

Establishing a Community Resilience Hubs Network

Initiative Summary Statement:

Coordinate a network of community Resilience Hubs – everyday community resource centers that can transition to provide sub-clinical, emergency assistance following a disaster - leveraging existing support centers across the region. As community needs are further understood the County can explore different solutions, widening the network to potentially include a broader range of community-based sites as Hubs, including health, social service, and/or cultural resource centers.

Initiative Description:

Objective: Coordinate a network of voluntary Countywide community resource centers who want to pro-actively plan to be a Resilience Hub if needed in future events. Resilience Hubs are locations that provide supplies and/or social services that residents need every day, and these spaces can transition in a disaster to provide critical information, emergency support, and health sustaining supplies to the surrounding communities. Hubs can function as an additional location within the “Points of Distribution” or “POD” system wherein emergency management agencies establish centralized locations where following a disaster or emergency, the public picks up life sustaining commodities such as shelf-stable food, bottled water, ice and tarps. Hubs can function as spaces to house and provide services as well as hosting peer support via community gatherings and engagement that sustain a sense of community strength amid disruption.

This Initiative proposes establishing Resilience Hubs across the Lee County area that would provide sub-clinical emergency assistance and become a part of the Public Safety response and recovery continuum of service.

Some key design requirements for Resilience Hub spaces but not limited to include the following:

- Located near and easily accessible to populations most needing support in times of disaster;
- Operated by organizations that are known and trusted by the surrounding community and key emergency management stakeholders;
- Housed in a facility that is resilient to disaster and has appropriate mitigation features, including flood protection, resilient power, and wind-resistant roofing;

- Able to house critical supplies that support residents' life safety and wellbeing needs such as food, water, ice, charging stations, first aid supplies including some over-the-counter medicine, flashlights, and other community-identified aides; and
- Able to establish resilient communications to ensure residents can receive up to date information on disaster response and recovery issues and community condition.

A network of Resilience Hubs also has the potential to play a supportive role in connecting community members to services developed or proposed in other Initiatives. For example, Resilience Hubs can work in tandem with a mobile health network, helping connect residents in need with a unit that can provide services. For this objective, Hub operators would need strong working relationships with emergency managers and the ability to communicate and provide support to a mobile health response function (e.g., space to park the mobile health vehicle, electricity hook-up).

Need: Hurricane Ian disrupted communications, critical private sector services (e.g., closed grocery stores), and left many residents without easy access to everyday necessities such as food, water, and power. Residents who can independently bridge the gap between the initial aftermath of a disaster and the first 1-2 weeks of recovery can often avoid using and therefore placing additional demand on emergency services that are needed by those already in crisis.

Not every disaster calls for evacuation, and not every resident has the capacity to leave their home. Resilience Hubs would help those residents remain safe in their neighborhoods as essential services are restored. Similarly, Resilience Hubs are a locally managed resource that can become an even more critical component of emergency management in situations where the disaster is localized, so there is limited or no state and federal support.

In situations where an emergency event is so severe that federal support is provided, FEMA may establish Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs), which are accessible facilities and mobile offices residents can visit to learn more about FEMA and other disaster assistance programs. Resilience Hubs are not meant to fully replace services traditionally located within DRCs (or other points of service such as PODs or private sector and nonprofit service providers), some duplication is intended to provide redundancy. Duplication of services and supplies is on a limited scale, and customized to the community to make them more accessible and improve overall resilience. FEMA also offers support scaled to the mission, including Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) crews who canvas neighborhoods to assist residents with registering for aid. While DRCs are larger and more centralized, DSA teams could be deployed to hubs to fill a vital need.

Regional Approach: A County Resilience Hub network would identify existing community sites that meet facility/utility requirements, have the trust of their neighborhood, and agree to participate. In keeping with best practices, criteria for and selection of these sites would be based on feasibility and a community engagement effort to identify key needs of residents.

The Lee County area has several assets that could be further developed to initiate a Resilience Hubs pilot project. Currently, United Way of Lee, Hendry, and Glades Counties (United Way) offers United Way Houses, which act as centralized locations for social services in known marginalized or underserved communities. In the County, these include Pine Manor, Harlem Heights, North Fort Myers, Lehigh, Charleston Park, Pine Island, North Fort Myers, South Fort Myers, Tice, Sanibel, Bonita Springs, San Carlos Park and Dunbar, among others. Each of the 18 Lee County United Way House locations offers social services provided by various partner agencies, based on the needs of that particular community.

Additionally, the United Way Houses already offer services such as emergency food; education programming like after-school tutoring, English as a second language, or GED classes; counseling services for domestic violence or mental health needs; financial literacy; case management; health and wellness services such as mobile clinics and health screening events; and access to programs like SNAP and direct assistance. If the needs of a family or individual are greater than what is initially provided at the United Way Houses, the locations also act as a connector to the United Way 211 information and referral hotline, so that those in need can be linked to the hundreds of available community resources in its database. Over 420,000 services were provided throughout the network of United Way Houses in 2022.

Lee County has a pre-existing relationship with United Way and the United Way Houses that could be further developed to support operations and strategic awareness needed to establish and maintain Resilience Hubs.

A successful Resilience Hub network would depend on a deep connection to the Lee County Emergency Operations Center and municipal emergency management agencies to facilitate regular planning, coordination, and connectivity before, during, and after a disaster.

Emergency management can also help:

- Evaluate and understand whether new mitigation features could be prioritized for these or other emerging Resilience Hub sites;

- Leverage the sites to promote the personal preparedness of nearby residents, integrating programming efforts conducted by Lee County Public Safety and/or municipal emergency management agencies; and
- Use the sites to inform situational awareness of community conditions in the Emergency Operations Center.

After the pilot program, lessons learned, and community feedback could support a second phase including identifying other community sites that could serve as Resilience Hubs. Key potential sites include current social service providers and service-related non-profit buildings, cultural spaces, and community healthcare providers. Additionally, a key goal would be to ensure that all jurisdictions have appropriately placed Resilience Hubs in their areas. Achieving this may require additional planning and a cooperative needs assessment.

Impact: The desired result is a network of Resilience Hubs that allow residents to be sustained in the period after a disaster, bridging the gap between immediate response and the beginning of recovery. Because the Hub site is known and managed by a trusted community partner, residents will have familiarity with the Hub and be more inclined to use it. Emergency services use could be lessened, avoiding calls that could be better handled through the administration of first aid, provision of basic supplies or provision of services like charging stations, or through referrals and reiteration of key emergency messaging from trusted sources. Additionally, vulnerable populations – such as seniors and those with chronic conditions – might gain the help they need to avoid unnecessary displacement in the recovery period.

By coordinating and planning with Emergency Management and the Long-Term Recovery Group, the Resilient Hub Network Coordination will be able to integrate into response and recovery activities. If needed, FEMA Disaster Survivor Assistance teams can be brought in to help support in Resilience Hubs during gray skies.

Key Considerations:

- The priority should be to bring existing buildings up to code to be resilient to disaster to return to service quickly.
- Community engagement to understand the needs of surrounding communities, define services, and promote use of the Hub is important and will support high utilization of sites and services.
- A clear public communication plan and/or time of event messaging that reconciles this new kind of asset with other assets, like shelters or DRCs, may also be important and support Hub utilization.

- Including Hubs in disaster-cycle planning and training will ensure effective implementation and integration of these sites into emergency response.
- Leveraging the Hub network to provide the residents and social-service providers awareness of other community supports that are open and operational after a disaster is a critical component of connecting those in need with services and increasing overall resilience. Similarly, the Hubs can be a source of information back to Emergency Operations Centers, contributing to situational awareness (i.e. Hubs serve as a two-way clearing house for understanding of what is functional in the area).

Consider sustainability planning of ownership and operation of system with funding. This would include consideration for agreements for designated purposes of blue and gray skies.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

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

Stakeholders:

- Florida Department of Health
- Lee County Department of Public Safety
- Municipal public safety/emergency management agencies
- United Way of Lee, Hendry, and Glades Counties
- Thrive Academy
- Lee County Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD)
- Health and mental health providers

Potential Funding Sources:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Department of Transportation
- Florida Division of Emergency Management
- Florida Department of Health
- Florida Department of Children and Families
- Florida Department of Transportation

Resources:

- [UW Houses Map - Google My Maps](#)