

# Transit Disaster Response Twitter Chat October 8, 2019

## Summary

Kelly J Scalf, Okanogan County Transit Authority (Washington State) and Michelle D. Horne and Jaimie Ainsworth, Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development led a [#TransitDisasterResponse](#) Twitter Chat about resources and strategies for disaster planning, response and recovery, and how rural and tribal transit agencies can play an important role in these efforts. Participants learned practical ways for agencies to help their communities during fires, floods, tornadoes, or any other disaster or emergency.

Visit the [chat transcript](#) for questions asked during the chat and attendees' replies. Answers to chat questions are provided below.

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**Question 1:** What types of natural disasters have affected your area in the past few years? How have they impacted your communities and transportation?

**Answers:**

- Florida RTAP described how approximately two years ago a tornado hit Cape Coral, FL - EOC activated. In 2017, Hurricane Irma affected SW Florida, causing transit evacuation routing. In 2018, Hurricane Michael devastated Bay County and completely collapsed their public transit system. The Bay County area is still adjusting and receiving assistance from the state. They leveraged the use of state resources and worked out of alternative locations. Assistance was also received from other agencies in the state.
- TRB just released an [article about landslides](#) from over 100 years ago.
- National RTAP held a [webinar on Fire and Flood](#). Louisiana considers floods and hurricanes as annual events. The threat of an event raises awareness for having a plan. Some communities are well prepared and some are still developing processes. There seems to be improvement on voluntary evacuations.

**Question 2:** How is emergency transportation handled in your state?

**Answers:**

- U.S. DOT provides [best practices case studies](#) about funding for states' transit disaster response.
- Washington State and Louisiana require counties to establish emergency transportation plans. In Washington, counties are all required to have an emergency management plan. Emergency transportation is a required element. In Louisiana, local governments are responsible for transportation activities and state only activated under state declaration.

**Question 3:** What do you feel is the “first step” a transit agency should take when disaster strikes?

**Answers:**

- [Palm Tran prioritized most vulnerable populations](#) throughout Hurricane Dorian and provided more than 300 trips for residents with disabilities and special needs leading up to the storm.
- National RTAP's [Transit's Role in Emergency Response](#) states, “First, decide whether your agency will participate in emergency response. When the phone rings, it is sometimes too late to decide.”
- Kelly Scalf advised, “The first step actually happens before the disaster strikes. That step is contacting your local emergency management agency and developing a working relationship and agreement for mutual aid, etc.” Before they could even really get started with service, they had their first fires. They assisted where they could, and immediately began developing an agreement with their county emergency management.
- Michelle Horne and Jamie Ainsworth recommended, “Build partnerships and develop a written plan.”

**Question 4:** Tell us about the transit disaster response “players” you work with. Examples: Office of Emergency Preparedness, local emergency preparedness decisionmakers, etc.

**Answers:**

- Since Okanogan County Transit Authority was the youngest transit agency in the state, they started contacting other transit agencies nearby to see what they had for agency and community. They also used local Red Cross resources, including preparedness manuals for individual households. They have lists of what to take to a shelter, what to pack for evacuation, pet info, and emergency contact recommendations.
- Participants felt that National RTAP training and other local training has been very helpful in identifying what we needed to do to prepare for a disaster. National RTAP has working relationships with organizations that provide technical assistance, training, and advocacy services to transit industry stakeholders. Many of National RTAP's [partners](#) have resources to help with disasters.

**Question 5:** What lessons has your agency learned from responding to previous natural disasters?

**Answers:**

- Okanogan County Transit Authority trains their staff each year to help them prepare their own household for potential emergencies and evacuation. If the workforce is focused on their own situation, they aren't prepared to help others.
- Communication and building relationships prior to emergencies are critical!

**Question 6:** Are you involved in emergency transportation contracts or cooperative agreements? Talk about your role and the process.

**Answers:**

- Okanogan County Transit Authority included staff costs, vehicle costs, insurance, fuel, everything we would include in operating costs.
- [ProcurementPRO](#) is a National RTAP web app to guide rural and tribal transit agencies and State DOTs to through FTA procurement procedures and provides the proper certifications and clauses.

**Question 7:** Are there any helpful online resources you turn to for disaster information?

**Answers:**

- Louisiana has a web-based [Louisiana Transit Providers Guide](#) that local emergency officials use for parish resources when evacuating.
- National RTAP's [Driver Training Best Practices Spotlight](#) article discusses Driver Bootcamps, which can prepare drivers for disasters. They also developed a comprehensive [Disasters Topic Guide](#).
- Red Cross has superb resources. Here is one of their helpful articles from today about [being prepared for wildfires](#).

**Question 8:** How do agencies receiving FTA funds handle DOT reporting requirements and what may be eligible for reimbursement?

**Answers:**

- Read FTA's [Response and Recovery for Declared Emergencies and Disasters: A Resource Document for Transit Agencies](#).

**Question 9:** Transit agencies can't wait until an emergency strikes. How do you build relationships all year long to be prepared?

**Answers:**

- Jamie and Michelle discussed the importance of understanding partners' needs, knowing contractual obligations, participating in coordination meetings, and holding regular communication throughout the year.
- Don't let the conversation end with this Twitter Chat. The community can [connect](#) with National RTAP in many ways – phone, email, chat, social media, and in person. A great suggestion for future training was mock table-top emergency training, along with a model for how to develop this training and how to operate it to practice the plans. Stay tuned!