



Lessons Learned from Irene*

1. **Individuals and families need their own disaster response plan.** Everyone should assume that they may become isolated without assistance for at least 48 to 72 hours. Individuals and families can find preparedness materials here: <https://vem.vermont.gov/preparedness/family>.
2. **Everyone should assume that an event can displace them from their home and/or office with little or no notice. Family members may not be together when an event occurs.** Keep essential items, such as medicine, within reach and ready to go where you go. Develop a family communication and “meet up” plan.
3. **Towns need to be prepared to subsist on their own for at least 72 hours.** It is possible that towns can become cut off from external aid, including that from adjoining towns, or even parts of their own town. Use your Local Emergency Operations Plan (LEOP) to think through the possible risks your town faces, how you’ll respond to those risks, who is best suited to execute necessary tasks, whether supplies or equipment need to be pre-positioned, and how.
4. **If the town says it will provide a service, such as a shelter, make sure the town does, in fact, have the capacity to provide that service.** Before an event know what is expected, invest what needs to be invested to make the service viable, seek training and support, and drill, drill, drill.
5. **Do not appoint someone to execute a task who cannot perform it.** Persons assigned tasks in the LEOP must knowingly accept that assignment, and be ready, willing and able to execute the task assigned them. They must also not have too many other duties already.
6. **Know the roles. Distribute responsibility.** Know Incident Command Structure. Do not assign multiple tasks to a few individuals such as the fire chief and emergency management coordinator. People in command should use volunteers to keep from being overloaded.
7. **Towns need to be prepared to assist one another.** Your neighbor may be your closest resource. Consider mutual aid agreements that address not only emergency services, but public works and administration as well.
8. **Town operations may need to move.** Just as an event can displace a family, it can displace town operations. This may be caused by flooding, fire, wind/tornado damage, or other event that renders town offices inaccessible or uninhabitable.
9. **The time to locate and save critical records is not during an event.** This is true for families and towns. Identify and protect critical documents from fire, water and wind before the event. Have computer records backed up and off site.
10. **State resources support state operations first.** State resources may or may not be available to a town in the event of a disaster. Towns should assume they will need to be self-sufficient in their response and recovery.
11. **Neither FEMA nor any other government agency or program will make a town, household or business whole in the event of a disaster.** Disaster relief programs are intended to be supplemental.
12. **Insurance policies should be reviewed on an annual basis.** Policies change, and town and homeowner needs change. Make sure your policies reflect your risks and needs.

13. **If your town participates in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), everyone, including the town itself, is eligible to buy flood insurance.** Flood insurance is your recourse if your home or business is damaged by a flood, including loss due to stream/riverbank erosion (where the land washes away along with the home or business that sat upon it). No matter how much flood insurance costs, it is THE source of funding that will pay off a mortgage, help you rebuild, or otherwise help you get back on your feet. You do not want to leave to chance the availability of federal funds for a post-flood buyout. Flood insurance is relatively cheap outside of the floodplain, and it was outside of the floodplain where a substantial portion of the damage happened.
14. **Plan now for financial resiliency.** Towns should maintain a relationship with lenders that allows them to borrow what they need to respond to a disaster. Towns should also create a rainy day fund in case it rains – and it will.
15. **Inform the public what to expect ahead of time.** Take advantage of preparedness weeks to educate your citizens about how they should prepare for and respond during an emergency, and what they can expect from the town. Include material in your town report. It can be difficult to communicate critical information when the power is out. Inform your residents ahead of time.
16. **Be prepared to manage information and keep your communications capacity during an emergency.** People want to know what is going on, and if left in the dark will assume nothing is or, worse, rumor will fill the vacuum. Establish a public information plan ahead of time to both provide the public with information they need to know, and to control rumors. Train staff/volunteers for this role. Use existing networks such as churches, service organizations and meals on wheels to get the word you want out. Redundant means of communication are essential (phone, email, notice boards, ham radio, social media). Social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) are facts of modern life, and people rely on these networks for information. Use them and monitor them.

*This was prepared by Windham Regional Commission Executive Director Chris Company. These are his observations and should not be viewed as a comprehensive preparedness list. Should you have questions please reach out to Vermont Emergency Management.