

South Carolina Department of Social Services

2025 – 2029 Child Welfare Services Disaster Plan

Overview

Disasters occur at the least expected time and require diligent preparation in order to successfully recover from them with minimal disturbance to daily operations. Divisions under the Department of Social Services such as child welfare are charged with lessening the impact of disasters on the populations served and must adequately be prepared by having guidelines clarify pre, during, and post disaster procedures that will allow the continuity of pertinent services. To maintain compliance with section 422(b)(16) of the Social Security Act child welfare jurisdictions are required to have procedures in place explaining how the state programs that receive assistance under this section plan to respond to a disaster. Plans of responsiveness should describe how the state will:

- identify, locate and continue availability of services for children under State care or supervision who are displaced or adversely affected by a disaster;
- respond, as appropriate, to new child welfare cases in areas adversely affected by a disaster, and provide services in those cases;
- remain in communication with caseworkers and other essential child welfare personnel who are displaced because of a disaster;
- preserve essential program records; and
- coordinate services and share information with other States.

Much of this information is supported by SCDSS Child Welfare Services Disaster Response Policy, which is included as appendix 1.

Identify, locate, and continue availability of services for children under State care or supervision who are displaced or adversely affected by a disaster

- 1) All licensed group homes, foster homes, and adoptive homes are required per regulations and policy to have a documented disaster plan in place. This plan is required for initial licensure and for all renewals thereafter. Disaster plans are submitted to the provider's assigned licensing/adoptive consultant and are kept on file. Group homes submit a disaster plan to their licensing consultant and maintain a disaster preparedness log to provide procedure in case of disaster. The disaster plan for foster and adoptive homes is documented via a standardized form and must include the following:
 - a) Foster family contact information;
 - b) Name, address, and telephone number for first and second choice locations in which the family would evacuate to during a disaster;
 - c) Evacuation locations must be shelters approved by local emergency protective services, hotels, or a residence outside of the area of impact and must meet the minimum standards of:
 - i) The location is safe and is large enough to accommodate everyone;
 - ii) The location is far enough away as to not be threatened by the disaster; and
 - iii) The residence is appropriate for the needs of the child(ren). This should consider the child(ren)'s medical needs, conditions, medications, and supplies.
 - d) Emergency contact information
- 2) SCDSS staff are responsible for locating alternative placement for any foster children as necessary. The licensing worker is responsible for ensuring the foster family provider understands how shelters can and should be utilized during a disaster. This includes identifying the shelter locations the family would utilize, if necessary.

- 3) During and immediately following a disaster SCDSS foster care, group home, and licensing staff are required to be on call to assist in communication and relocation efforts for any displaced children. If the disaster is anticipated, foster care and adoption case managers communicate with the foster families before the disaster to confirm the family's plans for evacuation and location during the disaster event. If a disaster is sudden with no forewarning, the foster care or adoption case manager communicates with the family as soon as the immediate disaster has subsided to confirm their location and assess their safety.
- 4) Service Referrals
 - a) Service referrals should continue to be made during a disaster event; however, it may become necessary for services to be sequenced to address immediate needs first.
 - i) Immediate services include those required to maintain the safety of the child(ren).
 - b) If a service referral is identified, but the resource is unable to provide the service, or the disaster prevents the family from completing the service, the case manager consults with their team leader for alternative service options and will continue to document the circumstances explaining the service cannot be completed or an alternate service is being selected.

Respond, as appropriate, to new child welfare cases in areas adversely affected by a disaster, and provide services in those cases

- 1) In the event a disaster occurs and CAPSS is unavailable, intake staff continues to answer the phone and gather information as normal. Intake case managers will not delay answering intake calls due to waiting on CAPSS to become operational again.
 - a) If CAPSS is unavailable, all information gathered during the intake call is documented via the Offline Intake Form (SCDSS Form 3027).
- 2) During a disaster event Child Welfare Services staff are to continue with required responsibilities during a disaster and seek guidance from county leadership on appropriate steps if needed. This includes initial contact efforts for new reports received during the disaster event. If initial contact is not reasonably possible, or is unsafe due to a disaster, the case manager will contact local law enforcement as needed to assist in conducting initial contact.
 - a) If initial contact cannot be made, the case manager documents concerted efforts explaining the circumstances and attempts made to coordinate contact with local law enforcement.

Remain in communication with caseworkers and other essential child welfare personnel who are displaced because of a disaster

State level DSS foster home, group home, and licensing staff are required to be on call to assist in communication and relocation efforts for any displaced children during a disaster. Child welfare staff statewide are required to complete specific online training courses for disaster response and must keep their personal contact information updated in the event of an emergency. Staff also complete this training so they may assist in shelter operations when called upon.

In 2023 SCDSS migrated agency cell phones, tablet aircards, MiFis, and CradlePoints inventory to AT&T FirstNet. FirstNet is a communications network dedicated to emergency responders and the public safety community. FirstNet provides priority communication with the highest level of network priority over commercial users and unlimited, unthrottled data

at all times. It provides the most comprehensive coverage, particularly in rural areas throughout the state. This has improved cell signal strength to communicate from the field and fewer dropped calls.

During emergency events FirstNet gives users priority and pre-emption over non-FirstNet users, dropping all commercial traffic if needed to dedicate the network exclusively to first responders and the extended primary group members, including SCDSS. In addition, if the communications infrastructure is damaged and unavailable in a disaster, FirstNet has dedicated deployable trucks that can be set-up as mobile cell sites that will link to the FirstNet network via satellite and allow SCDSS employees located in those affected areas to be reached via their SCDSS issued cell phones.

Preserve essential program records

The agency's data network allows for staff to access program systems and information from locations outside of their specific counties. Should staff need to relocate to other county office or work remotely technology allows this capability.

During a disaster event, all casework activities are to be documented in the same manner as they would under non-disaster circumstances. In the event CAPSS is unavailable, all documentation shall take place either digitally or physically written on paper.

- If digital records are used, such as a Microsoft Word document, the case manager will create a folder for each investigations case on their DSS issued computer.
- If physical records are used, the case manager will document all case records written on paper and stored in a file within a secure location, and:
 - A file will be created for each case. Physical records for cases are not to be stored in the same file as records from another case.

Coordinate services and share information with other States.

The South Carolina Emergency Management Division has developed the South Carolina Emergency Operations Plan, developed for use by state government departments to ensure a coordinated and effective response to disasters that may occur in South Carolina. This plan includes the general policies and procedures that provide a coordinated basis for joint state and location operations. The full plan can be found on the SCEMD website:

<https://www.scemd.org/em-professionals/plans/emergency-operations-plan/>

SCDSS is the lead state agency for the emergency support function – mass care. This includes shelter, feeding, distribution of goods, emergency assistance, and human services. During times of disaster SCDSS staff assist in these functions, as well as having a presence at the state's emergency operation center. This gives SCDSS access to the state emergency response team and all of their capabilities, including access to the Palmetto EOC system. This system is used during a disaster event to monitor shelter capacity and openings, as well as all congregate care, licensed childcare facilities, and all SCDSS office locations.