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# Emergency Planning for Nonprofits

Resources to guide organizations  
through response and preparation

August 2020



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*In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the traditional territories in Alberta of the many First Nations and Métis, whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries.*

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# Preparation and Response to an Emergency

Nonprofits will need to prepare for a pandemic in order to reduce the impact on their organization and prepare for disruptions. While the immediacy of the COVID-19 emergency has dissipated, epidemiologists do not rule out a second wave.<sup>1</sup> There is no way of knowing when another crisis may hit, such as recession or natural disaster, and planning for an emergency is an essential part of all organizations' risk management efforts to reduce the impact of unexpected events.

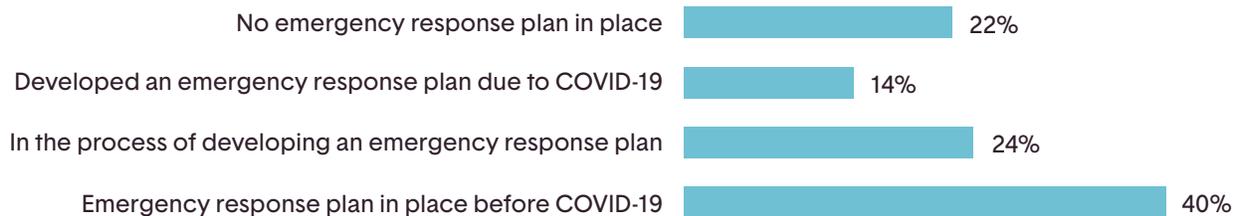
This guide will provide some practical emergency planning and preparations considerations to assist nonprofits in the event of a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The guide is intended to be used as a planning tool which identifies issues and critical elements of emergency preparedness that organizations should consider in planning for a pandemic.

Emergency preparedness is flexible and nimble, and meant to be catered to an organization's operations and programs. It provides nonprofits with tools to respond appropriately during times of uncertainty. Of the respondents to the 2020 Alberta Nonprofit Survey (ANS):

- only 40% indicated they had an emergency plan for health emergencies or natural disasters before COVID-19;
- 14% indicated they developed a plan due to COVID-19; and
- 46% are creating a plan or still do not have a plan in place [see figure 2].

**FIGURE 2**

## Nonprofits with an emergency response plan



Organizations in Fort McMurray were better prepared to deal with COVID-19 and its impacts, as one ANS respondent stated, "I believe our sector is relatively strong in Fort McMurray and was better prepared with business continuity plans due to the fire." This sentiment highlights the importance of a strong emergency response plan being in place prior to a crisis.

The following sections of this guide will help organizations with this planning and include recommendations for preparedness that you can implement within your nonprofit.

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## WORKPLACE PREPARATIONS

All organizations will need to plan to adjust their workplaces to accommodate public health risks, like COVID-19, and the resulting public health orders, and take every precaution to create a safe workplace for employees and clients. Preparedness Consultant Thomas Appleyard says that nonprofits should “think carefully about the precautionary principle. With this in mind, precautions and prevention must take into consideration the mode of transmission of the virus, as well as opportunities to protect individuals from infection.”<sup>2</sup>

**Based on lessons learned from the H1N1 virus (Swine Flu) pandemic, Rick Blickstead, former CEO of the Wellesley Institute, recommends the following preparations for nonprofits:**<sup>3</sup>

- Create a culture that encourages people to stay home even if it means additional payroll costs
- Set up systems for employees so they can work from home
- Set up job-sharing programs
- Create (and budget for) a new pandemic sick policy
- Partner with other organizations to replace front line staff who can't work from home
- Mitigate client risks for those that need to come to your organization to access services
- Keep track of clients who go to your workplace regularly

In 2009, the Alberta government developed a checklist for nonprofit organizations to help prepare them to respond to a pandemic, which can be found [here](#). The list includes how to plan for the impact of a pandemic on your organization, including developing communication strategies and creating policies, among other resources that will help with how to respond to a pandemic.

## HAVE AN UP-TO-DATE PLAN

As learned from the Calgary flood in 2013, having an emergency plan in place is vital for maintaining the safety and security of staff and clients, adapting quickly in a crisis, and continuing operations through the emergency and afterwards. These types of plans go beyond scenario planning to contingency planning, which considers the ‘worst-case scenario’.<sup>4</sup>

The Calgary floods in 2013 demonstrated that, planning for an emergency “is broad and considers a variety of scenarios and how an organization can respond. It details what needs to happen when disaster strikes, how an organization can continue to provide services, and how it can get back up and running once the crisis is over. Ideally, the emergency response plan is ingrained in the strategic operations of the organization.”<sup>5</sup>

Nonprofit organizations are crucial contributors to the vitality and well-being of communities, and their services are needed both during a crisis and after. “Community sector organizations play an active role in providing response and recovery services, especially for some of the more vulnerable members of our community such as newcomers, seniors, and individuals with disabilities – so it is especially important for these organizations to have systems and strategies in place to continue delivering their important services during an emergency.”<sup>6</sup>

As fallout for nonprofits continues due to the pandemic, planning becomes an essential part of an organization’s survival. SeaChange<sup>7</sup> has planning recommendations for nonprofits during the COVID-19 crisis, as summarized by LaPaina and MacIntosh:<sup>8</sup>

**Refocus on the mission.** All decisions should aim to advance the long-term mission of the organization, even at the short-term expense of vendors, partners, grantmakers, and staff.

**Understand your type of organization.** Are you a hibernator (for instance, a shuttered arts organization), a responder (such as a shelter or food bank, where demand is skyrocketing), or a hybrid (a group that can continue operating to some degree but does not deal directly with the pandemic’s effects, though it might adapt to do so)?

**Shorten time horizons.** Magical thinking leads to fatal delays. The executive director and board chair should speak daily, boards should meet at least monthly, and they should set up a committee to deal with COVID-19-related issues and get ready to make hard decisions.

**Understand the nexus of mission, cash, and control.** “Tough-minded,” “hard-nosed,” and “ruthless” are not adjectives that most nonprofit leaders usually embrace, but many will need to, and fast.

**Get help.** Get outside advice from people with relevant experience. Some boards might even consider an interim chief restructuring officer to support or temporarily replace, an overwhelmed leader.

**Plan for the longer-term.** Don’t weather the crisis only to ignore what will happen afterward. Stay in regular discussions with donors, and be realistic about the significant cuts in philanthropy and government support that are likely in the COVID-19 aftermath.

Finally, as nonprofits did after the 2013 Calgary flood, organizations should document what is being learned during the crisis and integrate it into formal plans.<sup>9</sup>

A useful resource with more in-depth information for nonprofits about planning for business continuity and disaster recovery can be found [here](#).

## ESTABLISH PARTNERSHIPS

Nonprofits are known to be collaborators, and their strengths in partnering with other nonprofits, donors, businesses, and all orders of government are very valuable in an emergency.<sup>10</sup> One step to withstanding the fallout from the pandemic may be to “explore mergers and other forms of collaboration, divestments, or even thoughtful dissolutions now; options will narrow as time passes.”<sup>11</sup> Nonprofits should not only remain open to partnerships, but actively seek them out and work even more deliberately together during a crisis. The research from the Fort McMurray fires revealed that nonprofits with stronger partnerships – not only with orders of government but also with other nonprofits – were more likely to be involved in core decision-making processes during recovery.<sup>12</sup>

Lessons learned from the 2013 flood in Calgary also support that there is value in developing relationships with other nonprofits and all orders of government. As partnerships emerge, there’s also value in developing reciprocal agreements as part of the emergency planning process.<sup>13</sup> Nonprofits need to work very closely with the communities and individuals who they serve. Community support is critical; existing relationship partnerships are sources of volunteers, support, and cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

## INFORM AND EMPOWER STAFF

As the sector moves past the initial shock of the pandemic emergency and enters a new state of operating in a long-term crisis situation, organizations will need to keep in mind that responding to a disaster is a team effort. Staff need to be informed, have a clear understanding of the organization’s mission, know their role during the crisis, and have the authority to make quick decisions.<sup>15</sup> Organizations need to make sure that

staff have the knowledge and the confidence to work at and contribute to the organization in a time of emergency. Effective organizational operations rely on staff being engaged, empowered, and informed. Difficult decisions may need to be made; transparency and honesty become very important in these circumstances.<sup>16</sup> A practical method to incorporate this would be through a communication strategy for staff, clients, and stakeholders. The ANS results indicated that 75% of respondents have a communication strategy for staff and stakeholders related to COVID-19.

Ongoing orientation and testing for emergency preparedness are important to embed within the organization so that when disaster strikes, everyone is prepared with a common understanding of the organization’s response.<sup>17</sup>

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## BUILD FINANCIAL RESILIENCY

Financial resiliency is fundamental to any organization, and nonprofits are no exception. Financial resiliency is important to build at all times, and there are many strategies to do so.<sup>18</sup> It becomes even more important in an emergency situation to focus attention on building this resiliency and preparing for uncertainty by putting your organization in the best possible financial position.<sup>19</sup> One respondent to the Sustainability Network and Environment Funders Canada's flash survey highlighted the importance of financial preparation, saying, "If we did not have a contingency fund built over the past six years, we would not be able to survive."<sup>20</sup>

The primary recommendation for nonprofits is to make sure financial policies are in place that allow for access to additional cash flow during a disaster, operating reserves to support rebuilding, and to secure fundraising expertise and advice.<sup>21</sup>

### **First, organizations will want to:**

- understand their cash position (the Federation of Calgary Municipalities has [created a video](#) to help organizations understand their cash flow position);
- assess revenue streams and damage; and
- look at the dual bottom line, which includes a conventional financial outcome and social impact outcome.<sup>22</sup>

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### **To fill the gap between operating needs and expenses, and revenues, and to conserve cash, organizations will need to:**<sup>23</sup>

- reduce expenses, delay payments, accelerate efforts to obtain cash and other revenue, and explore new fundraising opportunities;
- negotiate with the landlord or take advantage of local bans on evictions;
- pay only the most essential vendors;
- ask for the next tranche of a multipart grant or extra help from long-time donors and board members; and
- explore new COVID-19-related grant and loan opportunities.

Finally, an often overlooked part of ensuring financial resiliency in a time of crisis is the regular review and update of insurance policies. Even if this step has not been taken, it is important to discuss this with your insurance broker once a crisis hits to ensure you know what is covered under your policy and can access any and all support available.<sup>24</sup>

## FUNDRAISE AND BUILD A CASE

Fundraising is a core part of maintaining a financially healthy nonprofit, and it must continue during an emergency, with a quick pivot. As the priorities of donors and the community experience a drastic shift, nonprofits will benefit from building a compelling case to demonstrate the impact of the emergency on their operations. Recent reporting shows that organizations targeting their fundraising efforts specifically to the effects of the pandemic on their organizations and the people they serve are having success in their efforts.<sup>25</sup> Specific recommendations from Tom Iselin for managing fundraising efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic include the following:<sup>26</sup>

**Inform your donors.** Communicate to your donors about your direct impact on managing the response to COVID-19 and how you are keeping your staff safe while doing so. Keep these communications very succinct and to the point.

**Empathize with your donors.** Demonstrate that you understand these are trying times for everyone, and no one has been left untouched by the effects of the pandemic, economically, socially, or in health. Donors should know that you care about how they are faring in a unique circumstance that has seen a massive impact on the health and social systems, as well as the economy. Many people are facing uncertainty in their income status, their business ventures, and in family arrangements, such as school, childcare, or people with parents or other dependents in care.

**Only ask for money now if you need it.** General requests for donations are not likely to be well-received, but if you have a specific need, particularly because of the impacts of the virus, then make your ask very direct. This might include requests to help fund your particular cause or opportunities to support your organization's operations like utilities, rent, or other expenses.

**Engage donors and volunteers.** Communicate with your donors and volunteers with opportunities to support your organization by other means than solely financial, such as sending notes of encouragement to staff or clients, making phone calls, or other contributions of time. Your donors and volunteers are connected to your organization because they care about what you are doing, and you will want to keep them invested in your mission.

In addition to these fundraising recommendations specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, past experiences in difficult times – such as economic downturns – also have many lessons to offer nonprofits in managing fundraising efforts in a crisis. This list of suggestions from Mal Warwick is to help with managing fundraising in challenging times:<sup>27</sup>

**Strengthen your case for giving.** A crisis is a good opportunity to reassess your case for giving, and communicate the urgent need for funds – as well as the specific need for those funds.

**Stick with what works.** While your messaging and funding requests will likely need to recalibrate, this is not a time to get rid of all strategies that work for your organization.

**Cut costs with a scalpel, not an ax.** All nonprofits will be looking at cost-saving measures as they enter the economic downturn as a result of the global pandemic. Fundraising efforts must continue to maintain financial health, and any cost-cutting in this area needs to be considered in the context of long-term planning.

*“It doesn’t take long to destroy an effective fundraising operation – and then where will your programs be?”<sup>28</sup>*

**Fish where the big fish are.** This recommendation comes with the suggestion to segment your donors based on giving history so that fundraising efforts can yield a higher return for an investment of time and money. If your organization already has a segmentation plan, this is a good time to target donors with a greater history of giving.

**Be attentive to your donors.** Resist the temptation to assume that your donors will know your organization is working to address the needs of your clients and communities. Communicate regularly, with attention given to the current context and with an understanding that donors also have pressing needs in their own lives.

**Do your due diligence.** Research prospective donors and personalize your communications.

**Step up your efforts online.** With current limits on group gatherings and a shared respect for people’s health and well-being, online fundraising efforts are more important now than ever. If your organization does not already have it, now may be the right time to invest in technology to better support online fundraising efforts.

**Break down the silos.** It might seem like a counter-intuitive suggestion to coordinate fundraising with other organizations, but there is some precedent for that in Calgary. The RESOLVE campaign saw nine housing and homeless organizations collaborate to raise capital funds, which made it possible to provide housing support for more than 1,800 Calgarians. This initiative was prompted by funding organizations and saw a more efficient effort to raise funds for much-needed housing, without multiple agencies submitting multiple applications for the same dollars. In the current context, nonprofits might want to seriously consider how they can work together to raise support for their causes.

Fundraising is an essential function for nonprofits as they navigate very difficult circumstances that are likely to remain challenging for some time. Nonprofits will need to remain nimble and flexible in their fundraising plans while simultaneously staying invested and focused on the future.

## COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

When a crisis hits, nonprofits leap into action. They get to work making sure that the individuals and communities they are serving are looked after, and they start advocating for what they need. In this type of situation, it can be tempting to neglect communications in favour of getting tasks accomplished. However, it is important to create effective communications with staff, board members, volunteers, partners, and others during the crisis.<sup>29</sup> Organizations should communicate consistently even when – and maybe especially when – things are not going well or the future is uncertain.<sup>30</sup> Stakeholders are connected to nonprofits for a reason, and communicating honestly is important in maintaining trust and in reassuring others that they are all in this together. Communications strategies will need to adapt. Here are some specific recommendations from Vanessa Chase for doing so in 2020, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic:<sup>31</sup>

**Don't throw out what you've already planned.** Plans will need to be adjusted, but there were good reasons for the ones that have previously been developed. Instead of completely starting over, cull through your nonprofit's communications strategy and divide what you had currently planned into three categories – essential "must-keep" communications, "maybe" communications, and communications to postpone. To decide how to categorize planned communications, consider the plans in the pandemic context and re-prioritize accordingly.

**Determine what your community needs from your organization.** In light of this new reality, and the fact that some of your communications plans will no longer be relevant, it will likely be advisable to find out what your community most needs from your organization. Find out what it is that you can communicate to stay relevant, topical, and helpful.

**Plan for communications that reflect the environment and tone.** Consider the current events and the impacts on your stakeholders very carefully when crafting communications. You want to be tuned in so that your communications are not tone-deaf and out of touch. You can find a good test to run your communications through [here](#), which details the 6 R's of message relevance.

**Keep evaluating and stay nimble.** Things are changing rapidly, and that is not conducive to making rigid plans that are not open to alteration. As more information becomes available, as circumstances continue to evolve on a near-daily basis, nonprofits must be ready to adapt.

Communication plans are going to be in flux in this rapidly changing environment. Nonprofits must stay engaged with all their stakeholders and communicate thoughtfully, responsibly, and usefully.

## BUILD REDUNDANCY AND BACK UPS

Most nonprofits are expected to operate on thin margins, but this strategy does not lend itself to emergency planning. There is value in having back-up plans and built-in redundancy when crisis strikes.<sup>32</sup> Redundancy and back-up plans will have to be justified and should be a source of strength in funding requests when included as part of a robust emergency plan.

Data redundancy is particularly important in a digital age; so, too, is information redundancy.<sup>33</sup> Ask yourself: Do multiple team members have access to contact lists, banking information, and other data? What about the ability to update the organization's website and/or databases?

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the discouragement for nonprofits to have cash reserves has been detrimental. Many nonprofits are laying off staff, some have closed permanently, and others are looking at the distinct possibility that they will have to do the same, due to financial stress.<sup>34</sup> There needs to be a shift in thinking about what constitutes a responsible approach to financial stability for nonprofits, particularly in the context of emergency planning.

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