

Managing COVID-19 Risk during Natural Disaster Responses

How are States Balancing Natural Disasters with the Pandemic?

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The 2020 wildfire season has arrived in California and Colorado sooner than expected and hurricane season has hit the Gulf and East Coast with massive force, causing conflict between standard evacuation procedures and the best practices for COVID-19 risk management. In our write up, [“Natural Disasters and COVID-19”](#), RHP discussed natural disasters in the age of COVID-19 and the need for employer, community, regional and state planning and policy changes to account for new procedures such as physical distancing and masks. The impacted states of Texas, Florida, Louisiana, California, and Colorado are grappling with competing forces of public health and emergency response during natural disasters.



California: More than 1.4 million acres have burned across California in the August lightning complex fires (SCU, LNU and CZU, two of which are among the largest recorded in California) and other wildfires, with over 625 active fires currently burning. California’s mutual aid system is designed to swiftly bring in help when local firefighters are overwhelmed, but due to the immense size and frequency of the current fires, the system is under strain. Currently, California firefighters are being joined by tens of thousands of out-of-state and out-of-country firefighters who are gathering in fire camps. To minimize the risk of COVID-19, the camps are spread out with more tents and space for social distancing, and more washing stations. Due to the release of thousands of prison inmates from the start of the pandemic to now to reduce COVID-19 transmission risk, the CalFire prison brush clearing contingent is also under strain, and 12 of the 43 inmate fire camps were quarantined after several inmates tested positive for COVID-19. Not only did this result in fewer inmate fire crews, but also limited availability of inmates to help with logistics such as serving food in the camps.

Unfortunately for firefighters and the public, wildfires also bring the danger of respiratory illness and weakened immune systems caused by poor air quality index and smoke inhalation, which may make individuals more susceptible to COVID-19, or more likely to develop a more severe case of COVID-19. This was highlighted after a study in Environment International which found that communities tend to have three to five times more influenza cases than would be normally expected after prolonged smoke exposure from wildfires. ([https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412019326935#:~:text=Wildfire%20season%20for%20Montana%20\(and,cases%20typically%20occurring%20in%20January.\)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412019326935#:~:text=Wildfire%20season%20for%20Montana%20(and,cases%20typically%20occurring%20in%20January.)))



When a fire forces evacuations, evacuees are faced with tough decisions: do they potentially risk family or friends by staying with people they may not have seen in months, do they go to a county shelter, or do they take on the financial burden of going to a hotel at their expense? In years past, California's fire evacuees slept on cots inside fairground buildings, gyms, churches and community centers and ate food served buffet-style or by volunteers. However, in an attempt to control the spread of COVID-19, this model has been altered. Evacuees are being directed to temporary evacuation points where they can have access to air conditioning, get a snack, and complete an American Red Cross needs assessment. If it is determined an evacuee has nowhere else to go, the Red Cross will attempt to find dormitory style lodging or individual rooms at a motel or hotel paid for by a Red Cross voucher. The Red Cross is implementing this motel/hotel-first model across the country in an attempt to prevent the COVID-19 spread that would likely occur from crowding and close contact with people in confined spaces and evacuation points. As a last resort, the traditional mass shelter model can be used, but only if local motel/hotel capacity is overwhelmed.

For those who must stay at an evacuation center, implementation of COVID-19 precautions includes requiring face masks, health screening, and temperature checks before individuals come into the temporary evacuation points. Further, there are increased wellness checks, additional handwashing stations, provisions for an isolation care area, staggered mealtimes, additional space between cots, chairs, etc., and increased cleaning and disinfecting.

Colorado: Like California, Colorado has been struck by multiple major wildfires. The Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control is looking to suppress the fires more quickly by sending more aircraft than usual to battle fires with the goal of forestalling the need for large evacuation shelters and firefighter base camps. Should evacuation be necessary, Colorado is also using the non-congregate sheltering model. Evacuees are being directed to an evacuation point and are either advised to stay in their cars where they get individual services, or they are set up in motel/hotel rooms or camp sites.

Texas: The 2020 hurricane season is about halfway finished, but the remainder of the season has the potential to be very busy. The baseline issues faced are similar in many ways to those in California and Colorado with wildfires: congregation concerns at camps for first responders and evacuees at evacuation centers. FEMA has released COVID-19 Pandemic Operation Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season; according to this document, FEMA will generally minimize the number of personnel deploying to disaster-impacted areas and the number of new field deployments



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by using personnel already deployed to the impacted region; they will further provide PPE and/or cloth face coverings, and hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes for personnel to use in disaster facilities. Additional safety requirements for disaster facilities involve mitigation strategies such as temperature and health screenings, increased cleaning and disinfection, physical distancing, and when feasible, engineering and administrative controls such as the use of transparent barriers and labeling interior floor areas to encourage proper distancing, as well as non-congregant methods of feeding evacuees.

Florida: Facing many of the same issues as Texas during this hurricane season, the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) has prepared shelter PPE kits to distribute to shelters that may open in response to tropical storms / hurricanes, containing hand sanitizer, masks and gloves. The FDEM has also sent masks, gloves, face shields, shoe covers, goggles, and coveralls to health care workers and first responders. Storm shelters have been directed to admit no more than 50 people, use temperature and other screening methods, and maintain at least 60 square feet per person. There is concern that citizens fleeing from the four South Florida hotspot counties (Miami Dade, Palm Beach, Monroe and Broward) could influence the spread of COVID-19 to counties which currently are not as impacted by the pandemic.



Louisiana: Because of the pandemic, Louisiana has declared early evacuation orders to its residents to ensure they have time to get to safety while observing physical distancing. Fearing people will be reluctant to leave their homes due to concerns about COVID-19, Jefferson Parish officials are no longer “recommending” evacuation or even saying an evacuation is mandatory,



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but instead giving more graphic specifics about the projected feet of water and wind speeds to emphasize the need to leave the area. There is also apprehension that due to the state’s devastated economy, some people may financially be unable to execute an evacuation plan and may need evacuation assistance. New Orleans has set up “Evacuspots” areas where Regional Transit Authority buses will assist in evacuating those in need, taking physical distancing into account: the buses that normally hold more than

50 passengers will be limited to between 26 and 32 passengers. The state is identifying additional large shelter spaces in north Louisiana to accommodate physical distancing requirements, and because it is anticipated that many evacuees needing transportation will also need housing assistance out of state, the state of Louisiana has been negotiating with its neighboring states for hotel/motel space as an alternative to opening major shelters in these other states. Louisiana is further focused on recruiting shelter and healthcare volunteers so they do not have to rely upon out-of-state assistance.

What you can do if your home is in a natural disaster zone: The CDC recommends when evacuating due to a natural disaster, individuals have a “go kit” containing items that can help protect the individual and others from COVID-19, such as hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol,

bar or liquid soap, disinfectant wipes and two masks for each person. If staying with friends or family outside of an individual's home, the CDC recommends talking to the people you plan to stay with about how to protect yourselves from COVID-19. Consider if either household has someone at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19, follow preventative actions (cover coughs and sneezes, wash hands often, and avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth), and have a plan if someone becomes sick with COVID-19. Those staying with family and friends should also consider physical distancing and avoiding shared spaces as much as possible. Be sure that the combined households know and agree on the COVID-19 safety measures you intend to take and consider having a conversation about the risk tolerance of both households (i.e. dining out, entertainment, and mask use). If an individual must go to a shelter, the CDC recommends practicing physical distancing, washing hands often, covering coughs and sneezes, and wearing masks. Additionally, the CDC recommends individuals avoid touching high-touch surfaces as much as possible, and frequently clean and disinfect personal items such as phones, electronics and toys.

RHP's safety & health professionals have aided employers, business, and public entities before and after natural disasters to: assess health and safety of indoor and community air quality (IAQ) due to smoke or water intrusion; create personal protective equipment (PPE) plans and / or address needs for responders during recovery response; conduct site and re-occupancy evaluations and debris characterization; sample soil, air and buildings; rank public health concerns; assist with product loss termination; safety & health plans, infectious disease plans, and provide transparency in communications.

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