

# Integrating Access and Functional Needs (AFN) into Hazard Mitigation Planning

## Introduction

Modern hazard mitigation planning increasingly recognizes that resilient communities must address the needs of all residents—including those with access and functional needs (AFN). Historically, individuals with disabilities (i.e. including but not limited to, youth, those economically depressed, pregnant, etc.), chronic health conditions, language barriers, or transportation disadvantages have been underrepresented in emergency planning. As evidenced by the best practices for stakeholder inclusion and further supported by national preparedness frameworks, integrating AFN considerations leads to plans that are more inclusive and effective. By proactively engaging AFN populations and support agencies in every phase, from preparedness through recovery, a hazard mitigation plan can reduce losses, improve evacuation and sheltering outcomes, and build trust between emergency management agencies and the communities they serve.

## 1. Inclusion of AFN and Vulnerable Populations in Planning.

A major component of effective mitigation planning is a “whole community” approach. Incorporating AFN voices into the planning process is crucial because these stakeholders offer real-world insights into the challenges they face during emergencies. Key steps to this process include, but are not limited to:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Ensure that representatives from disability advocacy groups, community-based organizations, and service providers (such as local health departments and transportation agencies) are engaged early in the planning process. Their firsthand experiences help identify practical barriers that might otherwise be overlooked.
- **Public Participation:** Incorporating public stakeholders through meetings, surveys, and other outreach to capture the diverse needs of AFN populations. This input is vital to overcoming historical marginalization and ensuring that mitigation actions are relevant and equitable to the entire population.
- **On-Going Interagency Collaboration:** Develop a hazard mitigation planning advisory committee and interagency working groups that include AFN stakeholders. These groups can guide both the planning process and the review of existing plans, ensuring that AFN issues are fully integrated from the outset.

## Integrating AFN into the Overall Hazard Mitigation Plan

Integrating AFN considerations is not a stand-alone task; it must be interlaced throughout the entire hazard mitigation planning process. This includes:

- **Risk Assessments:** Incorporate AFN data into all risk assessments to ensure that the specific vulnerabilities of these populations are reflected in hazard maps and vulnerability index data.
- **Mitigation Strategy Development:** Ensure that every mitigation action is examined for its impact on AFN populations. For example, when planning for flood control or wildfire prevention projects, review how these projects can be improved to meet the needs of people with access and functional needs.
- **Plan Review and Update:** Ensure planning processes include regular AFN review and updates. Includes but not limited to:

- Surveys of community needs
- Consultations with AFN advisory groups
- Integration of new technological or infrastructural solutions
- **Funding and Resource Allocation:** Clearly identify funding streams and resource commitments for AFN-specific projects. This could involve targeted grants from federal programs (e.g., Hazard Mitigation Assistance), state funding dedicated to accessible infrastructure improvements, and local resources such as the Productivity Investment Fund that can be accessed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of County operations.

## 2. Assessment of AFN Needs

Understanding the specific needs of AFN populations requires both quantitative and qualitative approaches:

- **Data Collection and Risk Assessment:** Use existing resources, community surveys, outreach and risk assessments to help identify the number and types of individuals with AFN at the local community level. Evaluate the regional geographic distribution, vulnerabilities, and specific requirements before and after emergencies.
- **Frameworks for Analysis:** Adopt structured methodologies such as C-MIST (Communication, Maintaining Health, Independence, Support, Safety, and Transportation) to assess/ document AFN requirements.



- **C-MIST Explanation**
  - **Communication:** Individuals with hearing, vision, cognitive, or speech limitations may require alternative communication methods to receive or express information during emergencies.
  - **Medical / Health Needs:** People with complex medical conditions rely on medications, medical equipment, or specialized care to maintain their health and prevent complications.
  - **Independence:** Those who use mobility devices, assistive technology, or service animals need uninterrupted access to maintain their independence and daily functions.

- **Supervision & Safety:** Some individuals require continuous support for safety, comfort, or emotional well-being, including those with memory issues, psychiatric conditions, or intellectual disabilities.
- **Transportation:** Individuals without personal transportation or with mobility limitations need accessible and reliable options, especially in emergencies and evacuations.

**Integrating Vulnerability Assessments:** Leverage tools from local climate vulnerability assessments and hazard mitigation plan reviews to identify areas where AFN populations overlap with high-risk zones (e.g., flood plains, wildfire-prone areas). This integration helps prioritize mitigation actions in regions where vulnerable populations are most exposed.

### 3. Development of AFN–Evacuation and Sheltering Operations

Effective evacuation and sheltering plans must recognize that AFN populations may have unique challenges. Once the challenges are clearly defined, mitigation actions must be tailored to address those gaps. Key actions include:

- **Tailored Mitigation Measures:** Develop projects and policies that specifically reduce risk for AFN populations. For example, upgrading infrastructure to ensure accessible transportation networks, reinforcing public buildings to meet ADA standards, or retrofitting existing community shelters with features such as wheelchair ramps, wide doorways, and accessible restrooms.
- **Evacuation and Sheltering Protocols:** Incorporate AFN-specific protocols into evacuation plans. This might involve dedicated transportation resources, pre-identified accessible shelters, and clear communication strategies designed to overcome language or sensory barriers.
- **AFN Shelter Operations considerations:** Sheltering operations designed to be fully inclusive and have trained staffing to accommodate diverse needs. According to the ADA toolkit for shelter operations, shelters should:
  - Ensure that entrances, exits, and pathways are fully accessible.
  - Provide assistive listening systems, visual communication aids, and other technology to facilitate communication.
  - Be able to support wide range of electricity-dependent equipment such as refrigerators for medications, outlets for medical equipment, etc.
  - Designate areas for individuals who require additional support—including spaces for service animals and areas equipped for medical needs.
  - Train shelter staff on how to assist individuals with diverse access and functional needs.

By embedding these guidelines into the hazard mitigation plan, operational area communities can ensure that shelters and shelter operations are prepared to serve all residents equitably during any emergency.

- **Policy and Funding Considerations:** Align mitigation actions with local, state, and federal policies—such as those in the Local Mitigation Planning Policy Guide—to secure funding and support. Including AFN-specific language in plan objectives can also help meet legal requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other civil rights mandates.

#### 4. Coordination with AFN Support Agencies

Effective mitigation planning requires robust coordination with both governmental and nongovernmental agencies that serve AFN populations. Best practices include:

- **Formal Partnerships:** Establish relationships and partnerships with agencies such as public health departments, social services, transportation authorities, community-based organizations, and disability advocacy organizations. These partnerships ensure that there is clear, ongoing communication and that roles and responsibilities are delineated before, during, and after disasters.
- **Joint Training and Exercises:** Conduct regular joint meetings, and exercises that include AFN components and identify additional resources to support the needs of the AFN community. These actions will help prepare all stakeholders to work together during a crisis and help identify gaps in current plans.
- **Outreach and Information Dissemination:** Ensure that all information, both pre-incident preparedness messages, response measures and post-incident recovery plans are accessible to all audiences. This includes using multiple languages, various communication formats (e.g., large-print, audio, sign-language, and digital formats), and culturally appropriate messaging to reach all segments of the community.

#### Conclusion

A hazard mitigation plan builds a foundation for a resilient, inclusive community. By ensuring that AFN and other vulnerable populations are included in every phase of planning, from initial stakeholder engagement to the development of tailored mitigation actions and coordinated response strategies, communities can minimize disaster impacts and foster long-term resilience. Drawing on best practices from national frameworks and local planning guides, and by implementing ADA-compliant shelter operations, emergency managers can create a plan that truly serves every member of the community. This inclusive approach not only saves lives and property during disasters but also strengthens community trust and the overall effectiveness of emergency management efforts.