Vermont Community Crisis Response Toolkit

During times of crisis, community response teams and mutual aid organizations rally together to identify vulnerable neighbors and make sure they have the resources and support they need. If you're considering leading a crisis response effort in your town, check out this guide to mutual aid efforts. As you embark on this work, it can be helpful to establish some guiding principles. Here are a few to consider:

- **First do no harm** - Everyone's top priority must be slowing the spread of COVID-19, and all local efforts should adhere as best as possible to guidance provided by health experts.
- **Integration, not fragmentation** - Coordinating local volunteer efforts with schools, social service agencies, municipalities, emergency management, and other partners will achieve the greatest impact while building public confidence and minimizing confusion. Setting politics aside also helps to achieve unified action to serve all.
- **Strive for equity** - Helping all Vermonters, and especially those who are marginalized, realize their potential means reaching across perceived boundaries and including under-represented voices at every juncture in our collective response.

7 Steps to Community Response & Mutual Aid

Step 1: Survey the Landscape

Are there others already doing this work in your community? Check here to see if anyone has already been established as "town captain" in your town or if someone has already started a mutual aid group or form.

IF YES → Contact town captain and/or sign up to volunteer in your town.

IF NO → Consider volunteering yourself to be town captain and proceed through this guide.

Certain key people/organizations are likely already established. Contact the town government to determine what they are already doing and what help they need. Remember to coordinate or at least CC your work through your local town and EMD/EMC person as they can access the CARE directory and other tools volunteers cannot. Identify and reach out to other expertise needed, such as:

- Town management
- Emergency management
- School, faith and business community leaders

- Local agencies & nonprofits
- Volunteer coordination for specific needs: food prep/meal delivery, communications (PSAs, information distribution), data collection/collation

Step 2: Develop your Internal Structure

- Define a clear goal and focus for your efforts.
- Determine where your mutual aid effort fits in the larger picture.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities within your mutual aid team.

In some places, the municipality will have the capacity and leadership to be the primary hub for meeting needs. This may be led by a town manager, fire chief, or emergency management director. They may need some volunteers and other community resources, but not a new and separate mutual aid organization. If they do need a mutual aid group, it's important that it fits in with, and works with, existing town efforts.

In other places, the formal players will be sparse and will lack the capacity for organizing and deploying aid to meet community needs. Some towns may need help coordinating both existing groups and new volunteers.

Most places will lie somewhere between these two examples. The best way to create a good structure is to ask key questions: who's already doing or leading something, where are the gaps, and how can you all stay connected and work together. Also plan to be flexible and keep adapting. Your first structure may evolve.

Step 3: Connect with Your Team

You'll want to regularly check in with core members of the team. Circumstances are changing rapidly and aid efforts will change too. Depending on the team members and goals, you might check in daily or every few days or weekly. Don't forget to connect beyond your team as well. Reach out and talk to nearby towns and stay connected with regional groups. Connect with area social service providers. Help people in different sectors connect around what's happening and what's needed.

Pick the right tool for the job:

- Emails - Google Groups can make emails to the right audience easy and can facilitate certain discussions. Use the "BCC" line if you don't want the "reply-all" option.

- Virtual Meetings - Be clear on the agenda and any decision points to address. It's helpful to have a clear facilitator responsible for meeting management. For gathering online, Zoom is extremely convenient, and accessible for people with internet or phone connections. Here is some advice about using Zoom effectively.
- Google Drive - The Google Suite allows for shared documents (like Peacham's organizational document) and shared working. Links to Google documents are a great way to share information that changes regularly. Documents, spreadsheets, and forms are all easy to create, and group editing is built in. For many features, a Gmail account is not required.

Remember: Not all communications go to everyone. Develop certain channels for separate audiences, like core team, volunteers, partners, and the general public. Be aware that team members and volunteers will have different levels of tech expertise and connectivity. Work to make sure everyone is in the loop.

Step 4: Develop Tools to Find Volunteers & Resources

VOLUNTEERS

Thus far, most mutual aid efforts are beginning with an online sign-up form for volunteers. The form collects people's names, contact information, and ways that they are willing to help. Common ways for volunteers to help are: food preparation and delivery, phone calls to check in with neighbors, prescription delivery, or childcare for essential workers. Here are a few form examples:

Bethel
Brattleboro
Montpelier
Northeast Kingdom

If you need help setting up a form, contact katherine@nekcollaborative.org.

However you decide to collect volunteer information, be sure to have a central database you and the team can easily access. Think carefully about who will check it, how you will maintain confidentiality, and what you are offering or promising to people.

RESOURCES

To start, offer this crowd-sourced statewide resource list which offers comprehensive region- and state-wide resources for things like meal programs, financial resources, and healthcare access. For those in the Northeast Kingdom, here is a similar NEK-wide resource list.

Additionally, gather and share local information pertinent to helping people meet their basic needs: grocery store hours and options, delivery services for meals and prescriptions, free Wi-Fi access, etc. When appropriate, include contact information.

People and organizations with a wide reach on social media can engage their audience to discover what's happening locally to help those in need. For example, farmers may be offering free delivery. Retailers may offer online ordering. Individuals may offer childcare for essential workers.

Step 5: Develop a System for Finding Those in Need

One of the biggest challenges is finding and connecting with the people who can benefit from assistance. Here are a few different ideas for finding those vulnerable community members in need:

Connect with existing efforts: This list can be a helpful starting point, but local outreach will give you a more detailed picture of what is going on in your town and region. Trusted organizations including churches and associations (VFW, Eagles) may be in touch with their membership and gathering a sense of individual needs. Develop a connection with these partners so that they know there is a local resource able to meet needs of their members. They may also be interested in sharing information about how to access resources with their members once systems are in place.

Front Porch Forum and the Town Website: Front Porch Forum is an excellent way to reach community members. Remember to craft your message so that people know to share it with friends and neighbors. Town websites are often also a hub for information at a time like this. Work with your town to include resources and information on the town website. You can solicit volunteers through these methods as well.

Mailings: Some groups are doing postcard mailings to all households to share information including how to ask for help. Include a weblink to an online form along with a phone number people can call. To be as comprehensive and cost effective as possible, consider the Every Door Direct Mail program from USPS. Here is an example of a postcard from Craftsbury (additional examples at the end of the toolkit).

Flyers: The same information from a postcard mailing could be posted to bulletin boards around town as well, particularly at grocery stores or other essential shopping locations. Flyers could also be delivered by neighbors as well, with all appropriate precautions taken.

Phone calls and neighbor-to-neighbor check-ins: Some places are establishing or activating phone trees to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. Other communities are building a list of more vulnerable households and assigning volunteers to do regular check-ins. Schools have the capability to make bulk phone calls with a pre-recorded message. Here's a phone tree 101 guide, Point Person Info, and a step-by-step process.

PSA on TV or radio: Contact local TV and radio stations with information about how people in need can access resources and assistance.

Hotline: Designate a central phone number to receive requests. Consider setting up a google voice account (free) which can forward calls to multiple cell phones and stops ringing as soon as the first person picks it up. Here's sample hotline response guidelines.

As needs are identified be sure the information is captured and tracked in a consistent manner, such as a spreadsheet you and the team can easily access.

Step 6: Develop a System for Matching Volunteers and Resources with Those in Need

First create teams with certain defined responsibilities, such as a delivery team, an online services team, and a phone team. Perhaps a team that handles and organizes incoming requests.

Define what happens when a need is identified. Log it in an established database, contact the appropriate team member to respond to the need, and make note in the database when aid has been completed.

Be clear about your protocols, particularly when it comes to minimizing risk of spreading the virus. Consider vetting volunteers and any potential liability issues that could arise. As you navigate these issues, you may find that forming a collaboration with an existing agency or non-profit that has these safeguards already in place makes the most sense. (See this shared folder with a few examples of Volunteer protocol from VT and NH)

Update volunteers regularly, even daily, with opportunities via email or an active Google document.

Step 7: Implement - Assess - Adjust - Implement

As you implement your systems, keep in mind:

- Pace yourself and share the load. Be sure to delegate to members of your team, and look out for your own health and well-being.
- Be flexible. The nature of this crisis is changing by the day, if not the hour. Roles and needs are shifting accordingly. This requires an organizational structure that is flexible and adaptive. Always be gathering information and feedback and adjust your efforts and priorities accordingly.

Additional Resources

Direct assistance and advice as you do this work:

The following organizations and individuals have collaborated on this toolkit and are available to assist those who are working on community response and mutual aid efforts. If you fall into one of the regions described below, you are encouraged to start there as you seek assistance:

- Mindy Blank - Community Resilience Organizations - Statewide and the South Royalton Area
- Rebecca Sanborn Stone - Community Workshop - Bethel and surrounding White River Valley Towns, assistance on community engagement, partnerships and creative placemaking
- Katherine Sims - Northeast Kingdom Collaborative - Covering the Counties of Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans
- Monique Priestley - Space on Main - Covering the Bradford Area, and also providing assistance regarding various online tools
- Emily Ahtunan - Montpelier Mutual Aid, and Washington and Northern Orange Counties Regional Response Command Center (WNOC-RRCC)
- Vermont Council on Rural Development - Statewide, providing technical assistance, facilitation, and resource referrals

For all other requests and inquiries, to request and offer technical assistance, and/or to be added to a list for future communications about zoom calls and other resources, click here for a simple online form.

If you aren't already a member, **consider joining your local Front Porch Forum**. FPF is an essential resource for staying informed, giving and getting help, and combating isolation during this crisis. Membership is free, and hundreds of thousands of Vermonters already participate daily.

Official Resources

- VT Department of Health COVID-19 Page
- CDC Community Response Guide
- Department of Public Service Connectivity Resources
- ACCD Portal for Businesses, Individuals & Communities
- FEMA
    - Disaster Financial Management Guide
    - Disaster Financial Management Fact Sheet
- VEM Guidance on Maximizing FEMA Reimbursement
- VT Emergency Management Homepage
    - VEM Coronavirus Info For Local Officials
    - State Emergency Management Plan
    - Town and Private Non-Profit FEMA Reimbursement Support

Community Organizing Efforts

- Vermont COVID-19 Crowdsourced Resources List
- NEK-wide COVID-19 Crowdsourced Resources List
- Statewide/Regional Groups Providing Community Support
- Slack Group for Community Organizers
- The New England Environmental Grassroots Fund is providing grants of up to $1,000 to support volunteer mutual aid efforts.
- Information on Free Wifi Hotspot Equipment for Municipalities (from Microsoft)
- Tips for Producing Accessible Documents
- How to Create a 48-hr Local Business Gift Card Drive
- Privacy & Data Protection Tips for Local Groups
- Resources for Supporting Small Businesses
- Visit www.vermont4a.org or call 1-800-642-5119 to connect to your local Area Agency on Aging.
- Map of Senior Centers across Vermont
- Local Planning for Food Access - VT Farm to Plate. For more information, contact Sarah Danley at sarah@vsjf.org
- Brattleboro Growing Resilience Community Gardening Campaign
- Community Workshop's DIY Community Cookbook

Food Access

- Rochester's Grocery Delivery Setup
- Pandemic EBT Flyer

- Pandemic EBT Video
- COVID-19 & 3SquaresVT video
- COVID-19 & 3SquaresVT page on Vermont Food Help
- 3SquaresVT, Seeds, & Plants page on Vermont Food Help

Mask-Making & Distributing

- For mask making instructions, guidance, and best practices, explore this Mask Making Resources Folder, which includes
    - A list of current mask requests from assisted living facilities.
    - A Cloth Mask Community Mobilization Toolkit
    - Keys to a Successful Community Mask Program
    - MakerSphere Mask Design Instructions
    - National & Global Mask Making Resources
- Additionally, visit Green Mountain Mask Makers

Outdoor Spaces Guidance

- Better Paces COVID - Included in Phase II of the Governor's Package, this innovative program will help cities and towns find new ways to use streets, parking areas, and public spaces in downtowns and villages to help rebuild the economy and revive community life.
- Guidance for Restaurant and Retail Use of Right of Way – ACCD and VTrans just completed guidance to help ensure restaurants and retail businesses use streets safely.
- Design in the Context of COVID - A list of resources and references pertaining to the design of public spaces compiled by Randy Wilson, President of Community Design Solutions, a public design consultancy based out of Columbus, South Carolina.
- "Age-Friendly" Responses to COVID - AARP's guide to steps local communities can take to support and protect older adults during the pandemic.
- Community Action Grants - AARP Vermont's 2020 Community Action Grants will provide between $500-$2,000 in financial support to non-profit organizations and ad hoc groups that are responding locally to build and enhance community resiliency.

Protocols

- A folder containing several examples of volunteer protocols from VT and NH
- VDH Guidance on Reducing Transmission in Congregate Settings
- VLCT Guidance on Volunteer Liability

Sample Postcards

- Greensboro/Stannard
- Hardwick
- Albany

The development of this guide was a partnership between Community Resilience Organizations, Community Workshop, the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, the Space on Main, and the Vermont Council on Rural Development.