Transforming Emergency Management & Disaster Response

Emergency management agencies have historically focused on coordinating resources for rescue, sheltering and making repairs to critical infrastructure. Today, these organizations are increasingly embracing a wider scope that includes addressing unmet social needs — such as emergency food, housing and clothing — in response to a crisis.

This shift is timely and necessary. Research indicates survivors of disaster and major emergencies often face a range of social and mental health challenges, including family separation, job losses, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and the destruction of longstanding social networks and connections.[1]

By bringing together technology-driven automation, rapid response teams and community partners through a social care platform, agencies can do more than just help constituents through a crisis — they can offer them a path to improved well-being.

Barriers in Emergency Management

Agencies often lack real-time insights into health-related social needs at the individual and community levels. These organizations may not have standardized screening methods to capture and analyze data, leaving them with a patchwork of information that doesn't fully capture what constituents and their communities need.

Moreover, when emergency management agencies address chaotic situations like natural disasters, it's often up to small teams to react quickly and manage response plans. Modern tools like a social care platform can help these teams avoid becoming overwhelmed and provide more comprehensive services.

"Some agencies have traditionally struggled with having the data to truly understand the needs across the population that has been impacted," says Matt Hernandez, a senior strategic sales director at Unite Us,

a leading provider of integrated social care solutions for the public sector. "Having access to data to inform decision-making is critical."

At the same time, legacy systems and manual processes limit agencies' real-time visibility into available resources, making it difficult to coordinate response with community-based organizations.

"Emergency management cannot just focus on one thing," says Eric Holdeman, director of the Center for Regional Disaster Resilience and a senior fellow at the Center for Digital Government who has served in emergency management roles at the federal, state and local levels. "The first priority is safety, then the restoration of power and other utilities. If people are displaced from their homes, there is an immediate need for shelter capacity for families of all types. That task alone is huge."

As these barriers add up, agencies are focused on providing services, often in chaotic and stressful situations such as disaster response. Real-time visibility into available community resources could drive decisions quickly and efficiently at the most critical times.

A Holistic Approach

A social care platform enables emergency response teams to mobilize resources efficiently by automating response center workflows.

Depending on an agency's requirements, the platform can integrate a custom screening process into response center workflows, collect information on a resident's comprehensive needs and standardize decision support.

These workflows also streamline response planning and care coordination. For example, Unite Us has a coordinated care network that consists of thousands of partners, such as organizations that provide food, clothing, and mental health support.

A closed loop referral system provides standardized, shared infrastructure, allowing emergency management agencies and their partners to collaborate securely and coordinate care more effectively.

Empowering Agencies

An electronic assistance request form makes it easier for agencies and community partners to collaborate. It establishes a standard pathway for residents to submit requests for service, replacing spreadsheets and paper-based processes some agencies still use.

This information helps create a single client record that allows agencies to better understand the service continuum.

"It gives that unique identifier to an individual so we can understand all the requests of need for that person," Hernandez says.

A single client record is especially valuable because residents are often displaced during a crisis and may go to multiple sources for help.

All incoming requests should be timestamped within the platform so agencies can better address residents' needs. The timestamps track key indicators, such as time to close and the status of a particular case, which helps agencies close the loop on each service request.

"Data is the next frontier in emergency management," Holdeman says. "Integrating data from multiple places and organizations can be a force multiplier."

All this information must be accessible on a filterable dashboard that provides a structured, comprehensive view of service capacity and program availability in the impacted area. Making this information digital and easier to access is critical for more effective coordination during a crisis.

A powerful solution should also provide a comprehensive report that includes daily response reports on the number of service requests, screens and resolutions. Look for a solution that provides

automated updates to track impact and outcomes. That information should be easy to share with all stakeholders, promoting transparency and supporting continuous improvement.

Solutions in Action

Some jurisdictions are already leveraging these capabilities during emergencies and natural disasters.

Several Western and Southeastern states, for example, have used the Unite Us platform to support residents. The system provides a central, standardized hub for agencies and partners to coordinate the availability and delivery of resources during emergencies, such as major weather events.

Officials in these states have access to timely, relevant information that guides decision-making and planning around funding.

As these states show, a social care platform enables emergency management agencies to move toward a whole-person approach that identifies and responds to individuals' most pressing needs.
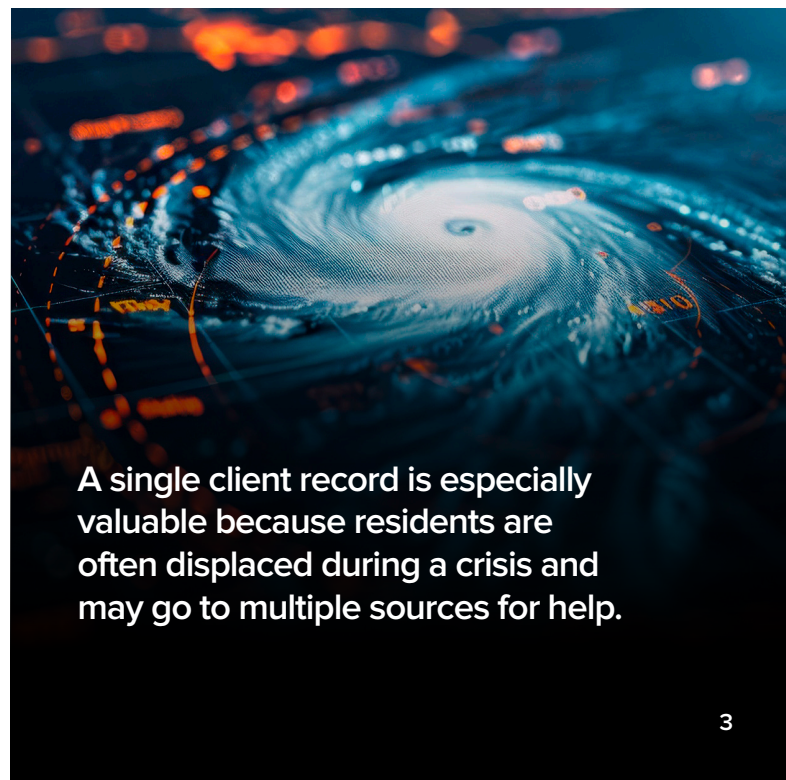
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1. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18705709/

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