

# Coordinating Housing Programs and Services and Enhancing Outreach

## Initiative Summary Statement:

Provide a streamlined, coordinated entry point to the housing recovery process for disaster impacted households and individuals, as well as those experiencing personal hardship, unexpected crises, through a unified outreach mission.

## Initiative Description:

**Objective:** Provide a centralized process for residents to access information, services, programs, and resource referrals and for organizations to coordinate provision of such services for unmet housing needs following a natural or personal disaster. Developers and landlords should also be included in the system, so their resources and needs are considered. This Initiative champions increasing consistent communication, with consideration to whole community accessibility, to support regional housing resilience and promote purposeful administration of other Initiatives, as well as existing programs and wrap around services within the housing sector.

Using simple, plain language to describe community plans (i.e., plans about land development and housing standards) eases the burden of understanding for readers/listeners from different backgrounds with diverse knowledge bases. Excluding technical terminology and including digestible descriptions and/or visuals improves a common understanding of the community vision. Communications should be accessible to all populations in their native language and remain consistent and timely with coordinated messaging and strategic updates on a given topic to increase community visibility on existing development plans.

Communicating through various media and methods will also increase accessibility to information. Community members have individual preferences about how they receive and provide information (e.g., through printed text, news outlets, social media, websites, word of mouth from a trusted source, and/or in-person engagement events) based on feasibility, accessibility, and personal choice. Messaging should also include community data, visuals, and interactive tools that enhance specific topic areas by supplementing written text and spoken words. Increasing the methods of information distribution helps to ensure that more individuals will be able to receive the message so overall increases community knowledge and ability to access housing services.

**Need:** The amount of housing damage, total destruction, and associated costs caused by a disaster like Hurricane Ian can destabilize and traumatize individuals, households, and the community as a whole. The financial challenge of rebuilding or otherwise securing housing post-disaster is typically most extreme for individuals and communities who were struggling financially pre-disaster.<sup>17</sup> Many households experiencing housing insecurity often have a variety of needs; they face the burden of navigating a bureaucracy of housing programs and/or do not know how to navigate the information or resources.

Outreach and communication are needed to build and socialize community support and develop interest in solutions that increase housing availability and attainability, amid the ongoing housing crisis. The County housing sector challenges existed before Hurricane Ian made landfall in Southwest Florida; storm impacts compounded already low housing availability throughout the region prompting the need to explore creative solutions that also increase resilience to hazard events. According to the Lee County CDBG-DR Action Plan, over 39,000 households in the County paid more than 50 percent of their household income towards housing before Hurricane Ian, and there is now an extreme deficit in rental properties ultimately contributing to increased competition for the limited resources and regional reduced housing attainability. Additionally, some community members raise objections about perceived negative impacts related to new workforce housing developments. Communication and outreach are needed to promote a shared understanding of community benefits from attainable housing development and reduce opposition that can disrupt progress.

On top of a tight pre-storm housing market, Hurricane Ian caused catastrophic levels of damage to residential property. The *CDBG-DR 2023 Action Plan Unmet Needs Assessment* estimates the unmet housing need to be \$4,598,352,445, including that almost 80 percent of owner-occupied units and about 20 percent of renter-occupied units suffered major-high or severe damage from Ian. The region now faces the prospect of building back what was destroyed and considering how to do so in a way that also addresses the underlying, pre-storm challenges. Many are overwhelmed by the complex process and the variety of options or may be unaware of programs for which they are eligible. Many are in need of

---

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Ratcliff, et al., *Insult to Injury – Natural Disasters and Residents’ Financial Health*, The Urban Institute, 2019. Accessed: [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100079/insult\\_to\\_injury\\_natural\\_disasters\\_1.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100079/insult_to_injury_natural_disasters_1.pdf)

assistance to manage this decentralized network, while some do not even know how to begin. This can impose further hardship if there is a language barrier or other vulnerabilities, like access and functional needs. A coordinated housing recovery process with a unified service program would mitigate and simplify some of this complexity.

**Regional Approach:** The approach to addressing housing challenges requires coordination among regional stakeholders to develop common language, resources, and building support for housing outreach strategies. A regional housing communications strategy is one tool that would support consistent messaging. Stakeholders should consider providing information in multiple formats that are accessible in terms of literacy, technological capabilities, and access and functional needs to the end user. Encouraging positive language aligned with proposed developments and policies is a key tactic used to transform notions and remove a barrier to building new housing. Engaging community voices should garner enhanced support for solutions that will meaningfully increase housing options throughout the region such as increased density within existing land use development regulations while maintaining neighborhood character, reduction of vehicle use, encouraging walkable neighborhoods and the development of near-by services. While unrealistic to imagine unanimous support for every development proposal, providing accessible information and addressing community concerns through the recovery process can increase acceptance and support timely rebuilding. Working with news outlets and trusted non-profit organizations providing social services within the region to reach historically underserved populations is another tactic for effective regional communication.

Collaboration on a housing delivery model is another critical solution to address the regional challenge that many housing experts do not know all the other programs that exist beyond their own and often struggle to provide comprehensive guidance to individuals seeking assistance. Collaboratory is currently in process of developing an integrated model that organizes a regional communications strategy promoting consistent services, information, outreach, and access, including vulnerable populations, as well as coordination and information sharing between service providers and across facilities for housing. The Hurricane Ian Housing Connection Services Program will enable residents in need to be connected to the right agencies and organizations considering the clients' housing need, location, and financial situation.

**Impact:** The anticipated outcome of implementing a coordinated housing services and communications program is to grow community support for rebuilding efforts and improve access to information and resources for those seeking housing recovery assistance. Community support for housing development, fostered through effective and accessible communication, leverages feedback and an understanding of project goals to

reduce opposition and prioritize projects that are desirable and vital to increasing resilience. Faster and ultimately successful development approval processes reduce risk for the private sector, result in more housing units, and are a critical component of ensuring the County can rebuild in a way that lessens systemic challenges. Ensuring public education and community outreach are accessible to all is a critical step to gaining community support for new residential developments and housing placements for those who need them. Educational efforts such as “Citizen Planning Academies” for interested residents can expand understanding of planning goals and objectives and the land use process.

The goal of an expedited, successful long-term regional housing recovery will be enhanced when those in need can access a simplified, coordinated, entry system for recovery information, services, programs, and resource referrals. Getting precise, coordinated assistance based on specific household needs will expedite the recovery process, saving individual residents time, money, and mental health. The collaboration between all the housing programs and wrap around services into one system will make the identification of gaps in the network easier for the partners and will also act as a vehicle to promote capabilities and capacities that already exist. Together, regional stakeholders can coordinate funding applications as needed. Through a collaborative effort by government, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector, residents can navigate the housing recovery process in an efficient and effective manner, with professionals and trained volunteers to assist them. Secure, safe, and resilient housing will in turn stabilize and revitalize the local economy.

### **Key Considerations:**

- Leverage regional vulnerability and demographic data to inform communication methodologies and approach to increase the accessibility of information to all residents. Identify vulnerable communities within the region that require additional communication outreach.
- Continue to incorporate warnings about contractor fraud and protection strategies into public messaging.
- Develop and integrate positive messaging that emphasizes the opportunities for improved livability, rather than focusing solely on changes to existing communities. Phrases such as “live where you work” promote positive outcomes from housing and reduce pre-existing prejudice about new developments.
- Engage in meaningful conversations with the public to improve overall understanding of community development plans from all parties and increase trust, encouraging resolution.

- Promote stories of community members benefitting from new developments promotes positive public reception and can increase support from residents who were not previously engaged in housing issues. Intentionally selecting and relating stories back to community values can create a common identity amongst incoming and existing residents.
- Take action to resolve legitimate opposition and constructive criticism; implementing residents' suggestions may not only combat community member hesitation, but also improve livability for residents of new housing developments.
- Include trusted community partners in engagement events and planning discussions as a strategy to connect with and solicit input from the whole community. Local faith-based and non-profit organizations often have large networks and are well regarded; they can help government and the real estate sector understand the community stance on specific projects, facilitate problem-solving, and assist in messaging efforts.
- Develop public-facing outreach tools, including maps and other graphics, to develop a common understanding of redevelopment.
- Provide elected officials with a policy foundation, including identified tools that can be used to improve developments within their jurisdictions, to help officials advocate for a regional housing strategy.
- Coordinate with 211 to provide information about and connect individuals impacted by a disaster to available programs and resources available to assist with immediate relief and recovery through phone service centers.
- Provide education materials about licensed and unlicensed contractor fraud.
- If needed, survey community to best address needs and identify local service providers, which may want to include:
  - Legal Services
  - Construction Services
  - Financial Services
  - Community Services
  - Goods and Services
  - Design Services
  - Coordination and Counseling Services

## Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Housing, Cultural Resources, Planning & Capacity, Infrastructure, and Health & Social Services

## Stakeholders:

- Housing Authorities
- County departmental experts in housing, planning, and communications.
- Municipal departmental experts in housing, planning, and communications.
- Non-profit and faith-based organizations
- Local media outlets
- Neighborhood organizations
- State and Local Housing Coalitions
- Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs)

## Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
- United States Department of Veterans Affairs
- United States Department of Agriculture
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Small Business Administration
- Florida Housing Finance Corporation
- Florida Department of Commerce