socialize basic reunification protocols and resources throughout the whole school community. This may include sharing post-disaster reunification resources through Websites, handouts, and posters.
- Promote family preparedness regarding post-disaster reunification. This may include encouraging families to develop a family plan, which identifies a local meeting point, teaches emergency contact numbers to all, and identifies an out-of-state relative or friend for each family member to contact in the event that all communication lines are down.

Key Reunification Resources

Several Federal Websites are available that provide resources to help with reunification planning. These include:



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- **Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach**, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), American Red Cross, and NCMEC. This publication, published jointly by FEMA, HHS, American Red Cross, and NCMEC, with contributions from the U.S. Department of Education and DOJ, provides a comprehensive overview of the coordination processes necessary to reunify children separated from their families in the event of a disaster. Included are the roles of various agencies responsible for the temporary care of children and overseeing reunification efforts at the local, state, and national level, including Tribes, Territories, and nongovernmental and private sector organizations. <https://rems.ed.gov/docs/24post-disaster-reunification-of-children-a-nationwide-approach.pdf>
- **Unaccompanied Minor Registry**, NCMEC. This online platform collects information from the public related to children who have been separated from their families due to a disaster, which NCMEC then uses to expedite the reunification process by providing assistance to local law enforcement and by cross-referencing the information about the child against information provided by families who have contacted NCMEC to report their child missing. The public, including education facilities, may report basic information about unaccompanied minors directly into the tool in the aftermath of a disaster. <https://umr.missingkids.org/>
- **Safe and Well**, American Red Cross. This online platform allows displaced individuals to report their current location, contact information, and well-being, as well as communicate with and provide personalized messages to family members or friends. Additionally, the tool allows family members and friends to search for information on displaced individuals who have voluntarily self-reported their information. This tool is available 24 hours per day. <https://safeandwell.communityos.org/cms/index.php>
- **Tracking and Reunification of Children in Disasters**, National Center for Disaster Medicine & Public Health. This online course is designed for health professionals and provides information on key tasks for tracking and reunifying children in a disaster. This includes the identification of designated individuals and/or agencies for assistance, depending on their role, institution, and state/local contexts. The course is accompanied by a reference card that participants may continue to use after course completion. <https://ncdmp.hhs.edu/KnowledgeLearning/2012-Learning1.htm>
- **Multi-Agency Reunification Services Plan Template**, National Mass Care Strategy. This document provides guidance and sample procedures for multiple agencies within a community to consider as they each develop coordinated Reunification Annexes. This resource was developed in coordination with NCMEC, FEMA, HHS, U.S. Department of Agriculture, American Red Cross, and other state agencies and national organizations. http://www.nationalmasscarestrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Multi-Agency_Reunification_Services_Plan_Template_508_final_v1.pdf

Key Reunification Resources for Presidentially-Declared Disasters

The REMS TA Center Website also provides several resources that can help schools and IHEs with inclusive planning efforts. These include:



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- **National Emergency Child Locator Center (NECLC), NCMEC.** This disaster call center assists local, state and Tribal governments, as well as law enforcement agencies in the location of children under the age of 18, as well as reunification with their families. NECLC is only activated through a request by a state agency during a state-declared disaster or by FEMA from a state, Tribe, or territory during a Presidentially-declared disaster. When activated, the toll-free number (1-877-908-9570) is staffed 24 hours per day.
<http://www.missingkids.com/DisasterResponse>
- **National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System (NEFRLS), FEMA.** This online platform and call center allows displaced individuals to report their current location and well-being, as well as communicate with and provide personalized messages to specified family members or individuals. NEFRLS is only activated in cases of Presidentially-declared disasters and facilitates the reunification of adults over the age of 21. When activated, the toll-free number (1-800-588-9822) is staffed 24 hours per day. <https://www.fema.gov/national-emergency-family-registry-and-locator-system-fact-sheet>

Key Collaboration Resources for Reunification

- **Families as Partners in School Emergency Management (*Helpful Hints Volume 2, Issue 7*), REMS TA Center.** This publication provides considerations for the development of a family reunification annex, identification of reunification sites, and maintenance of emergency information cards and student release forms. It also discusses the importance of involving families in school emergency management planning, provides strategies for forming partnerships with families, and offers information on training families and developing a communication and warning annex that accounts for communicating with families.
http://rems.ed.gov/docs/HH_Vol2Issue7.pdf
- **Developing High-Quality School EOPs: A Collaborative Process, REMS TA Center.** This Webinar focuses on the importance of collaborating with community partners. It covers what roles community partners can play during the EOP development and maintenance process, obstacles that can occur during the collaborative process and methods for mitigating them, and specific examples of successful collaboration with community partners.
<http://rems.ed.gov/DevelopingHQSchooEOPs.aspx>
- **Collaboration: Key to a Successful Partnership (*REMSExpress Volume 4, Issue 1*), REMS TA Center.** This publication provides considerations for initiating collaboration, managing a collaborative team, and strengthening the partnership. This includes identifying potential collaboration members, engaging members appropriate to community and school needs and capabilities, developing a positive interpersonal network, building a strong communications network, developing mutually beneficial working relations and procedures, adapting to changing need and capacity, and sustaining collaboration.
http://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMSX_Vol4Issue1.pdf

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References

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National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.missingkids.org>



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