



READYWHEN.ORG STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

FACTSHEET: DISASTERS ARE OUTPACING RESPONSE CAPACITY

Since 2011, America has experienced major disasters at rates far exceeding the historical norms on which our current response systems were built. The last five years saw disasters more than double the historical baseline—while FEMA operates with a consistent staffing shortage and 73% of emergency responders report burnout. This fact sheet reveals the gap between escalating disaster frequency and our collapsing response infrastructure, from resource allocation failures, lengthening response times, and firsthand accounts from national emergency coordinators who warn “we don’t have people to send.” We urgently need to find a better way to protect the 95% of American communities left at risk by the current system.

DISASTER FREQUENCY AND SCALE ARE ACCELERATING

2024 witnessed unprecedented disaster intensity. The U.S. experienced a Major Disaster declaration on average every 4 days—90 declarations compared to the 30-year average of 55 per year.¹ For almost three quarters of the year (267 out of 366 days), at least one Major Disaster was active somewhere in the country.²

Economic damages reached \$182 billion in 2024 alone, forcing over four million Americans from their homes.³ Twenty-seven billion-dollar disasters struck the U.S. in 2024, the second-highest number since records began in 1980.⁴

Exposure is near-universal. Over 95% of Americans live in counties that experienced a major disaster declaration in the last 15 years.⁵ In 2024, approximately 41% of the U.S. population (137 million people) lived under a Major Disaster or Emergency Declaration at some point during the year.⁶

¹ IIED [FEMA Disasters Factsheet](#), March 2025

² IIED [FEMA Disasters Factsheet](#), March 2025

³ National Census Bureau, “[Table 1. Displacement From Home Because of Natural Disaster, by Select Characteristics](#)”

⁴ NOAA Climate.gov, “[2024: An active year of U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters](#),” 10 January 2025

⁵ Rebuild by Design, “[Atlas of Disaster](#)”

⁶ IIED [FEMA Disasters Factsheet](#), March 2025

FEDERAL AND LOCAL RESPONSE SYSTEMS ARE OVERWHELMED

FEMA faces a critical staffing crisis. As of 2022, FEMA had a 35% staffing gap—approximately 6,200 positions short of its 17,670 staffing goal. Officials attribute gaps to COVID-19 responsibilities, rising disaster activity, increased burnout, and employee attrition.⁷

Emergency services are experiencing unprecedented burnout. About three-quarters of EMS providers nationwide report experiencing burnout or compassion fatigue, with 37% planning to leave the field within 5 years.⁸ The relentless pace of disasters has eliminated recovery time for responders. Cal Fire Battalion Chief David Acuna observes, “It used to be that the large incidents were so infrequent that you’d get to go home for a week.” Now, firefighters work 14-21 day rotations with little time between deployments before being sent to the next fire.⁹

Emergency management capacity is stretched thin with limited staffing, burnout, and growing demand. State and local response teams often lack bandwidth for community-scale preparedness or long-term recovery planning.¹⁰

RESOURCE ALLOCATION SYSTEMS ARE FAILING

“Compound extremes” strain resources across state lines. Multiple simultaneous disasters create unprecedented demand on mutual aid systems.¹¹ Recent examples include simultaneous megafires across western states and back-to-back Atlantic hurricanes creating high demand on shared emergency response resources.

The national resource allocation system is at breaking point. Sean Peterson, manager of the National Interagency Coordination Center, which coordinates firefighting resources nationwide, explains: “we don’t have people to send. It’s a balancing act, it can be a chess game... No large fire is going to get every resource they ask for right now. We are almost fully committed with our resources.” On a single morning, Peterson’s center received 800 resource requests from fire-affected areas.¹²

Cross-state firefighting deployments demonstrate the strain. California’s 2024 fire response required mutual aid from Oregon (75 engines), Washington (45 engines), Utah (10

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “[FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps](#),” GAO-23-105663, 2023

⁸ New York Senate, “[New York data supports sounding the alarm on the EMS workforce crisis](#),” 6 February 2025

⁹ Cart, Julie, “[California battles onslaught of wildfires with help from other states](#),” *Oregon Capital Chronicle*, 15 August 2024

¹⁰ Powell JR, et al, “[National Evaluation of Emergency Medical Services Clinician Burnout and Workforce-Reducing Factors](#),” *J Am Coll Emerg Physicians Open*, 2025 Jan 10;6(1)

¹¹ NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), [U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters \(2025\)](#)

¹² Cart, Julie, 15 August 2024

engines), Idaho (25 engines), and New Mexico (5 engines).¹³ When Oregon faced its own wildfires during peak California fire season, both states competed for the same limited national firefighting resources.

BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS GAPS

Most businesses lack disaster continuity plans. **An estimated sixty-five percent of businesses fail within two years of a disaster.**¹⁴ For arts organizations, these failures represent a double loss to communities—not just tangible assets, but the irreplaceable social capital and cultural identity that arts institutions provide.¹⁵ 89% of residents say arts events inspire "a sense of pride in the neighborhood or community"—an intangible community asset that cannot be easily rebuilt.¹⁶

The economic multiplier compounds the devastating effect of these losses. Arts organizations generate significant economic activity beyond their operating budgets: nationally, every dollar spent by arts organizations leverages an additional \$1.07 in community spending by audiences.¹⁷ When a \$1.5 million regional theater closes, a community can lose nearly \$6 million in annual economic impact.¹⁸

FEMA's evolving role pushes more responsibility to local systems. Federal strategy now emphasizes "localized resilience," requiring states, municipalities, and communities to shoulder greater response and recovery functions. And investment in local preparedness delivers exceptional returns: every dollar invested in preparedness saves an average of \$13 in disaster response and recovery costs.¹⁹

Local capacity fills known limitations in federal response. Even historically, disaster response has followed the principle that it is "locally executed, state/territory managed and federally supported." Communities are responsible for organizing and executing recovery within their communities, especially given that local governments often face capacity constraints during disasters.²⁰ A prepared local workforce with disaster-ready facilities can provide immediate response during the critical hours before federal coordination structures are fully established.

¹³ CalOES (California Office of Emergency Services), "[More than 7,500 firefighting, emergency personnel deployed](#)," 8 January 2025

¹⁴ Congressional Research Service, "[Federal Disaster Assistance for Businesses: Summaries and Policy Options](#)," 17 July 2023

¹⁵ Center for Disaster Philanthropy, "[Arts & Culture](#)," March 12, 2022

¹⁶ Americans for the Arts, "[Arts & Economic Prosperity](#)," October 12, 2023

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Inside Philanthropy, "[As Revenues Evaporate, Arts Institutions Adapt Their Fundraising to Survive](#)"

¹⁹ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "[Being Prepared for the Next Disaster Pays Off](#)"

²⁰ FEMA, "[National Disaster Recovery Framework, Third Edition](#)" Amended 10 December 2024

ABOUT READYWHEN.ORG

This factsheet is brought to you by [#ReadyWhen](#), a validated model for disaster planning that harnesses the skills of mass gatherings experts to strengthen community readiness. Launched in September 2025 by [Majestic Collaborations](#) in collaboration with arts & emergency management partners, the online campaign draws from nine years of pioneering work in the sector to mobilize arts venues, cultural organizations, and gathering spaces as recognized vital assets in community disaster preparedness & response.

Visit readywhen.org for assessment tools, factsheets, and resources to explore how your venue, agency, or organization can leverage untapped local capacity to strengthen emergency readiness.