
ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

TANF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS & RESPONSE PLAYBOOK



OCTOBER 2024

Introduction

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) administrators hold a unique opportunity to proactively assist families after a disaster or emergency by leveraging existing program flexibilities. Eligible disaster survivors can access much-needed benefits and services through the TANF program, aiding in their post-disaster recovery process. To provide this support, TANF administrators should lead their agency's engagement in preparedness activities.

The TANF Disaster Preparedness and Response Playbook provides high-level recommendations that will enable TANF administrators to prepare and implement their own emergency preparedness and response strategy. This playbook was co-developed by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response (OHSEPR), two program offices in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

This playbook does not enforce the implementation of emergency preparedness and response strategies. It provides actionable recommendations aimed at improving outcomes for families with children in the aftermath of disasters.

Office of Family Assistance

OFA administers federal grant programs that foster family economic security and stability, including the TANF program, the Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Tribal TANF) program, Native Employment Works, Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants, and Tribal TANF-Child Welfare Coordination grants. Its mission is to invest in families and communities for equitable economic and family prosperity across generations through effective economic supports, workforce development, and supportive services.

Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response

OHSEPR's mission is to lead, strengthen, and synchronize human services to prepare, respond, and recover from emergencies and crises. As the disaster human services lead within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, OHSEPR provides expertise to ACF grantees, partners, and organizations during preparedness, response, and recovery operations for emergency and disaster incidents. OHSEPR administers the Disaster Human Services Case Management (DHSCM) Program and the U.S. Repatriation Program.

Non-Recurrent Short-Term (NRST) Benefits and Other Services

The playbook highlights strategies that states, tribes, and territories (STTs) can take when leveraging TANF flexibilities to address disasters or emergencies. While this document focuses on non-recurrent short-term (NRST) benefits, TANF administrators should consider utilizing any available flexibilities as part of their response. TANF administrators are encouraged to reach out to TANF Regional Program Managers for additional assistance developing strategies.

NRST benefits, which are defined as one-time or infrequent forms of assistance for families experiencing a “specific crisis situation or episode of need,” could be added to a TANF plan as part of a jurisdiction’s preparedness efforts. NRST benefits, which are not intended to cover ongoing needs and cannot last longer than four months, could nevertheless support families’ recoveries following disasters.¹

NRST benefits are excluded from the definition of “assistance” under TANF. This exemption means that some TANF requirements – including work requirements, time limits on federal assistance, and detailed data collection and reporting – do not apply to families receiving only NRST benefits. This flexibility allows TANF agencies to provide NRST benefits to families who do not receive monthly TANF cash benefits without triggering these requirements. NRST benefits can also be provided to families receiving monthly cash TANF benefits, but because these families are already receiving “assistance,” they typically remain subject to TANF requirements.² Examples of NRST benefits and other non-assistance services can be found in past OFA guidance (see text box) and Table 1. Please note that these examples are not exhaustive; TANF agencies can propose other benefits or services as part of their emergency preparedness and response strategy.

It is largely within the discretion of a TANF jurisdiction to determine any eligibility criteria beyond the federal requirements, what benefits and services will be available to qualified recipients, and how its program will be operated. STTs can also decide whether recipients must have lived in an area that received a Presidential Disaster Declaration – specifically areas that include the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Individual Assistance Program. STTs that provide NRST benefits or claim other non-assistance expenditures must still be included in a federally accepted TANF plan. A state “should feel free to implement” new benefits or services immediately; a state plan

Past OFA guidance on NRST benefits and other non-assistance services:

Examples: Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits – Provides a list of non-recurrent, short-term benefits in approved State applications for TANF emergency funds. The list is not exhaustive.

Background Information about the TANF Emergency Fund – Provides information regarding how the TANF Emergency Fund under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act could be used.

The Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund [TANF-ACF-PI-2021-02] – Provides TANF administrators guidance regarding the Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund.

¹ Public Welfare, [45 C.F.R. § 260.31b](#) (May 15, 2024).

² In the event of a federal or state disaster declaration, HHS may grant a reasonable cause exception to forgive the penalty for some of the TANF penalties, including those associated with failure to meet the work participation rate requirement.

amendment reflecting these changes can be submitted later in disaster response or recovery.³ Tribes, however, must submit an amendment for approval prior to using Tribal TANF funds for any new benefits or services. Approval of such an amendment to the Tribal TANF plan will be expedited if the change is intended to address the disaster-related needs of families who are within a tribe’s geographic service area and who are part of the tribe’s service population.⁴

Table 1 – Examples of benefits and services that can be provided by TANF agencies

Category	Examples
Immediate Financial Assistance	Direct and immediate cash payments to cover urgent needs such as food, clothing, and temporary shelter.
Housing Assistance	Funding for temporary housing or for home repairs to help to prevent housing insecurity. Support with payment of utility bills. Support with purchasing of needed appliances – such as a refrigerator or a stove – which were lost resulting from a disaster. Warm referrals to programs to assist the rebuilding and repairing of homes damaged by the disaster.
Food Assistance	Vouchers or cash that can be used to purchase food and to replace food lost resulting from the disaster. Free or subsidized meal programs for affected families.
Transportation Assistance	Vouchers or cash for fuel to enable transportation to work, school, or medical appointments. Subsidized public transportation passes for those who rely on buses, trains, or other public transit systems. Assistance with car repair payments for vehicles that were damaged resulting from a disaster.
Legal and Advocacy Services	Free or low-cost legal assistance for issues such as eviction prevention, insurance claims, and obtaining government benefits. Advocacy services helping families to navigate the various services and supports available to them.
Information and Referral Services	Hotlines or information centers where families can get information about available services and assistance. Expanded and accessible case management services to help families develop recovery plans and connect with the necessary resources.

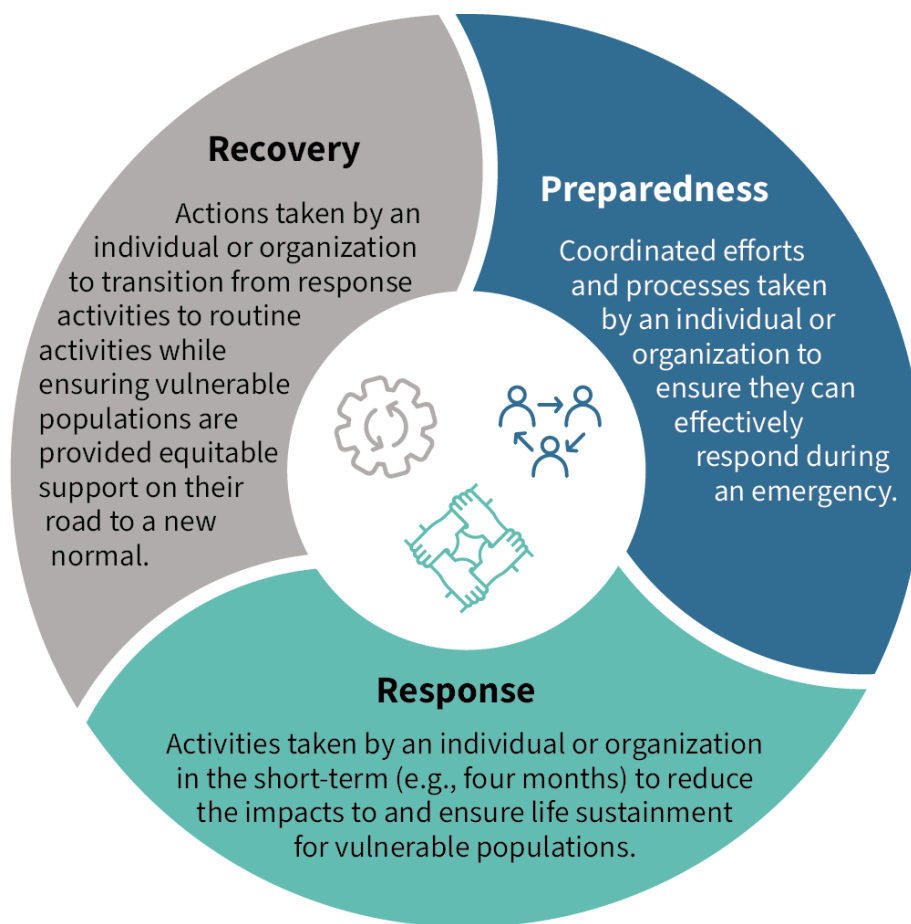
³ As indicated in TANF-ACF-PI-2007-08 (Using Federal TANF and State Maintenance-of-Effort Funds for Families in Areas Covered by a Federal or State Disaster Declaration).

⁴ Office of Family Assistance. (2007, November 28). *Using federal TANF and state maintenance-of-effort (MOE) funds for families in areas covered by a federal or state disaster declaration* [TANF-ACF-PI-2007-08]. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/policy-guidance/tanf-acf-pi-2007-08-using-federal-tanf-and-state-maintenance-effort-moe-funds>

Implementing Emergency Preparedness and Response Strategies

This portion of the Playbook provides recommended actions that may be taken by a TANF administrator to operationalize emergency preparedness and response strategies in their jurisdiction. While the key actions are aligned with the three phases of the emergency management cycle – preparedness, response, and recovery – TANF administrators do not necessarily need to complete all of the recommended actions to implement an effective approach to support eligible families. To the extent possible, however, key actions should be performed during the phases in which they are identified (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – The cyclical relationship between preparedness, recovery, and response.



Through the emergency management expertise of OHSEPR personnel and the TANF expertise of OFA, specialists developed recommendations that also align with the priority action areas identified in the *Emergency Playbook for Federal Human Services Programs*; the *Emergency Playbook for Federal Human Services Programs* was developed by Mathematica with funding and input from OHSEPR. The priority action areas draw on lessons learned from federal human services program

offices during major emergency, disaster, or crisis events (Appendix A lists each priority action area and their associated objectives).



Preparedness

There are several actions TANF agencies can take when preparing their agencies to be resilient against future disasters. The graphic below illustrates essential activities, each of which is explained in more detail throughout this section.



Build a team that can help develop, execute, and champion preparedness and response activities:

- Identify and fill positions that will support you in accomplishing your goals.
- Increase your team’s collective understanding of your emergency preparedness and response strategy, so they can champion it when engaging with external partners.
- Provide training for staff to help address knowledge gaps related to your preparedness and response strategy.
- Leverage your team’s expertise and knowledge to develop or refine your emergency preparedness and response strategy.

Build strong partnerships with federal, STT, and local agencies before disasters occur, including emergency management and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and create interagency agreements for mutual support during emergencies:

- Identify partners at the federal, STT, and local level you would work with to obtain information on disaster survivors’ needs or with whom you would coordinate with to execute your strategies (e.g., NRST benefits and other services) during an emergency. These

partners could include, but are not limited to, the jurisdiction’s emergency management agency, NGOs, and faith-based organizations.

- Establish interagency agreements with partners, identifying how you will support each other before, during, and after an emergency.
- Conduct routine meetings with your TANF Regional Specialist. Mutual understanding of communication styles and preferences will help during an emergency if requesting technical assistance.
- Establish coalitions with other TANF administrators to share lessons learned and approaches for implementing preparedness and response strategies. Engage your TANF Regional Program Specialist to identify and establish connections.

Ensure you fully understand the needs and strengths of your local community:

- Work with partners to clearly define the community’s pre-existing needs, which an emergency would further strain, and to understand the community assets that can support disaster response and recovery.
- Leverage existing community assessments completed by your partners to identify and characterize the needs of vulnerable populations (e.g., children or pregnant women). Tools like **FEMA’s National Risk Index** and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (**CDC**) **Social Vulnerability Index** can be used to understand specific risks.
- Understand how your community receives information: Who do they trust? How (e.g., radio, news, or social media) do they like to receive it?
- Increase your understanding of the “customer journey” for disaster survivors who may need NRST benefits or other services in your jurisdiction.⁵

Create and maintain an emergency response plan highlighting the overarching goal, primary objectives, key decisions, and staff roles and responsibilities for implementing NRST benefits and other services. This plan should be holistic, covering response, preparation, and transition back to routine operations; it should address support for disaster survivors transitioning to other human services programs:⁶

- Include a wide range of services and benefits that can be used during a crisis in your TANF plan submitted to OFA.⁷ If you include as many eligible services and benefits as possible in the plan, you will reduce or eliminate the need for jurisdictional approval of modifications

⁵ You can find information the federal government collected regarding the [customer journey](#) on the “Recovering From a Disaster” page on the [performance.gov](#) website.

⁶ Please see the following for more information: [Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans: Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101 Version 3.0](#).

⁷ Please see the following for more information: [Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits](#).

during an emergency. Ensure that you include services that target the identified needs of your community.

- Coordinate with partners to incorporate information on NRST benefits and other services into broader STT response plans. This information can include recognition that these benefits and services could supplement other resources to support impacted communities.
- Account for jurisdictional approval processes to ensure the plan can be in place soon after a disaster.
- Strategize how to coordinate with other available resources (e.g., the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and activities (e.g., mass care sheltering), considering potential benefit duplication.
- Plan staffing for operations during an emergency. Look internally and externally for potential sources of personnel. Consider forming a dedicated emergency response team that is appropriately trained and equipped to support implementation activities during a disaster or emergency.
- Document case management services provided during and after the activation of post-disaster benefits to help disaster survivors transition to other human service programs. Assist disaster survivors with enrollment in other human service programs for which they are eligible. Provide effective case management to minimize the need for participants to repeat their information across human service programs.

Understand how you will communicate information:

- Document how you will share and receive information from partners and the impacted communities. When possible, leverage pre-existing communication channels. Remember to vary your communication platforms (e.g., do not rely solely on internet-based communication) to help ensure you reach all members of your community.
- Ensure staff understand how they will receive information during an emergency. Explicitly identify how they will be notified when activated to support response activities.
- Develop messaging on eligibility and access to approved benefits and services for the different demographics (e.g., age groups, cultures, access and functional needs, and low literacy levels) that comprise your community.

Establish and document preparedness and response processes:

- Develop a process map, or similar documentation, that includes the steps, partners, and timelines associated with providing benefits and services following a disaster or emergency. This documentation should include any decision points that are required by leadership. You can use it to educate partners on the process and their responsibilities.

- Create various support materials such as job-aides, standard operating procedures (SOPs), templates, processes for non-electronic applications and eligibility verification, and other documents to help staff effectively implement NRST benefits and other services.
- Create just-in-time training that can be delivered during an emergency response to staff who are unfamiliar with the available benefits and services. The training should be focused on capturing the key tasks they will need to perform and clearly defining the populations that are eligible (e.g., families with children and household incomes below specific percentages of the federal poverty line).

Develop a data collection strategy:

- Ensure that the existing technology system can support implementation of both regular TANF and NRST benefits.
- Develop a plan for collecting and sharing data in the event that power or internet are unavailable and you are unable to access your technology system (i.e., create a non-electronic application and verification/eligibility processes and procedures).
- Work with partners to understand what information they need from you and what information you can obtain from them. Set up information sharing partnerships to support operations. For example, if you have an information sharing agreement with FEMA, you can readily receive information regarding individuals seeking assistance. You can use this information to assess the overall needs within the community and to assist with conducting targeted outreach.⁸
- Incorporate the option for a family to opt into sharing their personal information with partner organizations that are providing support (e.g., NGOs). Sharing this information can help streamline applications and the receipt of needed resources.
- Incorporate data collection that supports decision making, general situational awareness, or process improvement. Document how the information is collected, analyzed, and used.
- Incorporate data elements that help ensure post-disaster benefits and services are implemented equitably.

Train staff and partners:

- Develop a training curriculum to ensure that all staff understand the rules around approved benefits and services early (e.g., Who is eligible and who is not? How do the eligibility rules differ from those of regular TANF?). Provide the training on an annual basis.

⁸ Please see the following for more information: [Information Sharing: Guide for Private-Public Partnerships.](#)

- Deliver briefings to leadership to increase their awareness of your emergency preparedness and response strategy and increase their understanding of how the related benefits or services can be leveraged to support disaster survivors.⁹
- Increase partners' knowledge and understanding of your jurisdiction's strategy through an introductory-level training that describes what it is and how it impacts them.

Continuously identify other TANF flexibilities:

- Maintain an awareness of available federal TANF flexibilities. Monitor the [OFA/TANF website](#) for any notifications.
- Identify a process for streamlining jurisdiction approval of the TANF Plan during an emergency to reduce the time required to provide impacted families with benefits and services.

Playbook in Action

- **Preparation in Policy:** In fall 2020, a Midwest state’s human services agency codified a TANF policy that can be implemented in the case of a national or state emergency. The policy explicitly lays out TANF flexibilities, allowing them to respond to future disasters quickly. The policy allows for the state to provide NRST benefits for a certain set of defined purposes, including housing, clothing, utility payments, and more. It also permits relaxing of some work-related policies.
- **Emergency Offices:** Several states have dedicated teams in their human services departments that coordinate emergency preparedness and response. Creating a dedicated team for disaster management can ensure coordination and efficiency across human services—before disaster strikes.
- **Understanding TANF Flexibilities:** In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, OFA summarized [the flexibilities](#) available to agencies administering TANF.

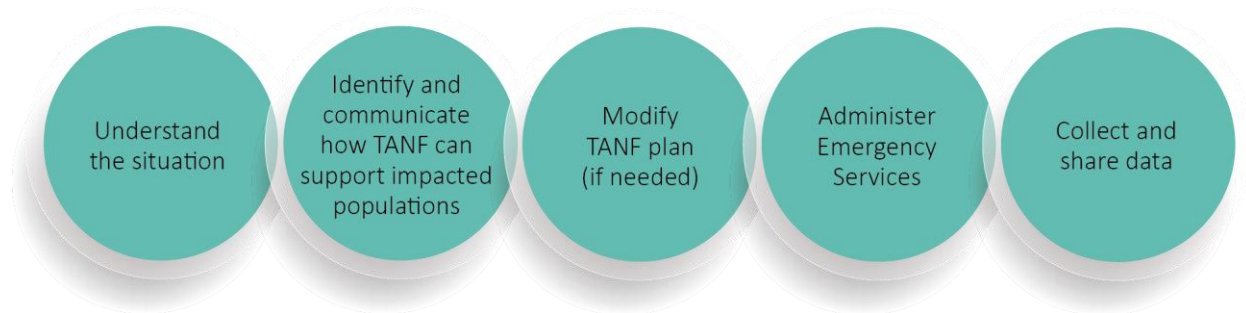


⁹ Please see the following for more information: [Using Federal TANF and State Maintenance-of-Effort Funds for Families in Areas Covered by a Federal or State Disaster Declaration.](#)



Response

When responding to a disaster, agencies should consider several key factors to ensure an effective response, as illustrated in the below graphic and recommendations.



Understand the situation:

- Establish a leadership team responsible for providing direction to staff, coordinating with partners, and ensuring leadership maintains situational awareness. This team can be a dedicated group of staff within your agency that is responsible for emergency preparedness and response.
- Collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., number of families impacted by the disaster or emergency, identified disaster-caused impacts, staff input) to identify challenges and impacts to the community.
- Understand the steps being taken by federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial partners to support impacted communities;¹⁰ having this understanding will help ensure your activities are appropriately aligned with those of partners and promote interagency collaboration. One approach is to participate in your emergency management agency’s recurring emergency operations coordination calls.

¹⁰ See key action “establish and maintain professional relationships” within the preparedness phase. Examples of partners include your jurisdiction’s emergency management agency and other human services program administrators.

Identify and communicate how your strategy can be used to support impacted populations:

- In cooperation with the interagency partners identified during the preparedness phase (e.g., the jurisdiction's emergency management agency, non-governmental organizations, and faith-based organizations), understand how NRST benefits and other services could be utilized by eligible disaster survivors.
- Connect with TANF administrators that have already implemented NRST benefits or other services for similar disasters. Identify potential pitfalls and promising practices that can be incorporated into your strategy.¹¹
- Communicate the utility of your strategy to leadership and relevant partners (e.g., the jurisdiction's emergency management agency). Ensure you are answering relevant questions related to the purpose, eligibility, timeline, and other requirements.

Key Point

It is critical to identify programs and resources supporting affected communities to determine how NRST benefits can fill gaps. NRST benefits can complement or follow initial disaster response efforts to aid affected families.

Consider whether you need to modify your TANF plan. If your plan needs to be updated, undertake the following steps:

1. Update the TANF plan to incorporate the benefits and services needed to support impacted families. Request technical assistance from OFA as needed.
2. Route the updated plan for jurisdictional leadership approval.
3. Submit an updated plan to your TANF Regional Program Specialist.
4. Communicate relevant updates to partners.

Administer your emergency services (e.g., NRST benefits and other services). While you do so:

- Maintain routine communication with your TANF Regional Program Specialist to receive technical assistance.
- Obtain STT approval to provide NRST benefits and other services. Leverage STT flexibilities to streamline the approval process. Provide briefs to leadership that highlight the need and justify their utilization.
- Follow established plans and processes to begin providing benefits and services in alignment with the overall response.
- Following the communications plan, communicate the availability of benefits and services to partners and the community. Partners can amplify the messaging to ensure impacted individuals are aware of it.

¹¹ Leverage the coalition that you should establish in the preparedness phase as part of the “establish and maintain professional relationships” key action.

- Participate or establish re-occurring meetings with partners to share information related to response activities.
- Coordinate the provision of case management services to NRST benefit recipients if these services are part of your plan.

Collect data that can be shared to support decision making and situational awareness:

- Ensure relevant aggregate data (e.g., number of people affected and the types of benefits needed) are shared with leadership and partners.
- If permissible, share individual information with partners (e.g., NGOs and FBOs) who are providing assistance that can meet survivors' needs.
- Collect information related to the provision of NRST benefits and other services by staff. The information collected should focus on the efficacy of processes, so that appropriate changes can be made to streamline and improve delivery.

Playbook in Action

- **Immediately Providing Financial Assistance:** At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Tennessee's Department of Human Services](#) quickly offered emergency cash assistance to families who lost their jobs or more than 50% of their household income. The Emergency Cash Assistance program gave up to two monthly cash payments to these families.
- **Simplifying Applications:** The [Owens Valley Career Development Center](#) streamlined their NRST benefits application, which is separate from their common TANF application. They request minimal information, understanding that families facing disaster will not have the time or resources to gather documents or complete a lengthy application. Owens Valley Career Development Center also increased the income limit for eligibility, allowing more families to receive NRST benefits.
- **Describing NRST Benefits in TANF Plans:** Following a natural disaster, one state permanently wrote NRST benefits into their state plan to ensure faster response times in the future.





Recovery

After disaster strikes and immediate needs are addressed, TANF agencies should take proactive steps toward recovery to swiftly restore support systems for affected families and communities. This playbook recommends the following key steps.



When **transitioning eligible individuals into human service programs**:

- Work with disaster survivors to communicate their eligibility for other human services programs. The disaster may cause more individuals to be eligible for human services programs.
- Coordinate with other jurisdiction-managed human services programs to streamline efforts to enroll eligible individuals into their programs.
- Share with impacted families any information from NGOs and faith-based organizations regarding available resources and services they may be eligible to receive (e.g., clothes and case management). NGOs and faith-based organizations may be able to further support a family’s recovery efforts after support from NRST benefits ends. This support is especially important for families that are outside of the eligibility criteria for other human services programs and still have disaster-caused unmet needs.

It is also important to **share collected data with relevant partners when appropriate**:

- Share data that can help shape short- and long-term recovery planning.
- Provide aggregate data to the TANF Regional Program Specialist to shape potential supplemental funding or to help with the development of recommendations that can be shared with all TANF administrators.
- Create a briefing product or a one-pager highlighting the support provided to impacted individuals. Share the product with leadership and partners.

Finally, take the opportunity to **reflect on lessons learned**:

- Conduct an after-action review to discuss what worked well and what could be improved when implementing NRST benefits or other services.
- Ensure you invite all partners to the discussion(s) to obtain a broader perspective.
- Update plans, SOPs, job-aides, trainings, and processes as needed.

Playbook in Action

- **Incorporating Lessons Learned from Disasters and Emergencies:** In 2022, Wisconsin’s Bureau of Working Families announced that a policy adjustment made earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed applicants to report prospective (expected) income instead of past income, was made a permanent part of the [Emergency Assistance Manual](#).
- **Sharing Lessons Learned with All TANF Administrators:** Peer TA published a set of [TANF Disaster Response Highlights](#), short (2-page) documents describing four state and Tribal TANF programs’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Appendix A

Table 1 – The Emergency Playbook for Federal Human Services Programs priority action areas with stated objectives

Priority Action Area	Objective
Establish strong, consistent, and effective communication with partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish strong, consistent, and effective communication. • Utilize multi-sector communication to build a unified disaster response, strengthen communication between partners, and ensure everyone involved is aware other’s roles and the disaster services available to them. • Communicate across sectors and agencies, including those representing disproportionately impacted communities. • Develop comprehensive disaster guidance, planning templates, training sessions, workshops, and other resources for effective two-way communication.
Implement real-time analytics, feedback loops, and ongoing data collection from grantees and other partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and analyze data promptly to understand the disaster. • Measure the success of disaster response and recovery efforts to support staff and agencies react to changing needs, including survivor needs. • Strengthen coordination among partners from local to federal levels through crucial feedback loops.
Promote cooperation among agencies, states, territories, tribes, local government, and non-federal entities to help achieve shared goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage interagency cooperation to achieve shared health, well-being, and safety missions. • Ensure that personnel from various sectors, including but not limited to human services, public health, medical, mental health, behavioral health, emergency management, and environmental sectors, are involved.
Identify waivers and flexibilities to support grantees and the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop waivers and flexibilities to reduce administrative burden, prioritize staff time, and more quickly meet needs of individuals and families. • Reduce the burden for disaster survivors via expanding flexibilities.
Address equity implications related to emergency response and recovery, including disaster-related traumatic stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage human service programs to reach all affected communities. • Ensure marginalized populations aren't further disadvantaged by disaster-related disruptions. • Address traumatic stress among affected populations.