



# EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION PLANNING FOR COASTAL TOWNS

Emergency risk communication (ERC) combines the need to communicate about risks and benefits to your community under urgent time constraints. ERC includes the range of communication required through the preparedness, response, and recovery phases of an emergency event to encourage informed decision making, behavioral change, and maintaining trust with authorities. It builds upon pre-event communications and enhances communications needed to support recovery and risk mitigation. You can use emergency risk communication to provide information to guide individuals or entire communities to make the best possible decisions about their well-being during an emergency. For example, ERC can be used to help residents make decisions in response to many questions, including the following questions about the threat of a hurricane:

- Should I seek safety at a public shelter?
- Do I need to prepare my property for flooding?
- Should I evacuate my home?
- When should I evacuate?

The ERC and associated communications should also emphasize:

**Engaging the community:** Include members of your community and local leaders (i.e., religious leaders, community leaders, representatives from nonprofit or neighborhood organizations, etc.) in planning for and responding to an emergency. The planning process should consider them in decisions, incorporate them in the plan, gather their feedback, and respond to their needs.

**Empowering decision-making:** Guide community members to make their own decisions by providing information about the situation, risks, resources available, and actions they can take. Give options for communities to decide on their own, what is in their best interest.

**Vulnerable populations:** Consider how you communicate with specific groups that may be disproportionately vulnerable. Specific vulnerable populations may vary by locality and the type of the emergency, but can include:

- Individuals living below the federal poverty level
- Limited English-speaking populations
- Disabled populations
- Individuals living with mental illness

- Individuals with substance use disorders
- Individuals with chronic illness
- Families without health insurance
- Communities without internet access
- Individuals and households without reliable transportation
- Temporary populations (including migrant workers, second homeowners, visiting tourists)
- Elderly individuals
- Families with children

Your ERC should recognize that communication should not be the sole responsibility of one department within a local government or even the local government itself. Rather, your ERC approach should include community partners and stakeholders in developing appropriate messages and disseminating the message.

Your locality should develop an emergency risk communication plan that can guide your locality's communications before, during, and after an emergency.

#### **PLANNING STEPS:**

1. Engage with county emergency managers/planners to understand communications elements of the county emergency operations plan and identify the hazards and risks that should be addressed in the town ERC.
2. Complete the **ERC Assessment**. This assessment should be completed by different departments within the local government and organizations or programs that work with specific populations in the community. Each department, organization, or program should complete its own assessment.
3. Compile the completed assessments into an **ERC Inventory** of current communication efforts.
4. Use this inventory to identify gaps in communication and identify ways to fill the communication gaps by completing the **ERC Gap Analysis**. Focus on the different communication roles, expertise and specialized skills, connection to special groups, and access to specific contact lists and channels identified in the assessment.
5. Develop a comprehensive **ERC Plan** that builds on the existing inventory and fills in the gaps.
6. Review this ERC Plan with locality staff and key community stakeholders and solicit feedback from those who will be tasked with communication activities and who are knowledgeable of the community's communication needs and challenges.
7. Revise the ERC Plan based on feedback solicited from locality staff and key community stakeholders.
8. Widely disseminate the ERC plan within the local government and with community partners.

**STEP 1: ENGAGE WITH THE COUNTY TO IDENTIFY HAZARDS AND RISK THAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE TOWN'S ERC**

Towns should coordinate their emergency risk communication with the county. Engaging with the county emergency managers/planners ensures that the town's ERC complements or supplements the county's emergency operations plan (EOP). Specifically, this will help you better understand what communication strategies are used by the county and how they can be augmented to meet the specific needs of your communities. Furthermore, coordinating with the county ensures that your town understands the hazards and risks that should be addressed in your ERC. Complete the pre-planning worksheet below:

- Obtain and review the county's EOP
- Identify vulnerable populations in your communities and how their needs may need to be addressed separately in the town ERC

- List hazards and risks that should be addressed in your ERC.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## STEP 2: CONDUCT ERC ASSESSMENT

This ERC Assessment is a starting point for compiling information about communication roles of departments, agencies, programs, and staff within your locality and other organizations (nonprofits, faith-based organizational, schools, fraternal associations, etc.); identify channels already in use for communicating with different audiences; identify special populations and their communication needs; compiling contact lists; and determine who is best to communicate via what channel with what audience. You should assign one locality staff member to be the point person for distributing the ERC Assessments and collecting completed ERC Assessments. (Blank ERC Assessment forms are available in Appendix A or can be downloaded as a [Google Doc](#)).

### Who Should Complete this Assessment?

Each department within the locality should complete the ERC assessment. At a minimum, however, the following local government functions should be covered by the assessment:

- Emergency management and emergency response
- Social services
- Human resources
- Community development
- Public information/communication

Other agencies, community programs, and nonprofit organizations should also be part of the assessment, as they also play an important role in a locality's ERC. It is important to recognize the unique role these organizations can play in effectively communicating with and reaching different audiences. You may want to consider asking the following organizations to complete and return an ERC assessment:

- Nonprofits or programs serving the elderly or youth
- Faith-based organizations (churches, synagogues, interdenominational services)
- Health care and public health organizations
- Programs providing handicapped and disabled services
- Housing support services or serving the homeless

### What's Next?

Collecting the completed ERC Assessments concludes the first step of developing a comprehensive emergency communication plan for your locality. The next step (Step 3) will be to combine the assessment results into one document (the ERC Inventory).

## **STEP 3: COMPILE ERC INVENTORY**

Combined, the ERC assessment across different departments, organizations, and programs provides an inventory of current communication efforts and existing skills, expertise, resources, and capabilities. Once you have collected the completed assessments, combine the results into one document (the ERC Inventory). This inventory will be helpful for identifying gaps in communication.

The process of compiling the ERC inventory is simple and can be done via pen and paper or electronically using the ERC Inventory (see Appendix B for the ERC Inventory Template or download here: [Google Doc](#)).

## **EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION (ERC) INVENTORY**

Instructions:

- Use the template included in Appendix B to enter information from the ERC assessments completed by the different departments, organizations, or programs.
- You can include as much detail as will be useful for you to understand what is currently being done in terms of emergency communication in your community. The goal is to develop a broad understanding of where you currently stand in terms of your ERC practices.
- The examples provided below shows different levels of details included in the ERC Inventory. You can refer to the ERC assessments for specifics and more details if needed.
- Some sections of the template may be empty because (1) it is not applicable or (2) no information was provided. Note that in the inventory. In the examples provided below, some boxes or sections were marked as 'No responses' or 'Not applicable.'
- Include the completed ERC assessments as appendices to your ERC Inventory for later reference.

## Communication Roles (EXAMPLES)

Preparedness (take actions in advance to be ready for an emergency)	Response (protect life and property in an emergency)	Recovery (rebuilding from an emergency)	Mitigation (prevent future emergencies or minimize their effects)
<i>Example: Nonprofit X - Reminds members to develop preparedness plans and gives strategies. Emergency Management - Reminds the public to sign up for emergency alerts and to know their evacuation zones.</i>	<i>Example: County Emergency Management - Announcements about evacuation orders, shelter locations Communications - Use town website to post regular updates</i>	<i>Example: Dept. of Social Services - Provides information about temporary shelters for displaced populations. Communications - Use town website to post announcements about recovery efforts</i>	<i>Example: No responses.</i>

## Communication Channels and Audiences (EXAMPLES)

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience: Broad public/residents</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	<i>Example: Emergency Management, mass notification</i>
E-mail	<i>Example: None.</i>
Website	<i>Example: Town website</i>
Publications	<i>Example: Parks and Recreation - Quarterly newsletter to all residents</i>
Publications (regular and special)	<i>Example: Emergency Management</i>
Public events and community meetings	<i>Example: Service Agency A, annual resource fair</i>
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	<i>Example: None.</i>
Other	<i>Example: None.</i>

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience: Specific groups of residents</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	<i>Example:</i> <i>Nonprofit Z - Has a phone tree set up to disseminate emergency information for families it serves (families caring for adults with cognitive disabilities)</i> <i>Public School System - Has telephone communication system to reach parents/guardians of all students.</i>
E-mail	<i>Example:</i> <i>Service Agency A - Quarterly e-mail newsletter mailed to recipients of services</i>
Website	<i>Example:</i> <i>Public School System - Has website with information relevant to parents/guardians of preK-12 students</i>
Publications (regular and special)	<i>Example:</i> <i>No responses</i>
Public events and community meetings	<i>Example:</i> <i>No responses</i>
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	<i>Example:</i> <i>Nonprofit X - Facebook page that is used to post announcements and share resources for the elderly.</i>
Other	<i>Example:</i> <i>No responses.</i>

### **Expertise and specialized skills for different channels (EXAMPLES)**

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Department/organization/program and expertise or specialized skills</b>
Landline telephone	<i>Example:</i> <i>Emergency Management - Reverse 9-1-1 service</i> <i>Nonprofit Z - phone tree system</i> <i>School System - Telephone communication system for mass notification of families with</i>
Mobile telephone	<i>Example:</i> <i>Nonprofit Z - phone tree system</i>
Regular publications	<i>Example:</i> <i>Parks and Recreation - Designs and disseminates newsletter</i>
Public events and community meetings	<i>Example:</i> <i>Service Agency B hosts widely attended resource fair</i>

## Expertise and specialized skills for different audiences (EXAMPLES)

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Department/organization/program and expertise or specialized skills</b>
Broad public/ residents	<i>Example: Emergency Management has Code Red system</i>
Specific groups of residents	<i>Example: Service Agency B provides resources in Spanish School System has phone communication infrastructure to reach all families with children in the school system</i>
Community leaders	<i>Example: Church N - Maintains a list of faith leaders and hosts quarterly church leaders meeting to discuss community issues</i>

## Special Populations (EXAMPLES)

<b>Communication with special populations</b>	<b>Department/organization/ program</b>
<i>Elderly adults without transportation</i>	<i>Service Agency An</i>
<i>Populations requiring electricity-dependent medical devices</i>	<i>Utility Company</i>
<i>Food insecure households</i>	<i>Nonprofit X</i>

## Contact Information Lists (EXAMPLES)

<b>Client lists, special registry, contact information, e-mail lists</b>	<b>Department/organization/ program</b>
<i>Phone (landline and mobile) tree to communicate with families caring for adults with cognitive disabilities</i>	<i>Nonprofit Z</i>
<i>Special needs registry of residents with specific medical, functional, or access needs</i>	<i>Emergency Management</i>
<i>Telephone communication system to reach parents/guardians of all preK-12 students in the public school system.</i>	<i>Public School System</i>



## **STEP 4: CONDUCT ERC GAP ANALYSIS**

Using the ERC Inventory, identify and highlights gaps in your locality's ERC approach. Then, determine if these gaps contribute to major weaknesses in how your locality communicates about crises and emergencies. These are considered critical gaps.

Note: Not all gaps indicate a problem or weakness. Local knowledge of your community will be important in determining which gaps need to be addressed.

For gaps that are deemed critical, determine ways to fill the communication gaps. In doing so, you should focus on the different communication roles, expertise and specialized skills, connection to special groups, and access to specific contact lists and channels identified in the assessment. This will help you determine how to fill the gaps by identifying who is best to communicate via what channel with what audience.

## **STEP 5: DEVELOP ERC PLAN**

Develop a draft ERC Plan that builds on the inventory and incorporates additional activities to fill critical gaps in the inventory. This draft ERC Plan should include different scenarios that each specify specific communication roles, including who is responsibility for developing the appropriate messages, and disseminating those messages to the appropriate audiences via the different channels. A template for the ERC Scenarios that comprise the ERC Plan is provided in Appendix C and downloadable as a [Google Doc](#).

As shown in the following examples, the ERC plan comprises of different scenarios with several messages for different audiences during different phases of emergency management. Your draft ERC plan will be a compilation of multiple scenarios.

# ERC SCENARIO 1 (EXAMPLE)

Emergency management phase:  Preparedness  Response  Recovery  Mitigation

Message:

*Create a preparedness plan and develop a preparedness kit.  
 Know your evacuation zone.  
 Resources: Information for preparedness planning (such as what to put in a preparedness kit, what to consider, where to find information about evacuation zones)*

Audience(s):

*General information for the general public.  
 Customized information will need to be targeted at populations with specific needs.*

Communication channels, approaches, and responsibilities:

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	N/A	N/A
E-mail	N/A	N/A
Website	<i>Messages on town website</i>	<i>Emergency management staff develop message, communications department to include on website</i>
Regular publications (newsletters, mailings, etc.)	<i>General preparedness planning information and Know Your Zone information included in newsletters issued by town departments.                      Specialized preparedness planning information included in service agencies' and nonprofit organizations' newsletters.</i>	<i>Emergency management staff develop message and content, share with service agencies and nonprofit organizations for dissemination</i>
Special publications (posters, flyers, signs)	N/A	N/A
Public events and community meetings	<i>Information table at resource fairs (with general preparedness planning information and customized information for the elderly)</i>	<i>Emergency management staff to manage table, coordinate with Service Agency A and Nonprofit B that run the resource fairs</i>
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	<i>General preparedness planning information</i>	<i>Emergency management staff develop message, coordinate with Nonprofit B to post on Facebook, Twitter</i>
Other	N/A	N/A

## ERC SCENARIO 9 (EXAMPLE)

Emergency management phase:  Preparedness  Response  Recovery  Mitigation

Message:

*Projected 5-day extreme heat event beginning [date].  
Town has opened X cooling stations at A, B, C with [operating hours].  
Check on elderly neighbors and others who are vulnerable.  
Be prepared for power failure.  
Resources: Location of cooling centers, warning signs for heat stroke*

Audience(s):

*General information for the general public.  
Customized instructions to nursing homes and long-term care facilities.  
Customized information targeted at populations with specific needs.*

Communication channels, approaches, and responsibilities:

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	<i>Phone calls to administrators of nursing homes and long-term care facilities Extreme heat warning alert text message sent to all registered residents via town notification system Telephone alert sent to all public school families via public school communications system</i>	<i>Emergency management  Emergency management  Emergency management staff develop message, School system disseminates</i>
E-mail	<i>E-mail messages to administrators of nursing homes and long-term care facilities E-mail messages to nonprofits and service agencies [list] with information about town response</i>	<i>Emergency management</i>
Website	<i>Messages on town website</i>	<i>Emergency management staff develop message, communications department to include on website</i>
Regular publications (newsletters, mailings, etc.)	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>
Special publications (posters, flyers, signs)	<i>Directional signage to cooling centers</i>	<i>Emergency management, facility staff</i>
Public events and community meetings	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	<i>Messages via service agencies' and nonprofits' social media accounts</i>	<i>Emergency management staff develop message, disseminate to partners</i>
Other	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>

## **STEP 5: REVIEW ERC PLAN**

Review the ERC Plan with locality staff and key community stakeholders. Solicit feedback on this draft plan.

Make sure to solicit feedback not only from those who will be tasked with communication activities, but also those who are knowledgeable of the community's communication needs and challenges.

## **STEP 6: REVISE ERC PLAN**

Revise the ERC Plan based on feedback solicited from locality staff and key community stakeholders.

Make sure to follow jurisdictional procedures to approve and implement the ERC Plan.

## **STEP 7: DISSEMINATE ERC PLAN**

Widely disseminate the ERC Plan within the local government and with community partners. Make sure all individuals and organizations with roles in ERC are aware of the ERC Plan and understand their roles and responsibilities.

# **Appendix A: Emergency Risk Communication Assessment Template**

# EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION (ERC) ASSESSMENT

Department/organization/program: \_\_\_\_\_

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this assessment is to understand how your department, organization, or program contributes to emergency risk communication. Consider your roles, approaches, expertise, skills, and resources as they relate to a wide range of crises and emergencies. Be as specific as possible in your responses.

## Communication Roles

Different departments, organizations, or programs play communication and informational roles across the emergency management spectrum.

What are your department/organization/program's primary communication role(s) during the different emergency management phases?

	Preparedness (take actions in advance to be ready for an emergency)	Response (protect life and property in an emergency)	Recovery (rebuilding from an emergency)	Mitigation (prevent future emergencies or minimize their effects)
Primary communication roles				

## Communication Channels and Audiences

**Audience:** Understanding the audiences that must be reached before, during, and after an emergency is an important step in development of an ERC. There are many potential audiences that will want information during and following an emergency and each has its own needs for information.

**Channels:** A combination of channels are available and used by departments, organizations, or programs to reach internal and external audiences.

In the boxes below, indicate the communication channels your department/organization/program uses and the audiences you target or interact with.

Channel	Audience				
	Broad public/ residents	Specific groups of residents <sup>1</sup>	Community leaders	Community partners or other stakeholders	Other
Telephone (consider landline and mobile separately)					
E-mail					
Website					

<sup>1</sup> These groups may include: Individuals living below the federal poverty level, limited English-speaking populations, disabled populations, individuals living with mental illness, individuals with substance use disorders, individuals with chronic illness, families without health insurance, communities without internet access, individuals and households without reliable transportation, temporary populations (migrant workers, second home owners, visiting tourists), elderly individuals, families with children.

Channel	Audience				
	Broad public/ residents	Specific groups of residents	Community leaders	Community partners or other stakeholders	Other
Publications (consider regular publications (newsletters, mailings) and special publications (posters, flyers, signs) separately)					
Public events or community meetings					
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)					
Other					



Which of these communication channels does your staff have expertise or specialized skills in application or use? Select all channels that apply.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Landline telephone                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Special publications (posters, flyers, signs) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mobile telephone                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Public events                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> E-mail   | <input type="checkbox"/> Small group meetings/events                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Website  | <input type="checkbox"/> Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular publications (newsletters, mailings, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other   |

Describe this expertise or specialized skills:

Which of these audiences does your staff have expertise or specialized skills communicating with? Select all audiences that apply.

- Broad public/residents
- Specific groups of residents
- Community leaders
- News media
- Community partners or other stakeholders
- Other

Describe this expertise or specialized skills:

## Special Populations

Some groups may require different messages from the general public. These may include individuals and households living below the federal poverty level, have limited English proficiency, are physically and mentally impaired, have chronic illnesses or are medically fragile, lack access to the internet and cell service, the elderly, and families with young children.

Describe any special population groups your department/organization/program works with and their unique communication needs. Describe other communication barriers faced by these special population groups.

## Contact Information Lists

Contact information for different audiences should be compiled and be immediately accessible during an emergency. Existing information such as client lists, special registries, suppliers, and employee contact information may be exportable from existing databases.

What contact lists does your department/organization/program have? In what format (hard copy, e-mail list, phone tree, etc.)?

## Additional Comments

What additional comments do you have about how your department/organization/program can support the locality's communication and emergency risk communication efforts?

# **Appendix B: Emergency Risk Communication Inventory Template**

# Emergency Risk Communication Inventory

## Instructions:

- Use this inventory form to compile information from the ERC assessments completed by the different departments, organizations, or programs.
- You can include as much detail as will be useful for you to understand what is currently being done in terms of emergency communication in your community. The goal is to develop a broad understanding of where you currently stand in terms of your ERC practices.
- Some sections of the template may be empty because (1) it is not applicable or (2) no information was provided. Note that in the inventory. For example, you can enter 'No responses' or 'Not applicable' in the appropriate boxes or sections.
- Include the completed ERC assessments as appendices to your ERC Inventory for later reference.

## Communication Roles

Preparedness (take actions in advance to be ready for an emergency)	Response (protect life and property in an emergency)	Recovery (rebuilding from an emergency)	Mitigation (prevent future emergencies or minimize their effects)

## Communication channels and audiences

Channel	Audience: Broad public/residents
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	
E-mail	
Website	
Publications (regular and special)	
Public events and community meetings	
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	
Other	

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience: Specific groups of residents</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	
E-mail	
Website	
Publications (regular and special)	
Public events and community meetings	
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	
Other	

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience: Community leaders</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	
E-mail	
Website	
Publications (regular and special)	
Public events and community meetings	
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	
Other	

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience: Community partners or other stakeholders</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	
E-mail	
Website	
Publications (regular and special)	
Public events and community meetings	
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	
Other	



<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience: Other</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)	
E-mail	
Website	
Publications (regular and special)	
Public events and community meetings	
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	
Other	

## Expertise and specialized skills for different channels

Channel	Department/organization/program and expertise or specialized skills
Landline telephone	
Mobile telephone	
E-mail	
Website	

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Department/organization/program and expertise or specialized skills</b>
Regular publications (newsletters, mailings, etc.)	
Public events and community meetings	
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	
Other	

## Expertise and specialized skills for different audiences

Audience	Department/organization/program and expertise or specialized skills
Broad public/ residents	
Specific groups of residents	
Community leaders	
Community partners or other stakeholders	
Other	

**Special Populations**

<b>Communication with special populations</b>	<b>Department/organization/ program</b>

## Contact Information Lists

Client lists, special registry, contact information, e-mail lists	Department/organization/ program

# **Appendix C: Emergency Risk Communication Scenario Template**

# ERC SCENARIO

Emergency management phase:  Preparedness  Response  Recovery  Mitigation

Message:

Audience(s):

Communication channels, approaches, and responsibilities:

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Telephone (consider landline and mobile/cell separately)		
E-mail		
Website		
Regular publications (newsletters, mailings, etc.)		
Special publications (posters, flyers, signs)		
Public events and community meetings		
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)		
Other		