

Stabilization

Stabilization is about reopening civil society and restarting the economy as prudently as possible to minimize ongoing damage.

Stabilization is the inverse of emergency response, as communities unwind the emergency measures put in place and return to 'normal' life.



The key challenge faced by local governments in this phase is to gather and leverage sufficient capacity to deploy assistance to where help is needed most.

Marginalized and vulnerable populations often have the most time-sensitive needs, and at the same time, are often underserved through parallel, under-resourced civic structures. It is more difficult to reach these populations through existing means of deploying assistance.

Leaders will also continue to face all the same leadership challenges experienced in the Emergency Response phase, only in the reverse. In a protracted and uncertain crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders will be asked to make difficult decisions based on insufficient information, and they will be challenged to maintain a spirit of flexibility.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

How are you ensuring that the “success” of and metrics around stability are defined by marginalized and vulnerable communities?

Who are you considering as part of your civic infrastructure to activate capacity and deploy resources during the response? Are well-resourced and connected nonprofits and civic organizations the only partners being tapped to act and seen as effective/efficient?

How are you prioritizing the deployment of assistance? Is it on a first-come, first-served basis? How are you meeting the needs of those less able, or trusting, to navigate the process to access assistance?

Are you being accountable to communities that vary across identity and wealth?

How are you varying the level and types of assistance provided to meet the needs of marginalized and vulnerable communities?

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1

Create and communicate a tiered plan to keep marginalized and vulnerable individuals protected and safe as the economy reopens.

Local governments must take precautions to ensure that marginalized and vulnerable populations directly benefit from the reopening of the economy and are not put in danger or newly destabilized when temporary emergency relief is withdrawn.

Maximize the transparency and stability of reopening by establishing a clear and coordinated communications plan. As with the tiered approach to emergency response, a tiered reopening should be proactively and clearly communicated to all communities, especially the marginalized and vulnerable. Again, local governments must prepare a plan that speaks to local conditions, communicates through multiple modes and languages, and is shared in a timely manner.

Focus on restoring employment and services for marginalized and vulnerable populations when reopening businesses. Local governments should prioritize reopening industry sectors that employ large portions of marginalized households with limited financial savings, only when these workers are fully protected and safe. Focusing on reopening businesses safely and with worker protections that employ marginalized populations, helps to ensure those households are receiving the income needed to avoid entering crisis as government assistance ends and their savings are depleted.

Organize and fund services to support the ability of marginalized communities to participate in reopening. Local governments must restore access to public transit, childcare, stable housing, and other basic needs that are necessary for marginalized and vulnerable populations to fully participate in a reopened economy. Cities must also mandate that reopened businesses provide safe working conditions (e.g. provide personal protective equipment and frequent cleanings). Without these supports in place, it will be challenging for households to return to work, children to return to school, and businesses to return to full operation. During Hurricane Katrina, many low-income households could not afford to evacuate—but eventually, after the storm, the story evolved to one where they could not afford to return. Schools with high shares of low-income students of color tend to suffer from high chronic student absenteeism rates after a disaster.⁶³

Unwind emergency actions without destabilizing households, workers, and businesses relying on emergency measures. When emergency measures are removed, local governments must give thought to how a return to “normalcy” will be experienced by different populations. In many cases, local governments will need to establish “bridge” policies or programs. For example, with regards to housing, shifting immediately from an eviction stay to traditional evictions standards risks creating a wave of evictions for households unable to pay back rent. Establishing a mandatory mediation process or program to resolve back rent is likely to be necessary.

Los Angeles passed a “right of return” for laid-off workers, advocated by unions seeking to prevent old job positions from being refilled by “cheaper, newer labor.”⁶⁴ This rule would ensure that workers that have been laid off will be able to re-participate in the economy when employment and hiring resumes at their former places of work.

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2

Dedicate available funding to support stabilization.

Evaluate current needs in real-time through community-based networks and project future needs. Local governments must estimate the level and degree of need for different types of households and businesses. For example, available data on unemployment should be used to estimate future risk of evictions and foreclosures to set aside adequate funding for emergency rental assistance, counseling, and legal aid. Housing costs beyond rent—such as insurance, utilities, and maintenance costs—should also be considered within funding programs and risk assessments, as any of these costs may jeopardize housing security.

Nimble reallocate local resources from existing projects and reserves toward current need. Local governments must share staff and budgets across government agencies, shifting responsibilities depending on needs. Capital resources must also be reallocated based on need, not existing budgets. Reallocating budgets goes against the culture of most organizations and is perhaps the most institutionally difficult task in this phase, but it is critical in a recovery context.

Actively deploy federal programs to ensure that all available aid reaches marginalized and vulnerable populations. A myriad of federal funding programs are included in the CARES Act and other recovery legislation. Local governments should work with states and community partners to undertake the difficult process of digesting the rules for these programs in order to take full advantage of the available support.

Find ways to fund the needs of those unlikely to qualify for direct federal assistance. Undocumented residents, those operating in the informal economy, or people otherwise at the margins of society will struggle to access federal assistance. Where there is a strong philanthropic presence, local leaders should partner with foundations to cover this gap.

Community-based organizations can help marginalized and vulnerable residents know and access their rights. For example, D.C. Jobs with Justice, a local coalition of labor organizations and community groups, has helped to distill all local D.C. policies into a series of regularly updated resources for residents to “know their rights.”⁶⁵ The City of Seattle has also created a simple “know your rights” tool,⁶⁶ and has taken care to compile COVID-19-related resources grouped by different types of needs.⁶⁷

Some cities have created programs to reach undocumented workers who have been excluded from federal relief programs.

- Washington D.C. established a \$15 million COVID-19 relief fund with \$5 million designated to undocumented workers.⁶⁸ This funding responded to immigrant advocacy groups such as Sanctuary DMV, who pleaded for the Mayor to bring relief to those who rely on nontraditional income streams. Money for the fund was drawn from reserves bookmarked for disaster relief, a budgetary precaution that the City took after the 2008 financial crisis.
- As a part of its COVID-19 relief effort, the Open Society Foundations made a \$20 million grant to create an Immigrant Emergency Relief Program with the City of New York, to provide one-time grants for up to 20,000 immigrant families, including undocumented immigrants. The fund will be managed by the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs and the nonprofit Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City.⁶⁹

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3

Prioritize the delivery of assistance over regulatory safeguards.

Speed is key. Most households cannot go two months without aid while their applications are being processed.

Provide lower-income households with financial aid that is as flexible as possible. It is crucial to empower and relieve households by providing them with money they can spend freely. Households have a range of needs, and they alone are best positioned to prioritize those needs. Local governments should push for public assistance to be as flexible as possible in terms of enrollment, disbursement

Identify regulatory or administrative barriers to accessing assistance—such as burdens of proof—and remove them. Local governments must avoid creating any additional regulations or administrative process beyond what is already in place, while making every effort to reduce the number of steps in the application process, as each is a potential bottleneck. Time is of the essence.

Push for maximum flexibility in public funding use. Following a disaster, rules for federal and state funding can be relaxed to support quick and flexible deployment. Local governments should closely track where there are regulatory barriers to effectively deploying funding. They should partner with other local governments and community advocates to identify common barriers, and jointly recommend changes to the rules and regulations to the responsible authority or agency. They should also lobby for reforms at the state and federal levels through state representatives and congressional delegations.

After Hurricane Maria, a group of legal aid advocates pushed FEMA to allow survivors to access financial assistance without undue burdens to verify their homeownership. Groups such as Ayuda Legal, Fundacion Fondo de Acceso a la Justicia, and Servicios Legales de Puerto Rico developed an affidavit tool named the “Sworn Declaration,” which allowed survivors to verify ownership on appeal instead of providing traditional ownership documentation.⁷⁰ Traditional documentation was not sensitive to the complex nature of homeownership on the island, leading 60 percent of Puerto Ricans to be denied FEMA help because they could not prove ownership of their homes.⁷¹

Chicago funneled \$2 million in housing trust fund money to create a Housing Assistance Grant program, offering 2,000 tenant-based vouchers worth \$1,000 each. This measure flexibly directed pre-procured funding to quickly place money into the hands of low-income residents struggling to pay rent. While this funding is not nearly enough to meet demand—the City received 83,000 applications for only 2,000 vouchers—it was valuable to quickly mobilize and provide relief where possible.⁷²

Maryland has announced that state-authorized licenses, permits, and registrations will be automatically extended through 30 days after the end of the state of emergency,⁷³ so that license holders and applicants are not struck with the stress of delivering paperwork either during or immediately after the crisis.

Funding flexibility was a key distinguishing trait and success factor for the 2009 TANF Emergency Fund, which issued \$1.3 billion to temporarily and countercyclically employ 260,000 low-income unemployed people. Flexibility allowed the fund to help small rural communities, big cities, and everything in between—no two subsidized programs looked alike.⁷⁴

4

Partner to leverage community capacity and deploy funding as quickly as possible.

Public subsidy and private investors must be deployed with the goal of reaching marginalized and vulnerable populations. This task is all about scale and speed: the scale of capacity must be commensurate to the scale of need. In post-crisis times, need may grow 100-fold, and capacity must match the level of need. This level of mobilization cannot be achieved within local government alone.

Partner with existing local groups and community-based organizations who can expand public capacity to deploy assistance. It is easier and more effective to work with a community if there is existing familiarity, trust, and local know-how. Community-based organizations, like member-based nonprofits, faith-based organizations, business improvement districts and neighborhood associations are critical partners in pushing out aid to local communities, as they have existing relationships and rapport with marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Coordinate with the philanthropic community to provide assistance quickly to community-based organizations and reach those not positioned to receive public dollars. Volunteer- and reimbursement-based support will be inadequate to fill gaps in capacity; this is exacerbated by the fact that social distancing measures have limited the number of volunteers available. Local governments will need to dedicate immediate funding, both flexibly and with fewer constraints, to cover the costs of staff and supplies for providing assistance to marginalized and vulnerable communities. Philanthropic funding is often better positioned to support these efforts, especially when coordinated and leveraging local government dollars and community-based organizational networks and capacity.

After the foreclosure crisis, HUD partnered with its network of intermediaries to implement the National Foreclosure Mitigation Counseling Program (NFMC). The program responded to a growing need for post-recession foreclosure counseling. The program proved to be very effective: 64 percent of participants remained out of serious delinquency after eight months post-counseling, and participants were able to receive loan modifications that saved borrowers an average of \$267 per month.⁷⁵

In Houston, after Hurricane Harvey, Familias Immigrantes y Estudiantes en La Lucha (FIEL) canvassed apartments where they could reach undocumented immigrants, providing them with FEMA application assistance and other options for accessing aid. During this process, FIEL also helped tenants move to safer housing, after discovering that many undocumented immigrants were living in dangerously mold-infested apartments but were too afraid to leave or complain. FIEL would not have qualified for most public recovery grants, but was empowered by philanthropic money (the Harvey Community Fund), which recognized that major nonprofits would not have known which apartments to canvas or have had the capacity and creativity to mobilize so soon after the storm.⁷⁶