

### **Purpose of this note:**

On April 17, 2023, the MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance hosted a virtual roundtable with 15 invited participants. They represented academics, public agencies, emergency managers, non-profit organizations, and organizations that represent persons with disabilities. Invitations to attend the virtual roundtable were sent to Advisory Board members and partners for the project titled *Interdisciplinary Study of Evacuating Persons with Disabilities from an Urban Centre* funded by Accessibility Standards Canada and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Kevin Quigley is the principal investigator.

This briefing note summarizes research findings and the roundtable discussions, including recommendations. Participants discussed the issues raised and their perspectives formed from their professional and personal experiences. Their comments are summarized but not attributed.

### **About the MacEachen Institute:**

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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## **Return and Recovery from Mass Evacuations:**

Improving Accessibility for  
People with Disabilities

**May 2023**

### **What We Recommend**

- ◆ Emergency responders need specific knowledge about the needs of residents with disabilities to ensure a residence is safe, accessible, and operational according to their needs.
- ◆ Opportunities for people with disabilities, caregivers, and emergency managers to engage directly with emergency planning are vital. The disability community is not homogenous.
- ◆ The process must provide caregiving services to enable caregivers to complete their own return and recovery tasks (e.g., repair work, insurance processes, clearing damage or debris).
- ◆ The process must also provide support to obtain insurance and disaster-relief funding in a timely manner.
- ◆ Most people have never been evacuated. Strategies to prepare for first-time evacuees will be important for return and recovery.
- ◆ Training should be developed for emergency responders and other professionals (e.g., insurance) and volunteers involved in return and recovery processes with the goal to improve accessibility. Such training programs should include disability organizations in a leading role.
- ◆ We need a better understanding of who the key stakeholders are (e.g., emergency organizations, first responders, volunteers, service providers) and their responsibilities during and following emergencies.

## Presentation on Research Findings from Return and Recovery Project Phase

The people responsible for mass evacuations are confronted with significant challenges: they must coordinate limited resources in a dynamic context, often in degraded conditions, and their decisions are consequential, time-constrained, and sometimes irreversible. These events are happening more often and at a growing and significant human, financial, and environmental cost. To develop a shared understanding of evacuation risks, we partnered leading risk scholars with those responsible for mass evacuation and organizations that advance the concerns of people with disabilities.

Advancements in accessibility and rights for people with disabilities have increased concern at all orders of government for improving emergency services for people with disabilities. Understanding how demographic changes and government policies are changing the context is important. For example, more people with disabilities and seniors are living at home; rates of disability increase as the population ages. Often the main focus of emergency managers is to increase public emergency awareness, but how can emergency processes be better informed by the perceptions and needs of the public, especially people with disabilities?

There are many different functional needs and experiences throughout the disability communities that should be accounted for in emergency responses. For example, emergency responses should consider diverse physical, sensory, and cognitive needs as well as the varieties of experiences in the disability community, even between people with seemingly similar disabilities. There are unique needs to consider, such as access to supplies and supports such as food, transportation, medical treatment, mental health services, support workers, and service animals.

There are four key stages to evacuation: communication and alert, transportation, shelter, and return to community. This presentation focused on return to community and recovery from evacuation. The purpose is to understand how we can improve the return and recovery phase of an evacuation for people with disabilities. Unless otherwise stated, we refer to “recovery” as the restoring of livelihoods and health, including economic, physical, social, cultural, and environmental assets, systems, and activities, of a disaster-affected community (Kushma 2022).

### Key Findings from Scholarly Literature

- ◆ **Evacuations are not common in Canada but have increased in frequency and severity over the past ten years.** Over 670,000 people have been evacuated in Canada during 273 evacuation events between 1990 and 2020. The most common events resulting in evacuation are floods and wildfires (Public Safety Canada 2023).
- ◆ **Managing safe return to communities following an evacuation is a significant challenge.** In many ways, the decision to announce the return to a community is comparable to a decision to mandate an evacuation (Stallings 1991, 183). There are similar concerns for public safety and individual risk perceptions that are important to consider. The Government of British Columbia enlists the help of volunteer engineers to support this work.
- ◆ **People with disabilities and caregivers have unique requirements to ensure their residences are safe and accessible for their return,** including access to assistive devices and equipment, access to utilities and telecommunications, considerations for service animals.
- ◆ **Insurance and disaster relief programs have a role in disaster recovery, but processes and policies need to be clear and user-friendly.** Residents need complete knowledge of their coverage and claim systems should be easy to use and efficient, with payments made quickly.
- ◆ **Disasters can have significant impacts on mental health, particularly post-traumatic stress, and cause long-term health and economic impacts.** Access to trauma-informed psychosocial supports can support disaster recovery over the long term.
- ◆ **The most resilient communities are often the most connected.** Strong interconnectedness between members of a community often means the community can be more resilient to disasters. Social

capital of individual members of a community and the community overall are also important factors for resiliency.

## Key Findings from Surveys

*(Conducted between October and December 2021)*

- ◆ **Top concerns with return to community relate to addressing damage and debris, alongside restoration of utilities and access to necessities (e.g., safe food and water).** Respondents with disabilities and caregivers noted that repair work is a concern, as are considerations for managing repairs while also providing caregiving support.
- ◆ **Lack of public experience with evacuation:** 90% of survey respondents (people with disabilities and caregivers) have not experienced an evacuation, which poses significant challenges for emergency managers. People's plans likely have significant gaps. Regardless of advance preparation, people may experience emotional and psychological stress that will further complicate an evacuation.
- ◆ **Respondents identified their reliance on insurance to recover and replace lost or damaged property.** Some people with disabilities noted they felt comfortable with their insurance coverage and felt fortunate to have financial resources to help recover from an emergency. It was also raised that people have varying degrees of insurance coverage and may not be able to pay out-of-pocket expenses (e.g., insurance deductibles).
- ◆ **Emergency manager respondents identified that emergency personnel need to have knowledge of requirements to ensure a residence is accessible and operational** (e.g., access to utilities, free of hazards, access to supplies and supports such as food, transportation, mental health services, and support workers). There are also considerations for medical equipment and assistive devices that impact safe return to community for people with disabilities, as well as service animals and their needs.

## What We Discussed

Each jurisdiction has its own process to lift an emergency order that has mandated an evacuation. At times, third parties (e.g., contractors) are involved in repair work. Concerns about impacts on dignity of risk were raised as a caution to ensure responses are not paternalistic and limit the dignity of the people processes are intended to support.

The fact that evacuations are rare events and most Canadians have never experienced them means there will be significant challenges for first-time evacuees as these events increase in frequency and severity. Members at the roundtable raised that it is important to ensure that emergency responses consider the needs of renters and people in poverty in addition to homeowners.

Personal support workers are often strained for resources and capacity and this would be accentuated during an emergency situation where there will be increased reliance on personal support workers. There needs to be support for workers in these fields.

The role of insurance is important as recently demonstrated in the response to post-tropical storm Fiona. Residential insurance claims in response to Fiona were 4 to 5 times higher than other disasters. Losses were most significant in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Support to navigate insurance and relief funding processes following an emergency was recommended.

Typically, insurance companies have the goal to repair and rebuild in the same location. The importance of implementing "build back better" concepts emerged, particularly with respect to insurance processes and the current focus on adhering to minimum standards. While insurance companies will make repairs according to the most up-to-date building codes, more should be done to incentivize and encourage principles of building back better to improve resiliency rather than returning people to exactly what they had in place before the disaster. "Managed retreat" was also

discussed as processes to relocate families living in vulnerable areas (e.g., coastal).

Training should be put in place for all professionals and volunteers involved in emergency response (e.g., responders, insurance adjusters, non-profit volunteers) that is led by people with disabilities with the aim of making emergency responses more accessible to diverse functional needs.

Implications of widespread issues with access to safe and accessible housing on emergency responses were raised. It is also important to recognize the needs of rural communities and implications of access, or lack thereof, to transportation.

The roundtable discussion informed our recommendations and will continue to inform our research in this area. For more information about the project, [see the MacEachen Institute website.](#)

### **Methods Statement**

The project analyzes four stages of evacuation: communication and alert, transportation, shelter, and return to community with a focus on improvements for people with disabilities. This briefing note focuses on the return and recovery phase of the project.

We surveyed 29 people with disabilities, some caregivers, and eight emergency managers to understand key considerations from different perspectives. Survey responses were collected between October and December 2021. We reviewed academic literature and other publicly available material.

Academics, public agencies, emergency managers, non-profit organizations, and organizations that represent persons with disabilities met to discuss our recent survey results and opportunities improve evacuation for persons with disabilities.

### **References**

Kushma, J. (2022). Case Studies in Disaster Recovery: A Volume in the Disaster and Emergency Management: Case Studies in Adaptation and Innovation Series. Elsevier Science & Technology.

[https://books.google.com/books/about/Case\\_Studies\\_in\\_Disaster\\_Recovery.html?id=aXf5wgEACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Case_Studies_in_Disaster_Recovery.html?id=aXf5wgEACAAJ)

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Stallings, R.A. (1991). Ending Evacuations. International Journal of Mass Emergencies & Disasters, 9(2), 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/028072709100900205>

### **MacEachen Institute Briefing Notes on Emergency Evacuation for People with Disabilities**

[Mass Evacuation Planning for the Halifax Peninsula](#)

[Accessible, Functional Sheltering for People with Disabilities](#)

[Communication and Alert for Mass Evacuations: Improving Accessibility for People with Disabilities](#)