

Improving Evacuation Preparedness

Initiative Summary Statement:

Continue to leverage technical and community expertise in the planning and communication of evacuation plans and procedures to generate successful evacuations.

Initiative Description:

Objective: The constant improvement, communication, and understanding of evacuation plans are critical parts of how regions prepare for disaster and protect the lives and safety of residents. Every time an evacuation occurs, plans are tested, and response officials, residents, and businesses learn important lessons. This Initiative will create a platform for the Lee County area to fully understand how community members fared during evacuations efforts and what changes might be necessary.

Emergency planners will lead an engagement effort that focuses on understanding how to assist those with special needs in the evacuation process, determining the preferred destinations of residents in an evacuation, understanding patterns in decision-making among residents and understanding how best to communicate and inspire preparedness planning among residents. Those with access and functional needs usually require more time to be evacuated. The engagement effort can also provide an opportunity to reinforce the preparations that residents should make in advance if they are able to shelter in place or what should be ready in a “go bag” if they need to temporarily seek higher ground at a shelter or with friends. Further, education efforts could expand to offer additional guidance to residents with unique concerns (e.g., business owners, boat owners) to reinforce evacuation expectations and objectives.

By engaging the public and key stakeholders in emergency management and law enforcement across the region, key lessons can be integrated into future public communications, training, and planning.

Need: Prior to Hurricane Ian making landfall, Lee County issued evacuation orders in alignment with existing plans. Increasing transparency of plans and procedures during blue skies can help set public expectations and enhance communications with residents during future catastrophic events. The After-Action Report (AAR) – a review of emergency management response to Hurricane Ian focused on identifying recommendations – identified some high-level needs. An additional assessment, inclusive of residents across the region, can be leveraged to better predict and plan for future challenges during emergency incidents.

Regional Approach: Evacuation planning and education can support the needs of the whole Lee County community through an intentional focus to provide solutions for and communications to all members of the population, especially those with high-risk factors or in higher-risk locations. The County and municipalities can continue to emphasize preparedness actions, such as sharing talking points in coordination with the local media and actions that the public can take prior to an evacuation order (e.g., boarding up windows, gathering shelter in place supplies, packing a go-bag) that can be shared with the public once a hurricane is forecasted to impact Southwest Florida.

Additionally, jurisdictions can provide communication about the timing and thresholds that would result in a potential evacuation order during the runup to a storm to manage the expectations of the public. Evacuation routes are a precious commodity during an event, and it is crucial to have those most vulnerable utilizing them in the most efficient manner.

These efforts can be bolstered with community engagement findings to determine the most effective communication strategies and messaging by conducting focus groups and interviews with emergency managers and law enforcement that assisted in evacuation efforts. The Study can be augmented by evaluating the placement of evacuation routes and trends in population growth to establish a plan for shorter evacuations over out-of-town evacuations, specifically providing more assistance to those on barrier islands.

Impact: The intended outcome of increased evacuation planning and communication efforts would be that community members have a thorough understanding of evacuation processes and are able to get to (or stay in) safety as directed during an event. Reported findings could be used to determine how to prepare communities for evacuation in future disasters and whether new evacuation considerations are necessary. The economic impact of shorter distance evacuations versus out-of-state evacuations could also be crucial to helping the County keep money locally, potentially accelerating economic recovery.

Key Considerations:

- The Hurricane Ian After-Action Report identified the following recommendations in future events:
 - Recommendation: The County should continue to emphasize preparedness actions, such as sharing talking points in coordination with the local media and actions that the public can take prior to an evacuation order (e.g., boarding up windows, gathering shelter in place supplies, packing a go-bag) that can be shared with the public once a hurricane is forecasted to impact Southwest Florida.
 - Recommendation: The County should consider providing communication about the timing and thresholds that would result in a potential evacuation order during the

runup to a storm to manage the expectations of the public. Use multiple data collection methods to capture the experiences of residents who evacuated successfully and those who had difficulty.

- Conduct focus groups and interviews with emergency managers, fire districts, and law enforcement that assisted in evacuation efforts.
- Study the placement of evacuation routes and trends in population growth to establish a plan for shorter evacuations over out-of-town evacuations, specifically assisting those on barrier islands.
- Incorporate lessons learned into the development of new or updated evacuation plans.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Infrastructure, Planning & Capacity

Stakeholders:

- County departmental experts on public safety
- Municipal departmental experts on public safety
- Fire districts
- Law enforcement agencies

Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Transportation
- United States Department of Homeland Security
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation – National Coastal Resilience Fund
- Federal Highway Administration
- Federal Transit Administration
- National League of Cities
- Florida Division of Emergency Management

Potential Funding Sources:

- [Lee County Hurricane Ian AAR.pdf \(leegov.com\)](#)