



GUIDE TO EXPANDING MITIGATION

Making the Connection to Faith-Based Partners



FEMA



PHOTO: Sewa International volunteers rebuild a home in Rosharon, TX after Hurricane Harvey. Photo credit: Sewa International, Houston

FEMA works with states, local communities, tribes and territories to recognize their hazard risks and work to reduce them. Hazard mitigation requires relationships and partnerships. Emergency managers, local officials, businesses, civic organizations, nonprofits and faith-based organizations may all be involved.

This Guide to Expanding Mitigation is meant to prompt connections between leaders in hazard mitigation and in faith-based and religious communities. It is for hazard mitigation and emergency management professionals who want to learn more about engaging faith-based organizations in hazard mitigation. It is also for people leading and serving in religious organizations who want to learn more about how to help reduce risks and protect their communities.

Strong and resilient landscapes benefit the whole community. Disasters also have the potential to affect everyone. Their effects often disproportionately burden historically underserved groups, including certain faith-based and religious communities. Working alongside these organizations allows mitigation professionals to join with local leaders and trusted messengers to reach the whole community.

Faith-based and religious groups may already be involved in hazard mitigation, climate adaptation, disaster recovery or other efforts. Their values of social justice, caring for people in need, protecting sacred sites, stewardship of the earth, and strengthening the local community intuitively align with hazard mitigation and related work.

HAZARD MITIGATION

refers to actions that reduce the long-term risk of hazards. These actions reduce the impact of the hazard itself. Mitigation actions can happen both before a disaster and during recovery. Learn more from FEMA's [Hazard Mitigation Best Practices Library](#).



This Guide to Expanding Mitigation is part of a [series](#) that highlights partnerships for mitigation.



PHOTO: Cover

Top, from left: Older women enjoying time with friends, Christian gospel choir singing with joy, Celebrating the Loy Kratong Floating Lantern Festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Middle: Father and son blow the shofar in advance of the Jewish new year.

Bottom, from left: Man bends down to pray in a mosque, Girl helps grandmother to make laddoos for the Hindu festival of Diwali, Parishioner receives Sacrament of the Eucharist.

PHOTO: Current page

FEMA Mitigation Community Education and Outreach crew leader talks with an attendee at the FEMA Faith-Based Summit in Puerto Rico in February 2020. Photo by Liz Roll/FEMA



PHOTO: NECHAMA volunteer repairs a flooded house. Photo credit: NECHAMA

In fall 2017, Hurricane Harvey reached south Texas, including the rural community of Rosharon. The farming community is home to refugees and low-income immigrants from Cambodia and Laos. The hurricane destroyed homes and greenhouses. Residents of the Little Cambodia neighborhood in Rosharon lost their homes and their livelihoods growing water spinach and other vegetables.

Sewa International, a Hindu faith-based humanitarian disaster relief organization worked on immediate relief and long-term recovery in Rosharon. Sewa's teams raised houses above flood levels (pictured). They helped the farmers apply for grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Using the grants, the farmers rebuilt their greenhouses—hoop houses this time. The rounded hoop houses reduce losses during severe winds compared to triangular roof models.

Raising houses and building more resilient greenhouses reduces losses in future hazard events. These actions mitigate harm from hazards. Achalesh Amar of Sewa International wants to build on these successes. He would like to connect more with local hazard mitigation professionals. He said, "We would love to be more involved [in mitigating risks before there is a disaster], but we lack funding and resources. We don't always know where to start."

PHOTO: Sewa International volunteers rebuild and elevate a home in Rosharon, TX after Hurricane Harvey. Photo credit: Sewa International, Houston

SUPPORTING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

When neighbors know each other, they recover faster and more fully from disasters. Faith communities build connections both within and across faith groups. Ties across religious communities often also bridge class and racial divides. The networks that faith-based communities build, both internally and through interfaith efforts, create a social fabric that makes other resilience work possible.

Faith-based communities include people with disabilities, immigrants and non-English speakers, and other historically underserved groups. Planners and hazard mitigation leaders can work through religious organizations to ensure people in these groups know their risks and mitigation options.

Working alongside faith-based organizations allows hazard mitigation professionals to reach the whole community. Sewa International often shows immigrant communities how to prepare for disasters and protect their properties. **Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) Relief**, a Muslim disaster relief organization, has brought Muslim leaders and emergency managers together to talk about hazard mitigation and preparedness. Planners can join with organizations like Sewa and ICNA Relief to share information.

People [who] know one another and are connected to community institutions...prepare for, respond to, and recover more quickly from natural hazards than those with lower levels of social connection.

– **U.S. Surgeon General**
Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



PHOTO: NECHAMA volunteers in Puerto Rico performing mangrove restoration. Photo credit: NECHAMA

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS ADVANCE HAZARD MITIGATION EFFORTS

Religious and faith-based organizations support a variety of mitigation and resilience efforts.

Climate and environmental stewardship and advocacy

Many religious organizations advance environmental causes, including climate resilience. For instance, the [Kadampa Meditation Center](#), a Buddhist community in Baltimore, [built a rain garden and cistern](#) to manage runoff from the center's parking lot and roadways. The features reduce flooding and improve water quality.

Building back better

Many faith-based organizations take part in disaster response and recovery efforts. They may also work to reduce vulnerabilities for the next disaster.

In 2016, Kevin King, the executive director of the [Mennonite Disaster Service \(MDS\)](#), a Christian organization and National Voluntary Organization Active in Disaster (VOAD)



PHOTO: DHS Director of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Marcus Coleman and team met with the pastor and local volunteers at the Tchoupitoulas Chapel in Reserve, Louisiana to assist following Hurricane Ida. Photo by Keith Jones/FEMA.

member, was working to help Greenbrier County, West Virginia, recover from a major flood. He realized the local creek would flood again. The floods would keep residents in a cycle of poverty. They would also force his volunteers to keep coming back. He said, "I had a Burning Bush moment: can we relocate the community out of the floodplain?" After great efforts, the local and MDS leaders found land on a hill just outside of town. They built 26 new homes there. The effort was a success, and it has served as a model for other communities.

[NECHAMA - Jewish Response to Disaster](#) is a Jewish disaster relief and recovery organization and member of National VOAD. After Hurricane Maria, the group put down roots in Puerto Rico—literally. At first, the teams focused on traditional recovery efforts. They repaired many concrete and tin roofs. As they built ties, they asked local partners how they could engage more holistically. The volunteers began to work on economic and ecological restoration efforts. They helped the local organization [Caras Con Causa](#) to regrow mangroves. The trees now protect the shoreline from severe weather.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Nature-based solutions, also known as green infrastructure, are projects that weave natural features or processes into the built environment to promote resilience.

Faith-based and religious communities may support nature-based solutions through volunteer efforts like NECHAMA's. They may also use nature-based solutions on their properties. The Kadampa Meditation Center's rain garden is a nature-based solution.

Learn more from [FEMA's resources on nature-based solutions](#).





PHOTO: MDS built 26 new homes out of the floodplain in White Sulfur Springs, WV. Photo credit: MDS

FOR MITIGATION PROFESSIONALS: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Relationships are crucial to this work. Below are some lessons and thoughts from hazard mitigation and faith-based leaders.

1 Empower local champions

Civil servants, political and religious leaders and volunteers all work with limited bandwidth. Having a local champion to direct efforts can make sure they move forward. Empower local leaders to take on that role! The right person to talk to may not be the clergy or a member of the governing board or leadership. A champion must be able to communicate well within communities and government. Hazard mitigation and other expertise can come from other sources.

2 Learn about your partners

Each tradition has its own perspective. Learn about the community and its needs. When are their holidays? Are there days of the week when you should not plan meetings? Do they have specific dietary restrictions? Learn about your partners' norms and practices in advance.

For many religious people, the ideals and principles of hazard mitigation are intertwined in how they live out their faith. Whether it's a local [African Methodist Episcopal church](#) protecting a sacred site, a synagogue living out the commandment to not stand idly by your neighbor's blood, or another religious or spiritual tradition, these efforts are an expression of deep values.

Learn about the specific community you want to work with. They may have existing programs that support, or could support, mitigation efforts. Consider how you could work together to achieve shared goals.



PHOTO: MDS rebuilt and elevated homes in Dulac, LA following Hurricane Ida. Photo credit: Paul Hunt/MDS

3 Build trust

Build trust by being a consistent and reliable partner. Listen to what community members share. Solicit and use their feedback when developing projects. Not every suggestion will be workable, so explain your logic and priorities.

Relationships take patience. Some religious groups have reason to distrust the government. Build connections slowly, over time. As a church volunteer told Becky Carter of [Rebuilding Together](#), a disaster recovery and housing organization, "You can't just come once."

Consider using stories to build trust and connect. Share your own experiences. Share successes from other communities. Make connections and learn from each other. Get inspired by FEMA's [Stories of Resilience](#) collection.

PROTECTING PLACES OF WORSHIP

Many places of worship – both buildings and other sacred sites – are vulnerable to hazards. Hazard mitigation professionals can work with communities to protect these sites. Some houses of worship are both historic and at risk of damage from hazards. These buildings are often culturally significant. They show the history and legacy of the community. There are often old cemeteries on the property that may be at risk.

It can be hard to find funding to protect these buildings. Think about reaching out to local foundations for support. Here are some resources to get started:

- [Guidance on Historic Preservation](#) (National Park Service)
- [Guidance on Cultural Resources and Hazard Mitigation Planning](#) (FEMA)
- [Guide to Expanding Mitigation: Making the Connection to Cemeteries](#) (FEMA)





PHOTO: NECHAMA volunteers in Puerto Rico performing mangrove restoration. Photo credit: NECHAMA

FOR RELIGIOUS AND FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS: WORKING TO MITIGATE RISKS

1 Find the experts and champions within your community

Faith-based communities contain experts. Who is usually responsible for ensuring building permits are correct? Do you have any contractors or someone familiar with permitting within your group? Does anyone have grant writing expertise? Are there any climate change experts or civil engineers? These skills can be helpful in identifying projects, applying for grants and managing construction or other work.

However, sometimes the best champions are not subject matter experts, but are simply people who are engaged and motivated to see a project through. One strong local champion in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, owned a restaurant. He worked with experts and volunteers from MDS and a local retired Pentagon purchasing agent. Together, the team helped residents who faced repeated flooding build new homes at higher elevations.

2 Find the right partners

Build relationships during non-disaster times. Some useful officials to know include:

- Local or county emergency manager
- Planning, building permitting and/or engineering department
- Floodplain manager
- State Hazard Mitigation Officer (SHMO)

These officials can help connect you with funding and other kinds of help. If you apply for a grant from FEMA, the local emergency managers will submit a sub-application to the SHMO who will manage the grants awarded by FEMA.

GRANTS AND FUNDING

Federal, state and not-for-profit foundations provide grants to address mitigation needs. Some grants focus on local organizations, such as faith-based groups. Others only support governments. Working together and applying as a team can open paths for funding.

Review the following resources within your organization and with partners. Determine what types of mitigation projects can best serve your community.

- Available mitigation grants: [Mitigation Resource Guide: Federal funding, technical assistance, and other resources to support hazard mitigation](#)
- Additional information on FEMA grants: [Hazard Mitigation Assistance Grants](#)

Many grant programs share information on previous awards. Check these out to see if your projects are similar. On FEMA.gov, in addition to the available guidance documents for each specific grant and pertinent webinars, you can “view allocations” to see previous projects.



PHOTO: ICNA Relief USA and FEMA present a “you are the help until help arrives” training at the Annual ICNA Convention in Baltimore, MD on how to be prepared for an emergency. Photo credit: ICNA Relief USA

RESOURCES

There are many ways to build connections and engage faith communities in hazard mitigation. Below are some resources for further reading and guidance.

Religious Literary Resources

Selected Resources – Interfaith Dialogue Resources

<https://pluralism.org/selected-resources>

Resources for interfaith engagement.

Publications – Aspen Institute

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/religion-society-program/religion-society-program-publications/>

Reports and other resources on religious pluralism.

Mitigation Resources

FEMA Resources on Faith-Based and Volunteer Partnership

<https://www.fema.gov/faith>

These resources support faith-based and religious communities in planning for disasters.

Guides to Expanding Mitigation

<https://www.fema.gov/guides-expanding-mitigation>

Find all available Guides to Expanding Mitigation.

FEMA Hazard Mitigation Planning

<https://fema.gov/hazard-mitigation-planning>

Review standards and guidance for the mitigation planning process.

Community Engagement Resources

Concepts of Religious Literacy for Emergency Management (IS-505)

<https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-505&lang=en>

Interactive web-based course on collaborating with faith-based and religious communities.

Ten Tips for Government Engagement with Religious Communities

<https://crcc.usc.edu/ten-tips-government-engagement-with-religious-communities/>

Tips for best practices for government agencies working with religious communities.

Mobilizing Faith-Based Community Organizations in Preparing for Disasters (MGT 405)

<https://ruraltraining.org/course/mgt-405/>

Training course (8 hours) for faith-based organization leaders and emergency managers in rural communities.



PHOTO: Family with their new, elevated house in Rosharon. Photo credit: Sewa International, Houston.

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ENGAGE WITH US

Are you a state, local, tribal or territorial official who wants to make the connection between faith-based organizations and hazard mitigation? Do you work with a faith-based organization that wants to connect with local officials to reduce risk from hazards? Please reach out to us at FEMA-ExpandingMitigation@fema.dhs.gov.





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FOR MORE RESOURCES

