

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT *and* DISASTER PREPAREDNESS *in the* CITY OF ST. LOUIS



A Vision for Response through a Social Work Lens

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the memory of Juan Baltazar, Delois Holmes, Larry Patrick, Patricia Penelton, and Rena Scott-Lyles, the five individuals who tragically lost their lives during the May 16, 2025 tornado that struck the St. Louis area.

We hope to honor their stories by recognizing the critical importance of being prepared when devastating natural disasters hit. We lift up their names and call St. Louis to action to continue strengthening our community bonds, improve our warning and response systems, and organize to prevent such losses in the future.

We also extend our heartfelt sympathies to their families, friends, and neighbors, as well as all of those who have suffered in the wake of this tragedy. We hope this report is a step toward a safer, more resilient future.

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Executive Summary

Purpose and Scope

This report provides an exploration of disaster preparedness in St. Louis City, Missouri, integrating principles of social work and community development to propose inclusive, equitable, and effective approaches to emergency planning. It seeks to empower social workers and community development organizations to more effectively prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies and disasters, particularly as the frequency and intensity of climate-related events continue to rise across the United States. In this context, the report analyzes the city's local vulnerabilities, available resources, and existing gaps, providing a roadmap for strengthening collaboration, enhancing communication, and building long-term resilience guided by a social work lens. The report aims to:

- **Evaluate the current emergency preparedness infrastructure in the City of St. Louis,**
- **Identify existing resources and service gaps,**
- **Center community engagement and social connection as tools of resilience,**
- **Highlight the critical role of social workers and community development organizations,**
- **Offer recommendations grounded in social equity and local empowerment.**

Background and Urgency: Why This Matters

The United States experiences unprecedented climate-related disasters, with 2023 alone witnessing 28 billion-dollar events, the highest number on record.¹ In this evolving landscape, St. Louis City is facing threats such as flooding, extreme heat, tornadoes, and earthquakes, particularly due to its location in Tornado Alley, proximity to the New Madrid Seismic Zone, and being at the confluence of three major rivers. These risks are compounded by aging infrastructure, inadequate stormwater systems, and pronounced urban heat island effects.

Yet, traditional emergency response efforts often overlook the social and emotional dimensions of preparedness, particularly the roles of social networks, trust, and connectedness. Research consistently shows that socially connected communities recover more effectively from disasters, while vulnerable and isolated groups such as older adults, low-income residents, people with disabilities, and non-English speakers are disproportionately affected and face significantly higher risks.

In St. Louis City, infrastructure fragmentation, outdated emergency plans, and disjointed agency coordination further limit the city's ability to respond effectively. While first responders like the City Emergency Management Agency (CEMA) and the Red Cross play central roles in immediate disaster response, they cannot meet the full spectrum of needs alone. This is where social workers and community development organizations become essential, as they have the connections, the cultural knowledge, and on-the-ground presence needed to fill key gaps in planning, communication, and response.

Identified Gaps

Despite the presence of numerous services, agencies, and volunteer efforts across St. Louis City, significant systemic gaps continue to limit the effectiveness of emergency and disaster preparedness. These gaps compromise equity, coordination, and the ability to respond swiftly and inclusively when crises occur:

- **Fragmented Coordination Across Jurisdictions:** St. Louis City and surrounding counties operate with inconsistent emergency plans, infrastructure, and protocols, leading to confusion and inefficiencies, particularly during emergencies that span multiple jurisdictions. Coordination between government agencies and community-based organizations is often ad hoc, siloed, and reactive rather than strategic.
- **Outdated and Inaccessible Emergency Plans:** Several official disaster response and hazard mitigation plans are outdated or not readily accessible to the public, with the exception of the 2020-2025 St. Louis Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan which is currently being updated for the next five year period, reducing transparency and limiting opportunities for public engagement and accountability. This lack of visibility weakens community awareness and preparedness.
- **Insufficient Inclusion of Vulnerable Populations:** High-risk groups, including unhoused individuals, people with disabilities, older adults, non-English speakers, and undocumented immigrants, are often excluded from formal disaster planning and outreach. Emergency messaging is rarely multilingual or accessible, and planning processes frequently neglect mobility, communication, or healthcare needs.
- **Underutilization and Disconnection of Grassroots Efforts:** Community-based groups and mutual aid networks, such as St. Louis Winter Outreach, play

essential roles in real-time response, exemplified by the May 16, 2025 St. Louis tornado and the overwhelming community-based disaster response. However, these groups often operate without formal recognition, funding, or integration into official emergency management systems. As a result, their potential impact remains underleveraged.

- **Lack of Investment in Social Capital:** While social networks, community trust, and neighborhood leadership are essential components of immediate response and long-term recovery, current strategies do not intentionally prioritize building or sustaining these networks. This is a missed opportunity to strengthen community resilience from the ground up.
- **Funding Constraints:** Local emergency agencies like City of St. Louis Emergency (CEMA) are under-resourced, limiting their ability to coordinate effectively, update public plans, and engage in proactive community outreach.

Recommendations: A Four-Pillar Approach

1

Preparedness

- **Integrate Social Workers into Official Disaster Response Systems:** Social workers should have formal roles on planning commissions (e.g., Local Emergency Planning Committees, or LEPCs) and emergency preparedness boards to bring holistic, trauma-informed approaches to community disaster planning.
- **Promote Resilience through Policy and Planning:** Encourage urban redevelopment projects that integrate green infrastructure, heat mitigation, and flood resistance. Incorporate disaster risk reduction in housing, zoning, and land use policies, particularly in low-income areas.

2

Engagement

- **Enhance Public Engagement:** Launch public awareness campaigns, participatory planning processes, and citizen preparedness workshops. Encourage participation in CERT programs through schools, libraries, and local CDCs.

3

Collaboration

- **Strengthen Community-based Disaster Planning:** Develop roundtables or task forces that bring together social workers, CEMA, CDCs, neighborhood corps, and mutual aid groups to co-develop localized emergency response strategies.

4

Representation

- **Invest in Inclusive Communications:** Expand emergency messaging tools to include multilingual alerts, visual aids, and low-tech options for those without internet or mobile access. Partner with trusted community institutions, such as libraries, churches, and nonprofits, to disseminate information. These were pivotal in the disaster response to the 2025 St. Louis tornado.
- **Empower Neighborhood-level Response Networks:** Fund and train local organizations to serve as on-the-ground emergency responders, coordinators, and information hubs, particularly in historically marginalized communities.

Conclusion

Disasters are not just natural; they are social. Preparedness must go beyond infrastructure to include equity, relationships, and collective care. This report provides a roadmap for embedding community voice, trauma-informed practice, and neighborhood-scale coordination into St. Louis City's disaster preparedness strategy. By elevating the role of social work and leveraging the strengths of grassroots organizations, the city can build a more connected, resilient, safe, and just future.

Literature Review

Background

The occurrence and intensity of natural and climate disasters, such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and extreme wildfires, have been increasing steadily in the United States over the last several decades. In 2023, the U.S. experienced a record-breaking 28 natural disasters, each incurring over \$1 billion in damages.¹ By comparison, the average number forty years ago was 3.3 billion-dollar disasters per year. The sharp rise in billion-dollar disasters represents an eight-fold increase over a relatively short period of time, highlighting the increasing occurrence and intensity of natural and climate disasters. Scientists point to several factors that are driving the increase in natural disasters, including human-driven climate change, poor land use and development decisions, as well as shifts in population migration.² However, the consequences of major natural disasters are not limited to the economic costs. They often lead to secondary impacts, including displacement, mental health issues, daily business disruption, disease outbreaks, environmental damage, and high death tolls.³ Fortunately, fatalities due to natural disasters have decreased in the United States in recent years due to improved infrastructure.⁴ Still, the sheer number and magnitude of these events make communities increasingly susceptible to long-term secondary impacts.

Social connection has been shown to lessen the impact of disasters, with more socially connected communities faring better post-disaster than less-connected communities.⁵ In the last fifty years, however, the U.S. has witnessed a worrisome decline in social connection, increasing susceptibility to devastating effects of disasters.⁶ Building community resilience through increased social connection is a mechanism through which social workers and community-building organizations can help their communities better prepare for and respond to future natural disasters and emergencies. In particular, social capital, defined as “the networks and support that people rely upon in their daily lives, the trust that they develop with each other and institutions, and the degree to which people are prepared to help each other without obligation,” has begun to be recognized as a critical piece of the puzzle.⁷

Social capital is beneficial in all five stages of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Communities that are more emotionally connected are more likely to engage in disaster preparedness, regardless of the severity of the threat, and are more likely to have shared social norms surrounding disaster preparedness.^{8,9} Shared social norms may include helping older adults and vulnerable populations prepare for disasters, following recommendations from official sources of information, and stockpiling resources in the event of an

emergency. Social networks are important for the informal distribution of information and aid; this effect is most powerful for lower-income families and individuals.^{8,9,10} Communities with strong social ties are able to build back more quickly following a disaster than those with weaker ties, largely due to volunteers coming together to support fellow community members.⁸

While social capital has been linked to improved natural disaster-related outcomes, the inverse is also true. Researchers have found that socially isolated individuals are less likely to engage in disaster preparedness, or to even consider the importance of doing so.¹¹ Social isolation can heighten the vulnerability of groups who are already at higher natural disaster risk, including older adults, those with disabilities, and the economically disadvantaged. Socially disconnected older adults and people with disabilities may face challenges due to limited mobility, reliance on medical devices and medications, and chronic illness.¹¹ Economically disadvantaged families and individuals are less likely to have the financial resources to evacuate prior to a disaster or to safeguard themselves or their homes in the event of an emergency.^{8,11} The aftermath of natural disasters can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, given that socially and economically disadvantaged communities face greater challenges to disaster recovery.¹¹

The link between social connection and disaster vulnerability is of concern in the U.S., given the steep decline in social connectedness in the last fifty years. Former U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, in his advisory “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Social Isolation,” describes how nearly half of all Americans report experiencing loneliness.⁶ On average, Americans today spend 166.5 hours per month alone, compared to 142.5 hours per month in 2003, representing a full 24 hours per month increase in time alone in just over twenty years. Americans are also reporting fewer close friendships and engaging less in their community compared to twenty years ago. Some groups are more likely to experience social isolation, including older and younger adults, single parents, people with disabilities, and those with poor physical or mental health. The rate of social isolation in the U.S. can directly impact individual- and community-level emergency preparedness and response. Therefore, any effort to improve disaster preparedness must pay special attention to social connectedness.

How Natural Disasters Impact St. Louis

St. Louis City sits at the confluence of three major U.S. rivers: the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers. Its geographic position makes the city and region vulnerable to flood events, with this risk having increased significantly over the last ten years. In 2022, nine inches and 15 hours of rainfall directly affected St. Louis residents along the upper River Des Peres, where more than 300 homes were destroyed and two lives were lost.^{12, 13} As recently as November 2024, two people died in the St. Louis area because of flash flooding.¹⁴ Additionally, St. Louis has struggled with poor drainage systems for decades, exacerbating flooding from the Mississippi River.¹⁵ These environmental challenges highlight the need for the city to invest in sustainable infrastructure and stormwater management to ensure its neighborhoods are protected from future flash floods.

Alongside flooding disasters, St. Louis City is susceptible to earthquakes due to its proximity to the New Madrid Seismic Zone (NMSZ) fault line. While the NMSZ is located in southeastern Missouri, the city sustained structural damage during the last two major earthquakes on the fault line in 1811 and 1812; these risks persist today.¹⁶ St. Louis City government officials, along with regional entities and other environmental stakeholders, should discuss the risks of a potential earthquake in any future mitigation plans.

Furthermore, St. Louis City experiences extremely hot summers, which have worsened in recent years due to human-driven climate change and global warming. Records indicate that since 1870, St. Louis City has experienced temperatures above 90 degrees approximately 35-40 days each year. Temperatures that surpass 100 degrees have typically occurred no more than five times annually.¹⁷ With unevenly distributed green space across different sectors of the city and fewer parks and less tree coverage in North City than South, as well as poor urban infrastructure required to mitigate high temperature levels, St. Louis City residents will continue to experience significant consequences related to heat waves in the absence of infrastructural changes.^{18, 19}

St. Louis is also susceptible to tornados, with multiple occurring every year since 2021, and in the past reaching up to levels EF4 (out of a scale of lowest intensity EF1 to highest intensity EF5) in 2011 and EF3 this year, in May 2025. The May 2025 St. Louis tornado unfortunately damaged or brought down thousands of trees across the city, including over 3,000 trees in Forest Park; replanting and regrowth will take decades.²⁰ The city must engage neighborhoods and communities to develop the best course of action to address local needs in preparing for and responding to heat waves and high temperatures.

Call to Action: Social Workers and Community organizations in disaster preparedness

While national, state, and local agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the St. Louis City Emergency Management Agency (CEMA) and the American Red Cross (Missouri chapter, St. Louis subchapter) already exist and play a large role in immediate crisis response, these agencies alone cannot address the full scope of challenges faced by a rapidly changing climate. Local residents, along with community organizations and government institutions, are uniquely positioned to coordinate disaster preparation decision-making, as well as address immediate community needs and supplement official response efforts following a disaster. They can aid in fostering a sense of connection, reducing the social isolation often felt during and after disasters. Effective community responses involve connecting diverse groups and creating action plans to meet common needs. By linking local organizations, citizens, and leaders, a robust network is established, allowing active involvement in disaster preparedness and response efforts. This capacity-building must occur before, during, and after disasters to be most effective.

In this effort, social workers, nonprofits, and other public services should be included in discussions and actions to prepare communities for natural disasters. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), social workers possess important skills that can contribute to both immediate disaster response and long-term recovery.²¹ The NASW Executive Director, Elizabeth Clark, discussed how social workers focus on issues of disparities when addressing disasters.²² Social workers can serve an essential role in disaster risk management. Disaster risk management involves disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and reconstruction.²³ Involving social workers in the process before, during, and after disasters is critical to increase community preparedness and, therefore, resilience in the case of disasters. Mathbor found that community social capital reduces community stress. Social capital concepts such as solidarity, social cohesion, social interaction, and social networks can be used by social workers to enhance the capacity of individuals, groups, communities, and organizations to ensure social development during the aftermath of disasters.²²

Social workers can engage people across three different practice areas: micro, mezzo, and macro. *Micro-level social work* involves direct interaction with an individual; *mezzo-level social work* focuses on group issues and is commonly used simultaneously with micro-level practice; and *macro-level social work* focuses on structural changes and intervening in larger systems that are beyond an individual. Social work professionals' holistic perspective centers around understanding the ecosystems of the communities and clients they serve, while also considering their emotional and psychological well-being.²⁴ Social workers can play many roles in disaster risk management, beginning with assisting communities to recover from the impacts of disaster and advocating for social justice and human rights. Some other specific ways social workers can assist communities in disaster risk management include:²²

- Using various communication tools to engage in public awareness campaigns about disasters,
- Coordinating disaster management and development activities,
- Building community capacity at the social, economic, and environmental levels,
- Enhancing community preparedness for disasters and building social capital,
- Educating people on how to mitigate the consequences of disasters during relief (the short-term), recovery (the mid-term), and reduction (the long-term) prevention strategy periods,
- Strengthening the capacities of existing civil society institutions,
- Providing psychological support (e.g., counseling for disaster survivors, reuniting families after disasters).

Community development associations can work alongside social workers to assist in disaster preparedness. Community developers can provide training to the community to facilitate community preparedness and response to disasters that are relevant to their region. Furthermore, they can mobilize around direct action efforts concerning disaster preparation and recovery by playing a role in planning, responding to, and rebuilding in the aftermath of a disaster. By working with other local groups, developers can set the stage for effective ways to prepare and address community crises and disasters.

Libraries can also play a critical role in both disaster preparedness and recovery. A research study about Florida's recovery from Hurricane Michael looked at the experiences of three county library systems. Hurricane Michael had a devastating impact on Florida in 2018, resulting in 17 fatalities, the displacement of 2,058 households, and over \$25 billion in damage. The research identified libraries' role in recovery, including "recurring themes of external organizational infrastructure and hierarchy, connection to community, library space and resources, and self-care."²⁵ Libraries are placed within communities and serve a role as informational providers, safe spaces, and online service providers, which positions them to build capacity to provide disaster response and relief. Libraries can foster community resilience in the event of natural disasters.

Many libraries already serve as destinations during and after weather events, providing shelter and connecting users to relevant information. Libraries are communication infrastructures that offer various information and communication hubs like computers, internet access, phones, copiers, chargers, as well as a resource for disaster preparation and recovery information.²⁶ In 2005, Hurricane Katrina resulted in 1,836 fatalities, over a million people displaced, and significant long-term economic and health consequences. During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, citizens utilized libraries to charge devices, access the internet, respond to emails, submit insurance claims, and file FEMA forms. In 2024, the American Library Association (ALA) announced that they were releasing the National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries, a collaboration with the Sustainable Libraries Initiative.²⁷ Their plan instructs libraries to contribute to community resilience by utilizing

internal disaster preparedness plans, along with engaging in other actions for climate change and climate justice work. Libraries are placed in communities to serve a wide range of individuals; they must be equipped with the tools and training to contribute to the readiness and recovery of their communities in case of disasters.

Some key roles that libraries in Florida and Louisiana have provided in response to hurricanes that can also be replicated in other regions for additional disasters include serving as safe havens and disaster recovery centers for resident and evacuees, providing electricity, air conditioning, seating and bathrooms, as well as acting as a point of distribution for recovery materials and continuing normal service provision. Florida libraries have also served as liaisons between emergency management and cultural organizations, improvising and taking direction from emergency management and local government to provide whatever is needed.²⁶

Another example of social workers' role in disaster preparedness and response can be seen in New Zealand, where social workers are trained to work in disaster management and response during natural disasters. While this is not always a formally designated role, social workers often find themselves involved in recovery and response efforts, but receive minimal recognition. A case study about social workers' response after the 2016 Kaikōura Earthquake, which resulted in two fatalities and 618 injuries, highlights the challenges caused by poor coordination between relevant agencies and confusion over available resources.^{28,29} Due to the lack of regional collaboration, services were replicated, and the needs of vulnerable residents were inadequately addressed. Following the disaster event, residents were in social isolation and withdrew from many of their existing social support networks. Social workers utilized their relationship-building and de-escalation skills to better understand individuals' situations and collaboratively explore solutions for processing the traumatic effects of the earthquake.

Social workers can apply ecological systems theory to identify resources across the micro, mezzo, and macro levels to ensure a well-coordinated, multi-disciplinary response to natural disasters. Efforts in coordinating resources and providing aid to marginalized populations, such as low-income families, people with disabilities, and older adults, intersect with the role of social workers in disaster preparedness and response. Social service providers, including community development organizations, libraries, and more, all serve vital roles in disaster risk management and community resiliency. These groups are well-positioned to identify immediate needs, coordinate efforts, and ensure effective decision-making. These community-building efforts help build trust between residents and response agencies, which also allows social workers and first responders to develop more effective plans and distribute resources efficiently. It is critical for these local entities to work together and alongside policymakers, other community entities, and service providers to ensure comprehensive, community-driven disaster preparedness and recovery, ultimately building stronger and more resilient communities.

Landscape Analysis

The following table provides an overview of the entities, agencies, organizations, and services available throughout the St. Louis Metropolitan Area relating to emergency preparedness and disaster response, with a focus on those within St. Louis City. The entities are organized in three categories or levels of governance: (1) local government and intergovernmental institutions, (2) local non-governmental institutions, and (3) state- and federal-level agencies. This is not an exhaustive or all-inclusive list, but it includes the largest stakeholders and players in the city and broader regional emergency preparedness and response.

REGIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS		
Entity/ Agency	Description/Roles	Key Links and Documents
Regional Institutions		
East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWG)	<p>Regional coordinating body across the federally-designated metropolitan planning organization for the bi-state St. Louis region, facilitates cooperative planning and problem-solving among local governments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes St. Louis City, Franklin, Jefferson, St. Charles, and St. Louis counties in Missouri; and Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties in Illinois Develops regional plans like the St. Louis Hazard Mitigation plan, as well as comprehensive climate and sustainability planning 	Regional Alternate Care Site Plan 2020-2025 St. Louis Hazard Mitigation Plan
St. Louis Area Regional Response System (STARRS)	<p>Regional disaster preparedness coordination group with representatives from key agencies and offices in five jurisdictions across the bi-state metropolitan area (St. Louis City, St. Louis County, St. Charles County, Jefferson County, and Franklin County).</p> <p>Consists of sub-committees that meet semi-regularly (though no sub-committee meeting minutes are posted online), including a Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD) subcommittee consisting of representatives of several area organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> EWG is the fiscal agent and coordinating body Develops critical regional plans like the Regional Emergency Resource Coordination Plan (RERC) to facilitate communication and resource allocation during catastrophic events Operates the St. Louis Medical Operations Center (SMOC), which ensures healthcare coordination among hospitals, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), public health agencies, and emergency managers during disasters Manages specialized programs such as the Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) to enhance mass casualty response capabilities Provides funding for equipment and training for urban search and rescue teams, hazardous materials response units, and law enforcement specialty teams 	COAD Sub-committee
St. Louis-Jefferson Solid Waste Management District (SWMD)	<p>Waste and recycling management agency that covers St. Louis City, St. Louis County, Jefferson County, and St. Charles County</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Runs the Waste Reduction and Recycling Grant Program, providing financial assistance to local governments, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations for waste management and recycling projects 	Grant program
Local Government Agencies		
City of St. Louis Emergency Management Agency (CEMA)	<p>Agency that leads emergency operations planning, resource management, and public education on disaster preparedness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recently initiated projects new centralized 911 Dispatch Center to streamline communications for police, fire, EMS services, and emergency management Offers Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training to volunteers for basic disaster response skills. CEMA-coordinated programs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CEMA Faith Alliance (began 2023): Partnership that equips faith-based organizations with emergency planning tools and resources In development: CEMA Business Alliance and Emergency Financial Empowerment Program (in coordination with the City Treasurer's Office of Financial Empowerment) 	City Emergency Preparedness website CEMA Faith Alliance CEMA Business Alliance and Emergency Financial Empowerment Program

City of St. Louis Department of Health	Agency in charge of public health programs and regulations to ensure the public's health. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays a role in developing health-related disaster response services Has larger emergency preparedness staff than CEMA 	
St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS)	City school system that collaborates on disaster planning to ensure student safety during emergencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May serve as evacuation sites or shelters during disasters Provide cooling, warming, and electronics charging stations to the community 	
St. Louis Public Library	Multiple library branches that act as community hubs for information dissemination and may function as shelters or resource centers during emergencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some library systems in the region have more formalized social service referral programs, including St. Louis County's library social workers program (pilot as of April 2025) 	
Specialized Local Committees		
Local Emergency Planning Commission (LEPC)	City-coordinated commission made up of volunteer community representatives (government officials, business owners, and community members) that focuses on hazardous materials management and chemical spill response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures compliance with federal regulations under the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA) 	
St. Louis City Continuum of Care (CoC)	Federally required coordination of social services group for people at risk of becoming unhoused or experiencing homelessness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involves an Executive Board and committees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions are mostly held by homeless service providers St Louis County has a separate CoC 	St. Louis County CoC
Local Public Services and First Responders		
St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department (SLMPD)	City law enforcement agency that coordinates with other emergency agencies to manage and ensure security during disasters. In March 2025, the Governor signed a law putting the SLMPD under state control, rather than City government control.	
St. Louis Fire Dept (STLFD) and Emergency Medical Services (EMS)	City fire department which provides fire suppression services, rescue operations, and hazardous materials response during emergencies; EMS delivers critical medical care during disasters and ensures patient transport to healthcare facilities	
Local Communications Systems		
Notify STL	Opt-in notification system designed to alert residents about emergencies such as severe weather, road closures, and other critical incidents including community reminders such as during the COVID-19 pandemic	
911/311/211 phone numbers & services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 911 is used for emergency response coordination among police, fire departments, EMS services, and other critical agencies Non-emergency SLMD number: 314-231-1212 211 is for referral and connection to social services, coordinated by United Way of Greater St. Louis 311 (locally, 4800#) is used for public service announcements, run by the Citizens' Service Bureau (CSB) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> St. Louis City number: 314-622-4800 St. Louis County number: 314-634-3111 	911 211 (United Way) 311/CSB
Apps & sites used by social service agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basecamp app: Project management and communication app used by the St. Louis City Continuum of Care, used for coordinating social services across agencies, including coordinating nightly beds for homeless individuals Get Help app: for first responders to coordinate the provision of services and seek back-up support 	
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Nationally-provided, locally-run system that provides mental health support during crises, including those related to disasters or emergencies	

LOCAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS		
Entity/ Agency	Description/Roles	Key Links and Documents
Educational Institutions		
Washington University in St. Louis (WashU)	<p>Private university with an independent system for responding to and alerting community members of disasters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses WashU Alerts system to communicate emergencies with WashU community members • Provides detailed information on campus emergency procedures • Offers emergency training and events for school community • Environmental Studies department offers the WashU Sustainability Exchange course which supports sustainability projects around the St. Louis region and has previously collaborated with CEMA <p><i>*Campus locations in St. Louis City and County</i></p>	<p>WashU Emergency Management</p> <p>WashU Sustainability Exchange</p>
Saint Louis University (SLU)	<p>Private university with an independent system for responding to and alerting community members of disasters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes the RAVE Alert and RAVE Guardian emergency notification systems for SLU community members • Provides a detailed plan for campus emergency procedures • Provides emergency training and events for school community 	<p>SLU Emergency Preparedness</p> <p>Emergency Procedures</p>
University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL)	<p>Public university with an independent system for responding to and alerting community members of disasters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a private system to alert community members of emergencies • Offers emergency training and events for school community • Emergency Operations Plan states that they have a partnership with the American Red Cross; UMSL's Mark Twain Building could be used for sheltering and meal needs in the event of an emergency, and the building and parking areas near it could be used as a staging and distribution area for resources if needed <p><i>*Main campus is located in the St. Louis County, not St. Louis City</i></p>	<p>UMSL Emergency Operations Plan (August 2025)</p>
St. Louis Community College (STLCC)	<p>Public community college with independent emergency preparation and response procedures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses STLCC Alerts to notify community members of emergencies • Collaborates with the City of St. Louis to offer CERT trainings at multiple campus locations <p><i>*Campus locations in St. Louis City and County</i></p>	<p>STLCC Emergency Preparedness</p>
Religiously-Affiliated Institutions		
Society of St. Vincent de Paul - St. Louis	<p>Catholic volunteer organization that provides services such as food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and more to poor and struggling individuals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners with a variety of community partners, such as the American Red Cross of Eastern Missouri, to help disaster victims access the resources they need • Provides an emergency helpline • Website has links to numerous disaster preparedness resources 	<p>Disaster Preparedness Webpage</p>
Catholic Charities	<p>Catholic ministry organization providing services such as workforce development, legal aid, senior care, addiction recovery, and more</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides natural disaster relief as one aspect of services provided • Services provided after a disaster through Natural Disaster Case Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial assistance, referrals, and connections to other resources 	<p>Disaster Preparedness Webpage</p>

Community Development Organizations		
St. Louis Community Foundation / Regional Response Team (RRT)	<p>Nonprofit foundation that manages the Regional Response Team (RRT), established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and public health emergency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covering St. Louis City, St. Louis County, St. Charles County, Madison County, and St. Clair County, the RRT improves the health and well-being of underserved communities by mobilizing the nonprofit, philanthropic, and public sectors to collaboratively address life-threatening crises and systems' dysfunctions. 	
St. Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO)	<p>Coalition of neighborhood associations within the St. Louis metro area that offers support to member organizations and a variety of community-based programs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Events focus on various topics, including emergency- and disaster-adjacent topics such as community health, extreme heat, and environmental issues. <p>Many associations located across the St. Louis region that could provide disaster and emergency preparedness resources and trainings for community members.</p>	
Neighborhood organizations	Many associations located across the St. Louis region that could provide disaster and emergency preparedness resources and trainings for community members.	STL Neighborhood Associations Websites Roster and Social Media
Healthcare Systems		
BJC Healthcare	<p>Nonprofit healthcare organization which includes 14 hospitals in Illinois and Missouri, many of which are affiliated with the Washington University School of Medicine. Hospitals in the St. Louis area include Barnes-Jewish Hospital, Alton Memorial Hospital, Barnes-Jewish St. Peters Hospital, Barnes Jewish West County Hospital, St. Louis Children's Hospital, Missouri Baptist Medical Center, Christian Hospital, and Northwest Healthcare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides medical care and treatment during crisis and emergency situations WashU Med plan details how the hospitals and schools will function if a large-scale disaster were to occur 	WashU Med Disaster Plan and Policy
SSM Health	<p>Nonprofit, Catholic healthcare organization based in St. Louis that includes hospitals in Missouri, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. St. Louis area hospitals include Saint Louis University Hospital and Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital in the city and DePaul Hospital and St. Clare Hospital in the county.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides medical care and treatment during crisis and emergency situations SLU Med provides a disaster policy for hospitals and medical education in the event of a large-scale emergency 	SSM Health Medical Education Disaster Policy
Other Nonprofits and Community Groups		
St. Louis Area Regional Coalition of Community Organizations Active in Disaster (SLARCC)	<p>Response-based coalition consisting of various area organizations that coordinates volunteers to respond to disaster relief and provides financial and non-financial support to people affected by disasters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governmental organizations historically involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FEMA, SEMA, U.S. Small Business Administration—St. Louis District's Office of Disaster Recovery and Resilience, Missouri Department of Mental Health and Department of Insurance, STARRS, etc. Non-governmental organizations historically involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Way, St. Louis Area Foodbank, Mercy Chefs, ToolBank Disaster Services, Humane Society, Convoy of Hope, utility companies, etc. 	
American Red Cross: Greater St. Louis Chapter	<p>Nonprofit that exists to meet immediate disaster-caused needs, as well as assisting in disaster recovery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service focused on meeting immediate needs (food, shelter, clothing, etc.) Offers trainings/certifications such as CPR, basic first aid, and more trained community volunteers 	Red Cross Disaster Relief St. Louis Area Website

Community Development and Disaster Preparedness in the City of St. Louis

Salvation Army - Midland Division	<p>Nonprofit organization that provides emergency and disaster relief services such as food, shelter, and emotional and spiritual support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides volunteer training and opportunities An established relationship exists with the AmeriCorps St. Louis Emergency Response Team in which the Salvation Army provides training to AmeriCorps members, and AmeriCorps supports some Salvation Army local response and recovery projects 	Midland Division Emergency Disaster Services
AmeriCorps St. Louis	<p>Nonprofit organization affiliated with the federal AmeriCorps agency (will deploy to disasters outside of St. Louis)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recovery and response support team Tactical field service team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respond to immediate disasters and provide long-term recovery services after disasters <p><i>*AmeriCorps St. Louis ERT is affiliated with the federal AmeriCorps agency as an official state program</i></p>	AmeriCorps Disaster Response
Heat Up/Cool Down St. Louis	<p>Nonprofit charity that focuses on helping elderly and disabled people and low-income families in the St. Louis metro area with their delinquent energy bills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides at-risk households with utility budget and energy efficiency counseling Provide donated energy-efficient window A/Cs during the summer months Advocate on behalf of community to utility companies to avoid shutoffs during emergencies 	
House Everyone STL	<p>Organization dedicated to leading the way in ending homelessness through collaboration with regional stakeholders and community service providers to deliver data-driven, best-practice solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides funding to support Emergency Winter Outreach, particularly focusing on the operation of pop-up and emergency shelters 	
United Way of Greater St. Louis	<p>Organization that mobilizes communities to action and brings volunteers, advocates, and donors together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinates 211 social service connections system (see above) 	United Way 211
Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis	<p>Nonprofit working to empower African Americans and others throughout the region in securing economic self-reliance, social equality, and civil rights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers a weatherization program that enables low-income families to permanently reduce their energy bills by making their homes more energy-efficient and by safeguarding homes from extreme weather 	Weatherization
Grassroots or Mutual Aid Organizations		
STL Winter Outreach	<p>All-volunteer collective of individuals who do whatever they can to prevent persons experiencing homelessness from dying on the streets of St. Louis during the frigid winter season</p> <p>Provides blankets, shelter, and transportation to shelters during severe winter weather conditions</p>	
Action St. Louis	<p>Non-profit centered on coordinating direct action advocating against systemic racism and for Black empowerment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major coordinating organization as part of the "People's Response Hub" to meet recovery needs in North City/O'Fallon Park following the May 2025 St. Louis tornado in coordination with For The Culture STL, an organization aimed at supporting Black-owned businesses and events in the City. 4TheVille, a community development organization, was the lead organizer of another major community resource hub in The Ville neighborhood. 	The People's Response 2025 4TheVille Emergency Hub For the Culture STL

STATE AND FEDERAL AGENCIES		
Entity/ Agency	Description/Roles	Key Links and Documents
State Agencies		
State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA)	<p>Missouri state agency tasked with coordinating the state government's response and recovery to disasters as well as promoting disaster preparedness; state-level equivalent of CEMA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Website has various resources and emergency management plans regarding disaster preparedness in Missouri, including floodplain management and earthquake response, as well as contact information for local emergency management agencies 	<p>MO disaster recovery framework</p> <p>All-Hazard Planning Program</p>
Univ. of Missouri Extension Disaster Education Network	<p>State-wide and local network providing education and technical assistance for preparing and responding to natural disasters, including providing guidance to COAD groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not provide disaster response <p><i>*The St. Louis City and County COAD does not seem to be currently active, as their most recent online activity was in 2016</i></p>	<p>MO COAD Guidance Manual (last updated 2016)</p> <p>City/County COAD Facebook Group</p>
Missouri National Guard	<p>Missouri unit deployed only by the governor or the U.S. president to respond to disasters and emergencies, only under specific mission areas</p>	
Missouri Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network (MoWarn)	<p>Network coordinating a nationwide program by the American Water Works Association to help states better handle emergencies; it is designed to allow members across the state of Missouri to borrow equipment and skilled personnel from other members on an as-needed basis for emergency management.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Membership is required and is only for entities dealing with water and wastewater utilities Provides emergency assistance 24/7 	
Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR)	<p>Agency providing resources and information regarding disaster risk areas in Missouri; provides information to residents of Missouri to assist in mitigating potential disasters (e.g., prescribed burns, well water alerts, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates projects to help build resilience for disasters in Missouri Provides up-to-date information regarding current disasters and emergencies impacting Missouri 	<p>MO Disaster News & Information</p> <p>MO Drought Mitigation & Response Plan (2023)</p> <p>Emergency Operating Plan for Public Water Supplies</p> <p>Natural Disaster Assistance for MO Citizens: Contact Phone Numbers</p> <p>MO State Weatherization Plan</p>
Missouri Department of Conservation	<p>Agency that protects and manages the state's fish, forest, and wildlife resources. Is involved in animal control and wildlife protection during emergencies, as well as wildfire prevention and response.</p>	

Federal Agencies		
FEMA	<p>Federal agency tasked with coordinating the federal government's response and recovery to disasters, as well as promoting disaster preparedness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only deploys for disaster response after the president declares a disaster Provides a vast amount of resources on ready.gov CERT program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained community volunteers 	<p>Ready.gov</p> <p>CERT</p>
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	<p>A support and supplement to state, county, and local government disaster response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must receive a request for response from an authorized entity Primary area of response is fighting and controlling floods 	<p>Emergency Management</p> <p>Flood Fight Brochure</p>
National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD)	<p>Association of many organizations designed to foster more collaboration and coordination in mitigating and alleviating the impact of disaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online shows there is a "chapter" in each state <p><i>*Unsure of the level of activity in Missouri, as the Missouri chapter did not respond to email inquiries</i></p>	
AmeriCorps	<p>Federal government program that partners with federal, state, and local agencies and nonprofit organizations for disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and resiliency</p>	
United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	<p>Agency that prepares for, prevents, and responds to oil spills; chemical, biological, and radiological releases; and large-scale national emergencies. The agency also provides additional response assistance when state and local first responder capabilities have been exhausted or when additional support is requested.</p>	<p>EPA Emergency Response</p> <p>EPA's office of Emergency Management Brochure</p> <p>Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act</p> <p>Community Based Water Resiliency Initiative</p>

Local Emergency Plans and Hard Infrastructure

Several disaster preparedness and emergency response plans for the St. Louis region exist, though many have not been updated or publicly released in several years as of 2025. The [St. Louis Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan \(2020–2025\)](#),³⁰ led by the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, serves as the cornerstone for disaster preparedness across five counties; EWG is working on finalizing its 2026-2030 Plan as of May 2025.³¹ It addresses natural hazards such as tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and sinkholes, emphasizing risk reduction through strategies like public education, infrastructure upgrades, and coordinated emergency response protocols. The plan prioritizes:

- Public awareness campaigns to educate residents on disaster risks and preparedness.
- Critical infrastructure protection, including levees, dams, and floodplain management systems like the [Lower Meramec Floodplain Multi-Jurisdictional Plan](#).³²
- Mitigation actions tailored to specific hazards, such as reinforcing buildings against earthquakes and improving stormwater management to reduce flooding.

There is currently no publicly available emergency response or disaster mitigation plan for St. Louis City. There are several other emergency management and hazard mitigation plans in place throughout the St. Louis metropolitan region beyond those developed specifically for St. Louis City, including the [St. Louis County Basic Emergency Operations Plan](#).³³ It is unclear what level of coordination there is in the development, expected implementation, and inter-jurisdictional planning across entities throughout the Region, beyond the coordination by EWG, STARRS, and SEMA.

In terms of government-backed financial assistance and hard infrastructure, [FEMA Hazard Mitigation Assistance Grants](#)³⁴ are available (as of early 2025) to jurisdictions adhering to the Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan for projects like floodplain buyouts and infrastructure upgrades.

Emergency Response Training Opportunities

There are multiple organizations within St. Louis that provide training, certification, and volunteer programs to prepare and respond to emergencies in the community. The St. Louis division of the American Red Cross provides emergency preparedness training and first aid response training, as well as specific volunteer teams dedicated to disaster response. Additionally, The Salvation Army's Midland Division provides disaster training courses and holds an annual emergency disaster services summit. FEMA has a certification program called the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), providing disaster preparedness and response education specific to that region.

Volunteer Programs

- [American Red Cross](#)³⁵
 - **Disaster Action Team (DAT)** - a team that helps respond to provide 24-hour immediate support and assistance to individuals and families who have been impacted by a home fire or other local disaster
 - **Disaster Health Services Team** - licensed healthcare providers using their professional skills to deliver hands-on care and education to shelter residents. Qualified licenses include RN, LPN, LVN, EMT, Paramedic, MD, DO, PA, NP, and APRN
 - Volunteers can be youth over the age of 13 with parental consent and must be accompanied by an adult for supervision
- [Salvation Army, Midland Division, Greater St. Louis Metropolitan Area](#)³⁶
 - Emergency disaster services volunteer registration

Trainings/Certification programs

- [American Red Cross](#)³⁷
 - First aid, CPR, AED
 - Some costs associated
 - [Emergency Preparedness Program](#)³⁸
- [CERT St. Louis](#)³⁹
 - The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program educates volunteers about disaster preparedness for the hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills.
 - Course provided through [St. Louis Community College Continuing Education programs](#),⁴⁰ \$9 training course fee
 - [National CERT program](#),⁴¹ run by FEMA
- [Salvation Army, Midland Division, Greater St. Louis Metropolitan Area](#)³⁶
 - Holds an annual emergency disaster services summit
 - Provides disaster training courses designed to help

individuals & communities prepare for emergency events & become trained disaster volunteers

- [MO SEMA](#)
 - In-person trainings and courses held statewide on a variety of emergency and hazard management topics
- [FEMA Emergency Management Institute Trainings](#)⁴²
 - Online courses and certifications covering the Incident Command System (ICS), National Incident Management System (NIMS), and All-Hazards Position Specific (AHPS) courses

Gaps in Disaster Planning and Response Services and Coordination

Despite some established systems for regional coordination and infrastructure, several critical gaps persist in St. Louis' disaster preparedness framework. Several plans and systems referred to by city and regional disaster response officials, community organizations, and emergency response training providers contacted for purposes of this report are not publicly available. For example, many leaders within the disaster preparedness sphere in St. Louis have indicated that Community Organizations Active in Disasters (COAD) is or should be the primary structure through which organizations coordinate responses.³¹ However, COAD is seemingly not publicly-facing, given it last had a public statement posted on its Facebook page in March 2016.⁴³ COAD is a sub-committee of the St. Louis Area Regional Response System (STARRS) and consists of representatives from key organizations across the city and seemingly primarily convenes in response to a disaster, rather than in anticipation of them.

This gap points to a larger, more pervasive issue within the disaster planning and response landscape in the St. Louis region—communication and coordination between local service providers and community organizations. While many local organizations provide disaster planning and response services across the region, most provide independent services with minimal communication with other providers. This can make knowing where to turn in the event of a disaster and implementing an efficient response post-disaster even more challenging. Instead of combining resources to create a stronger impact, local organizations must often rely exclusively on their own, siloed resources and infrastructure. This lack of central coordination also indicates issues in the distribution of resources for disaster planning and mitigation, which CEMA particularly noted. Despite formally requesting an increase to the Agency budget from the City's Board of Aldermen many fiscal years in a row, CEMA remains financially unable to fill even the minimum number of needed positions on its internal team.⁴⁴

There are several specific social groups that are at higher risk of negative impacts of natural disasters. These groups do not seem to be directly supported by most, if any, existing disaster preparedness and response systems. Unhoused populations remain particularly vulnerable due to a lack of targeted strategies for emergency shelter access or mobility during disasters, leaving them disproportionately exposed to extreme weather and evacuation challenges.⁴⁵

Non-English-speaking communities face communication barriers, as emergency alerts, preparedness materials, and public advisories often lack multilingual accessibility or are only provided at a federal resource level, rather than locally, hindering equitable access to life-saving information.⁴⁶ Health risk mitigation plans also overlook explicit protocols to address disparities in medical care access for vulnerable groups, such as low-income residents or individuals with chronic conditions or disabilities, during emergencies.⁴⁷ The City Human Services Department, which is tasked with providing support to children and families, veterans, unhoused populations, and disabled individuals, does not have an existing disaster preparedness plan or recovery assistance system for these communities.

Programs like [CERT](#)⁴⁸ and [The Salvation Army's Midland Division trainings](#)³⁶ foster some level of community engagement. Unfortunately, information sharing about these trainings is limited and participation from historically underserved neighborhoods remains inconsistent, reflecting broader inequities in outreach and trust-building.⁴⁹ Financial assistance programs, including those facilitated by the [Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund](#),⁵⁰ are in the process but not yet fully integrated into disaster response frameworks, potentially exacerbating economic impacts on marginalized households. These gaps highlight the need for more inclusive planning that prioritizes equity in resource allocation, communication, and service delivery to ensure all populations can navigate disasters safely.

It is important to note that, at the time of this publication, federal disaster response agencies, particularly FEMA disaster funding, and by extension SEMA funding, and funding for AmeriCorps programs that coordinate disaster response and mitigation volunteers, are either frozen or under threat of cancellation. State and local relief efforts often rely at least in part on federal funding for disaster prevention, mitigation, response, and long-term recovery. As of May 2025, several states have reported the cancellation of disaster prevention and response funding.^{51, 52, 53} These new funding challenges will require creativity and innovation on the part of local communities like St. Louis City if we are to weather the next storm.

Case Studies

Regional Case Study: *Joplin, Missouri*⁵⁴



Case studies of disasters that have occurred throughout the state can offer helpful insight into best practices surrounding disaster response and recovery efforts. One of the most destructive tornadoes in the last 100 years occurred in Joplin, Missouri, in 2011. The scale of destruction and the relatively short notice to prepare due to the nature of the disaster greatly impacted recovery efforts. However, despite these challenges, Joplin is viewed as a successful case in disaster recovery efforts due to the efficiency and speed at which the community mobilized in response to the crisis.

Several factors contributed to the city's ability to rebound in the aftermath of such a destructive event. Critically, recovery efforts were spearheaded by both public and private coordination efforts, including local officials, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community volunteers. Many community members credit Joplin's success to a decentralized approach. This refers to recovery efforts initiated on the community level without centralized bureaucratic oversight. The public sector focused on restoring public services, rather than directing private sector activities. Temporarily waiving zoning laws allowed the private sector to more efficiently deploy new construction projects. Community organizations facilitated the coordination of relief efforts by directing the volunteer activities of local residents and national groups who aided efforts.

The public sector played an important role in the city's recovery. At the recommendation of FEMA, the city established a Citizens Advisory Recovery Team. This group drafted the city's long-term recovery plan. This allowed citizens to voice their concerns and provide ideas to government officials. The city also brought in city inspectors from surrounding areas to help expedite the permitting process for new construction. In focusing on tasks regularly within its control, the city created opportunities for spontaneous efforts from volunteer and community groups to better meet the needs of residents.

Social capital proved to be an important protective factor for community members. In Joplin, social connection facilitated the deployment of local resources through credible channels of communication. Residents established a website named Rebuild Joplin. This provided a platform for volunteer groups to coordinate their efforts. Other community leaders established a Facebook page called Bright Futures, inspired by an existing initiative of the Joplin public schools. This allowed leaders to match donors with resident needs in real time. One community member described this process taking place in just a few minutes, making it a useful tool for rapid community response.

Additionally, church leaders described "relational recovery" as an essential component of the rebuilding process. This included mutual aid efforts. At College Heights church, members were encouraged to check in on their neighbors to determine who needed assistance. The church then provided funds for members to distribute to other community members. This helped strengthen community ties and provide aid far earlier than if the community had waited for government funds.

The recovery efforts in Joplin highlighted the benefits of expertise in disaster response to tailor coordination efforts. The National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) coalition served as an important channel for insights on recovery efforts. This resource provided information regarding best practices in volunteer management and donation management strategies. This helped mitigate redundancy in community relief efforts and maximized the impact of community donations and volunteer hours.

Joplin highlights the need for expertise, flexibility, and spontaneity in disaster recovery efforts. Future disaster recovery efforts can learn from the ingenuity exemplified by nonprofits and volunteer organizations that organized recovery efforts across the city.

Local Case Study: St. Louis Winter Outreach⁵⁵

Examining existing local organizations is also important for understanding disaster coordination efforts. St. Louis Winter Outreach is a grassroots, completely volunteer-run organization that seeks to meet the needs of unhoused people during cold, winter nights. This model provides important insights into a mutual aid and harm reduction model of disaster response. The organization is led through a horizontal leadership structure and is not incorporated as a nonprofit, a strategic choice meant to reduce the administrative burden on those involved.

St. Louis Winter Outreach provides training at the beginning of each season to prepare new volunteers to participate in the program. This includes training in de-escalation strategies, wound care, frostbite, and Narcan administration. Volunteers are mobilized when the temperature outside is 25 degrees Fahrenheit or below. Communication with volunteers primarily takes place via social media on the organization's Facebook and Instagram pages. Many of the volunteers are professional social workers or employees of community organizations throughout the St. Louis region. This facilitates the sharing of information with community partners and clients alike who may need to access resources.

During the 2024-2025 winter season, Winter Outreach volunteers had 1,200 contact occurrences with unhoused people, averaging 65 people per night. There were 40 nights

throughout the season that met the temperature criteria for volunteer mobilization. Volunteers traveled around the city to identify people who may benefit from shelter. Unhoused individuals who expressed interest were then shuttled to shelter beds at various warming centers throughout the city. Those who declined assistance to shelter were offered warming supplies, including blankets to help them through the night.

The activities of Winter Outreach are made possible through private funding and mutual aid donations. This gives the organization the flexibility to leverage funds in creative ways, as there are fewer restrictions on how donations are spent.

A gap identified by organizations is that the group is not connected to larger emergency response systems such as FEMA or the Red Cross. They have collaborated locally with the City Department of Human Services but not with CEMA. They note that they could use a more efficient tool for volunteer management. Importantly, this organization developed to meet an unmet community need and continues to mobilize when this need arises. St. Louis Winter Outreach provides a good example of an alternative method to structure disaster response efforts at the community level, without depending on funding from a grant-based model.



Photo courtesy of Johnny Wu Gabbert

Proposed Solutions/Action Steps

Proposed Solutions for Disaster Preparedness through a Social Work Lens

In the face of risk for flooding, tornadoes, extreme heat and cold, and earthquakes, St. Louis has a myriad of resources at its disposal to prepare for emergencies and mitigate disasters. The local government and intergovernmental institutions focus on regional coordination, disaster planning, and the sharing of information and resources across the region. Local non-governmental institutions involved in this work include educational institutions, religiously affiliated organizations, healthcare systems, and community development organizations, among other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many offer training to the public, provide emergency plans, facilitate response teams, and disseminate disaster resources. These resources include fulfilling immediate emergency service needs, such as medical care, food, shelter, and clothing. State and federal agencies focus more on disaster response than on emergency preparedness, with many offering disaster response support upon request and working on an as-needed basis.

While there are some collaborative efforts in the St. Louis disaster response landscape, the region suffers from significant siloing, be it between cities and counties, between communities, or between organizations, which can lead to inefficiencies in the spread and use of resources for mitigating emergency response needs and responding to disasters as they occur. Fragmentation is a considerable barrier to effective disaster management and hazard mitigation. This fragmentation impedes ideal collaboration for a regional and inclusive disaster response system. Furthermore, a lack of communication between service providers and from service providers to communities also acts as a roadblock to establishing disaster response and preparedness efforts, leading to diminished support when emergencies occur.

The following suggestions are evidence-based practices informed by a literature review and reliable first-hand input from disaster relief teams in St. Louis. Based on our research findings, we have compiled suggestions around four main pillars: **preparedness, engagement, collaboration, and representation**. By focusing on these four categories, our recommendations are not only what we believe to be most effective in disaster preparedness and relief, but also well-suited to the specific needs of the St. Louis community.

1. Prepare for Disaster Before It Happens.

In 2025, the National Centers for Environmental Information's report on billion-dollar weather and climate disasters recommended ways to advance disaster preparedness, maximize resources, and mitigate the impacts of disasters. They argue investing in disaster preparedness ultimately saves resources and cuts preventable spending on disaster recovery.¹ When people are more prepared for an emergency, they are less reliant on resources during recovery from disasters, which lowers the severity of the disaster's impact and allows for a more targeted flow of resources. Community organizations can work to promote personal and family disaster plans, including guides and materials for disaster kits and emergency communications, to help mitigate the severity of disasters at both the individual and community levels.

Additionally, current disaster training programs can be expanded or formalized. For example, while St. Louis' CERT training teaches volunteers what to do in different disasters, it does not have a formal contact system for volunteers to organize and create CERT teams when disasters occur. Additionally, CERT teams in other locations across the country often have contact with first responders so that they can coordinate response when necessary. Creating an official partnership between CERT leaders and CEMA or

the St. Louis Fire Department would create communication infrastructure to prepare volunteers and the City to respond promptly across the City during a myriad of disasters.

On a systems level, investment in infrastructure that mitigates the severity of disasters functions similarly. Considering the risk St. Louis faces regarding flooding and temperature-related disasters, incorporating more green infrastructure and smart surfaces into the region stands out as an effective investment. Green infrastructure not only mitigates flood risk but also reduces the effects of heat islands and helps address other environmental risks, such as air pollution, high energy costs, and heat-related illnesses.^{56, 57} Both local government agencies like the Planning and Urban Design Agency and Community Development Administration as well as community development corporations can push for these types of infrastructure investments when engaging in development work in the region. This is just one example of how disaster preparedness efforts can mitigate the impacts of extreme weather events when they inevitably occur.

2. Engage Deeply with the Community.

By proactively deepening community engagement strategies, St. Louis decision-makers can improve the efficiency of disaster response and distribution of financial resources. Without effective community engagement that encourages community members to get involved in disaster preparedness, people are less likely to listen, share, and build relationships with each other and local officials on this front. Community organizations are uniquely positioned to do this work by facilitating listening sessions, town halls, and workshops that gather what community members have experienced post-disaster and what resources or projects they believe would be beneficial, given their lived experience. In doing this, community organizations can not only learn how to best prepare for disasters but also advocate for community needs with local governments and larger institutions that have greater resource capacity. Governmental agencies and local committees should actively engage with community organizations doing this work, as well as work to incorporate community involvement and particularly affected community members in their regular practices. Additionally, when community members come together to discuss disaster preparedness, they have the opportunity to connect and build social capital, which is vital to supportive disaster recovery efforts and resiliency in disaster aftermath.⁹

One specific way St. Louis could strengthen community engagement in emergency preparedness and response would be to incorporate social workers into the St. Louis Public Library system. In the wake of the tornado that hit the City on May 16, 2025, the St. Louis County Library system offered their library social worker services to City residents. We strongly recommend having library social work resources regularly accessible in the City based on local needs. Putting a program like this in place would not only bring the conversation surrounding disaster recovery needs to the people living in the City, but also allow St. Louisans in the City to build that invaluable social capital through the local libraries in their own communities before disaster strikes.

Disaster recovery and planning efforts following the Joplin tornado could also be mirrored in the St. Louis region regarding community engagement. Much of the immediate community-based tornado response and recovery was headed by local organizations in deep connection to community needs. Moving forward, the City could create a coalition similar to the Citizens Advisory Recovery Team to draft a long-term recovery plan that incorporates community engagement and needs assessment ahead of time to incorporate community engagement in mitigation efforts moving forward.

3. Collaborate within and between Communities.

While no one pillar is more important than another, focusing on collaboration is the broadest measure that St. Louis organizations and agencies can take to ensure the cohesive and efficient use of disaster relief resources. Sources shared that a lack of collaboration across the region's multiple counties results in inequitable distribution of resources, which is not responsive to the needs of different areas. Additionally, disasters often occur across county and city lines. While some of St. Louis's emergency preparedness and disaster recovery entities collaborate, these entities typically stay within or adjacent to their sectors when engaging in collaboration.

Maintaining open channels of communication and up-to-date public resources can have a significant impact on intercommunity knowledge of available resources in the wake of a disaster. We encourage city government departments and entities, regional governments, non-profit organizations, first responder groups, neighborhood and community organizations, and others to form connections through regional connectors like East-West Gateway, STARRS, and COAD, in preparation for potential disasters. During disaster recovery, getting involved in a Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) through SEMA can also help build partnerships for future disaster preparedness. Collaboration-focused organizations like CEMA or the Community Builders' Network (CBN) could also host regular roundtables for community development organizations, allowing communities and community organizations to share

their needs, resources, and capacities related to disaster preparedness and recovery. We also encourage government-organized entities like the LEPC to genuinely engage communities and act as a collaboration space between public and private entities surrounding hazard mitigation. Generally, intercommunal collaboration among community decision-makers and leaders can allow regions to distribute resources based on need rather than geographic area.

We also recommend the City establish a City Manager or City Administrator position. This position would be a non-political appointment who would focus on appointing certain department directors as well as making sure residents get needed services efficiently and cost effectively.⁵⁸ When it comes to emergency response and management, city managers act as facilitators across the local government to ensure collaboration in getting relief efforts active efficiently. Creating a position that focuses on crisis management, preparation, and response has proven vitally beneficial to communities like Washington, Illinois; Pearland, Texas; and Sanford, Florida in the wake of tornadoes, flooding, and gun violence.⁵⁹ Establishing a role that focuses on communication and collaborative effort within local government for emergency response helps ensure a more immediate response that uses city resources effectively and promotes working together between elected officials across the region.

Communication goes hand in hand with collaboration and is vital to the efficacy of disaster planning and response.

We identified communication between local service providers and community organizations as a significant gap that makes disaster preparation and response more challenging. Allocating funding to entities situated to act as central communicators, like CEMA, would help improve the communication between service providers and community organizations about training and resources available, existing coalitions and collaborations, and post-disaster response efforts. We strongly encourage agencies, organizations, and other entities to clearly and publicly communicate their emergency preparedness and response efforts so that community members as well as organizations can be aware and involved. Tabling at city-wide events and sharing emergency preparedness brochures and graphics in public community spaces, can keep disaster mitigation, planning, and response front of mind while inviting community input surrounding what information is needed. Keeping group social media accounts updated, uploading meeting minutes to public-facing websites, and providing transparency to all community members about disaster preparedness and response efforts work to keep communities engaged,

informed, and prepared for any emergency that might occur.

We recommend establishing a dedicated communications manager on teams that deal with emergency mitigation and response who is responsible for keeping relevant information flowing on social media and public local TV and radio news stations. They would also be responsible for communicating with networks of community organizations that have direct contact with community members who might not otherwise see these forms of information dissemination. This communications manager should be a local St. Louisan with connections, community trust, and a deep understanding of how St. Louis communities communicate. This is especially true for governmental agencies, which should act as a hub of information during and prior to disaster. The person in this role would ideally have clear contacts with major news outlets and key community organizations. Through connections to a broad network of organizations, clear communication pathways would be established prior to any disaster so that efficient emergency management is possible.

4. Represent All Community Members in Planning.

Finally, focusing on representation in disaster preparedness is essential when creating disaster plans that include everyone in the community, regardless of physical or mental ability, housing status, age, language spoken, or citizenship status. Our literature review and discussions with local sources both highlight a lack of preparedness measures that intentionally include older adults, people with disabilities, those without housing, and immigrant communities in St. Louis. Current plans in the City like the Functional Needs Registry put the onus on those vulnerable populations and their caregivers to sign up for the registry without chance for input on overarching plans or intentional inclusion in seeking out the valuable voices of people with disabilities, older adults, or those with complex medical needs. With social isolation disproportionately affecting these communities, ensuring they are included in disaster preparedness planning processes and action plans can help mitigate the adverse effects that social isolation has on disaster vulnerability.

By intentionally deepening community engagement with vulnerable populations, St. Louis governmental and non-governmental organizations can demonstrate their commitment to the entire community, rather than the sense of laxity that the public typically associates with government leadership. Collaboration between CEMA, the Department of Human Services and collaborative organizations that work on community disaster planning would be beneficial in organizing this kind of connection and inclusion with these communities. Maximizing the efficacy of these suggestions requires strategic and focus-area overlap. Robust community engagement before disaster strikes furthers the potential for increased preparedness that is representative of the St. Louis population by encouraging a collaborative process for disaster relief.

In closing, our recommendations call for renewed intentionality with regard to holistic preparedness, deep community engagement, regional collaboration, and diverse representation in disaster planning. It is our belief that these efforts will both mitigate harm and reduce the cost of future disasters. Along with the local recommendations detailed here, we urge community members and leaders in the St. Louis region and beyond to advocate on a federal level for the preservation of FEMA, a vital national resource for disaster preparedness and recovery programs.

Approach and Acknowledgements

Our Approach

This report is the result of a fifteen-week class project from a community development class at the Brown School at WashU. The majority of the work for this report was completed before the May 16, 2025 tornado that struck the St. Louis area, including St. Louis City. Although we have made some additions to the report in light of the post-tornado relief efforts, we acknowledge there is still much to be learned in the wake of this tragedy as St. Louis works to be prepared for potential future disasters. We hope for this report to spur conversation among those in St. Louis City and the broader metropolitan region whom we have identified as being involved in disaster preparedness and response work, as well as those who are interested in engaging more in this area of planning. We are students interested in learning about and furthering these efforts, and we do not claim to be experts in community disaster preparedness.

In compiling this report, we made every effort to be as comprehensive as possible. We interviewed people working with East-West Gateway, the City Emergency Management Agency (CEMA), and St. Louis Winter Outreach. We also attended public meetings held by the Local Emergency Planning Commission (LEPC) and the St. Louis Area Regional Response System (STARRS). Further, we corresponded with the St. Louis AmeriCorps program. We reviewed academic literature on disaster preparedness and read case studies of disaster plans and responses in other areas. Additionally, we searched for any organizations focusing on preparing for disasters, including governmental and non-governmental actors at the local, regional, state, and national levels. We also read any publicly available disaster plans, found disaster preparedness trainings posted online, and identified potential gaps in disaster preparation based on the available materials.

Despite our best efforts, we suspect that there are organizations, efforts, and plans we have missed. We also know that these plans and preparations can and should be updated often. We have provided the most current information we could find, and we recognize that some of these details may have changed. In favor of gaining a broad understanding of the disaster preparedness and response framework in St. Louis City, we ask that you share any overlooked information with [Molly Metzger](#), our faculty advisor, who will continue this work after our semester ends.

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Post-Script Following May 16 Tornado

This report was largely written prior to the tornado that hit St. Louis on May 16, 2025. Since then, we have updated each section to include resources that were particularly impactful, as well as some recommendations that came to light, in the initial weeks of recovery efforts in our region.

The scope of this report largely focuses on the impact that city government and non-profit community development organizations can make on emergency preparedness and disaster recovery. Many institutions and larger corporations have not taken the community-focused role we call for in this report during the disaster recovery period so far, with many staying silent or offering words of encouragement without tangible action in the most affected areas. We call on St. Louis institutions to offer up their services, spaces, and resources in times like these to facilitate disaster recovery for the benefit of the affected areas as well as the larger St. Louis community.

Finally, we would like to bring attention to all the mutual aid organizers that have headed disaster recovery efforts across the city but especially in North St. Louis. At the People's Response Hub, Ohun Ashe of For The Culture STL, Kayla Reed of Action St. Louis, and their amazing team; mutual aid organizations like Lifeline Aid Group; place-based organizations like 4theVille and InvestSTL; local businesses in the landscaping and restaurant industries, and countless other organizations and individuals have stepped up and put in invaluable work to foster safety, support, and community. There are so many amazing, people-powered efforts underway—surely more than we know. We honor your hard work and thank you all for your efforts to prioritize the needs of the community during this difficult time. Thank you for walking the walk.

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