

# School's Not in Session: What Do Families Do When Disaster Strikes?

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**A**s a former elementary school teacher and the current emergency manager for a moderately-sized school district in southern California, I know one essential thing. Nothing is more crucial to most people than the welfare and protection of children.

In 1994, a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck Northridge, California, at 4:30 a.m. This earthquake resulted in the collapse of a major bridge connecting Antelope Valley via Highway 14 with the rest of Los Angeles County, which lies to the south. Other less traveled roads between Antelope Valley and Los Angeles also were damaged, effectively cutting off access to greater metropolitan Los Angeles, where many parents work. Fortunately, the earthquake struck before most parents had left their homes for work. But what if that same earthquake had struck during the winter break or later in the day when parents were at work, resulting in their children having been at home alone?

## Identifying Gaps in Services to Children During and Following a Disaster

The Antelope Valley Children in Disasters Task Force (AV CID Task Force) was established to identify the gaps in services to children during and following a catastrophic disaster. Should a disaster, such as a large-magnitude earthquake, occur during the school day, schools are prepared to care for the children in their charge. What about disasters that occur after school closes for the day or when it is not in session for

holidays? What are the children to do when disaster strikes, if they were left home alone because the expense of childcare is more than the family can afford?

This issue was the most pressing concern identified by the AV CID Task Force. The task force consists of representatives from local city governments; first responder agencies; public, private, and charter school districts; community and child-serving organizations; county public health, mental health, and family services; faith-based organizations; nonprofit organizations; and concerned citizens. Local faith-based organizations quickly stepped up to lead the charge in caring for displaced, unaccompanied children through the AV CID Safe Havens Project.

## Actions That Must Occur Before AV CID Safe Havens Project Could Proceed

The task force promptly recognized several actions that must occur before this ambitious project could proceed:

- Identify organizations willing to serve as Safe Havens to children following a disaster.
- Identify the most crucial times of the day and year when Safe Havens may be needed.
- Create screening procedures, training requirements, an operations manual, and parent-child reunification protocols for volunteers serving at Safe Havens.
- Include Safe Havens locations on the cities' critical inspection lists to ensure the safety of all occupants.
- Provide mechanisms for communication between Safe

Havens and city governments to create a conduit for information and resources.

- Develop and disseminate educational material for families through schools identifying the nearest Safe Havens to their homes, conveying crucial information for expedited reunification, and providing suggestions for teaching children to get to Safe Havens.

- Develop protocols for parents and caregivers to follow if local communication systems are overloaded or inoperable.

- Ensuring first responders are aware of Safe Havens locations and that children may be making their way to these locations following a disaster while facilitating the safety and delivery of unaccompanied minors.

- Providing material support to Safe Havens through donations, including the determination of current on-site storage capacity and the potential need to support children in the surrounding neighborhood.

## Task Force Still Addressing Concerns

Great strides have been made in completing these actions. However, the task force is still working through many concerns and issues that may arise during an emergency and must be addressed:

- How do Safe Havens help young adults (ages 18-21) seeking assistance for their children?
- Since children can be very attached to their pets, how do Safe Havens accommodate children arriving with pets?

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- What happens if an identified Safe Haven is not operational due to damage?
- How do Safe Havens communicate with each other and other agencies and organizations to provide support if landline and cell phone systems are inoperable?
- How do Safe Havens cope with extended operations and provide hygiene services to children in care for greater than 48 hours?

■ What should Safe Havens do for children who are not reunified with family after 72 hours following a disaster?

- What agencies or organizations should they communicate with to connect to services for extended assistance?
- Are there insurance considerations for organizations that wish to become Safe Havens?
- Does the task force need to create its own nonprofit status to support the material needs of Safe Havens?
- Which entity will maintain the list of Safe Havens and ensure that

these locations remain ready to receive children following a disaster?

### Conclusion

The fact of the matter is that every community has children home alone from time to time. If a major emergency occurs while these children are alone, what are they to do if their families cannot reach them? That is the heart of the problem we are trying to solve BEFORE the disaster strikes.

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## IAEM-USA Signs On to EM Coalition Letters to Leaders of Congressional Appropriations Committees

■ **IAEM-USA Signed On to 3DEP Coalition Letters Signed by 52 Organizations Supportive of USGS 3DEP funding in FY 2021** (24 Apr 2020) The letters were sent today to the [House](#) and [Senate](#) Appropriations Committees. The requests state: "As you develop FY 2021 appropriations, we ask for your support for the USGS recommendation to provide \$146 million to 3DEP, as requested by John Palatiello, on behalf of the 3DEP Coalition, in his testimony before the Subcommittee on February 6, 2020."

■ **IAEM-USA Signed on to Flood Map Coalition Letter to Senate and House Appropriations Leaders** (23 Apr 2020) IAEM-USA signed on to the [Flood Map Coalition letter](#) sent Apr. 23 to Senate and House Appropriations Committee leaders, strongly

supporting at least maintaining FY 2020 appropriated levels (\$262.5 million) for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Flood Hazard and Risk Analysis Program. The coalition, which represents a diverse group of partners, stakeholders and interests, noted in the letter that "Appropriations as close as possible to the full authorization level of \$400 million would help move the nation to better coverage with up-to-date flood maps more quickly." The reasons for the coalition's request include: Flooding is responsible for more loss of life and property than any other natural disaster in the United States; current and accurate flood mapping is the key to minimizing future losses; both taxpayers and policyholders benefit from flood mapping; flood mapping is a cost-effective taxpayer investment; and mapping

also reduces National Flood Insurance Program borrowing from the Treasury.

■ **IAEM-USA Joined 10 Other Stakeholders in Requesting Delay of Implementation on New Grant Requirements for One Year** (06 Apr 2020) On Apr. 3, IAEM and 10 other organizations sent a letter to DHS and FEMA requesting a one-year delay on recently-issued, new guidance for FY 2020 preparedness grants. The new guidance would require grantees to obligate 20% of grant funds to comply with core DHS priorities. IAEM does not oppose the new guidance, but feels the COVID 19 response is creating unprecedented challenges that make an implementation delay prudent. [Download the letter to acting DHS secretary and FEMA administrator here.](#) ▲

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