



HAZARD MITIGATION FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS

What kinds of hazards does your school district face? Over the past few years, California and California schools have received some cruelly sobering reminders of how little we control natural forces. Drought, floods, fires, and other disasters have hit the state one after another. In October 2017, nearly 600 California schools were closed because of fire danger, evacuations, and poor air quality.¹ In Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, fires, floods, and debris flows caused school closures from early December 2017 through mid-January 2018.²

What could we have done to reduce the damage and losses from these events? What can we do now to reduce the risks from future events? We have neither the funds nor the technology to eliminate all risks, but we still have to determine which risks are most urgent and how to address them in order to minimize future impacts. To do this effectively, we must take an approach that is realistic and rational, neither ignoring the potential for disasters nor overreacting to it. This is the purpose of a local hazard mitigation plan (LHMP).

WHAT IS AN LHMP?

An LHMP is a tailored plan to reduce the risks of damage to people and property by prescribing measures to make them more resilient to the most likely hazards. LHMPs are authorized by both federal and state law; since the federal Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, state, local, and tribal governments and special districts must submit hazard mitigation plans in order to be eligible for certain federal grants. Both the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) are required to review an LHMP before it is approved, which can take from two to five months and

sometimes longer. Once adopted, LHMPs are valid for five years.

All emergency management, including an LHMP, is based on the four-phase emergency management cycle. A community is always in at least one phase of this cycle, though phases may overlap.

Mitigation. The mitigation phase focuses on the prevention and minimization of consequences related to emergencies before they occur. This can include anchoring furniture to walls, strapping down water heaters, and buying insurance.

Preparedness. This phase involves making plans for and gathering supplies to be used during and after an emergency. This can include conducting training drills, making evacuation plans, and stockpiling food and water.

Response. The response phase includes actions taken during an emergency to save lives and prevent further damage, such as evacuating, turning off gas valves, and providing emergency medical treatment.

Recovery. The recovery phase includes all actions taken after an emergency to help return to normal or even safer conditions. This includes assessing damages, rebuilding or repairing property, treating psychological trauma, and restoring economic activity.

LHMPs focus on the mitigation phase of the cycle. Hazard mitigation, at its most basic, comes down to the age-old premise that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. FEMA estimates that for every dollar spent on mitigation, a community saves four dollars in response and recovery costs.³ Recovery from major disasters can

FEMA and Cal OES have standardized the LHMP process to facilitate approval and ensure sound planning practices.

- » **Data collection.** Gather information that informs nearly every other task in the process.
- » **Hazard profiles.** Identify previous hazard events, their locations and strengths, and the probability of their recurrence. Hazards are rated based on perceived threat to the community.
- » **Vulnerability assessment.** Quantify the risks to assets and populations, estimate potential losses, and review plans and practices.
- » **Capabilities assessment.** Review district policies, programs, staff, funding, and other resources. What reduces disaster losses now or in the future?
- » **Mitigation actions.** Develop and prioritize mitigation actions based on the previous assessments, e.g., high risks with high expected damage have higher priority than low risks or disproportionately costly mitigation.
- » **Implementation.** Determine the people, funding, and future actions to complete mitigation actions.
- » **Other FEMA/Cal OES requirements.** Conduct public outreach, document the entire LHMP process, and submit LHMP to FEMA and Cal OES.



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take years, and some places may never fully recover. Hazard mitigation reduces the risk of damage, loss, and casualties in a disaster, which makes recovery quicker and future preparedness easier. An LHMP pinpoints the areas that need mitigation the most, as well as the mitigation actions that will have the most benefit.



hazards, vulnerabilities, and assets required for an LHMP help districts better understand the actual risks. The district can then prioritize the most significant vulnerabilities and hazard risks and identify strategies to reduce or eliminate them.

An LHMP also opens new opportunities for funding before and after a disaster. In the regular course of business, school districts must make capital improvements just as cities and counties do. With a valid LHMP, schools can take advantage of new funding sources for capital improvements and other projects that make schools safer. This includes funding for seismic retrofitting, repairing or replacing infrastructure, clearing brush in high-fire hazard zones, or improving roadways and intersections that are vulnerable to flooding. Competitive FEMA grant programs include the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, Flood Mitigation Assistance, and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Grant Program. Under these programs, up to 75 percent of a mitigation project's costs could be covered. And if a disaster does strike, a district with an LHMP can receive funding to actually improve its damaged



facilities and equipment, not just replace them.

FEMA also awards grants for the preparation of LHMPs. An individual school district can receive up to \$150,000, and a district in partnership with a city, county, or other jurisdiction can receive up to \$250,000 to prepare a multi-jurisdictional HMP. These planning grants require a 25 percent local match, which can be met through staff time instead of cash.

BENEFITS TO DISTRICTS

Planning for emergencies is not a new concept for schools. Schools and school districts are required to develop comprehensive school safety plans that align with the Standardized Emergency Management System and the National Incident Management System.⁴ However, these plans focus on response to and recovery from natural or man-made disaster events. The benefit of an LHMP is that it identifies likely threats and establishes strategies to reduce their potential impacts *before* they happen.

Schools are considered "critical facilities," and are often designated as evacuation centers and/or shelters for people displaced by a disaster. Damage to a critical facility can impair response and recovery and disrupt services. The extensive assessments of

WHAT IS A CRITICAL FACILITY?

Critical facilities are buildings and structures that, if severely damaged in a disaster, would have the worst possible consequences because they:

1. Provide essential services, especially during and after a disaster. Severe damage would reduce the availability of the services needed most during an emergency, e.g., hospitals, police and fire stations, and vehicle and equipment storage as well as ancillary structures needed to operate these facilities during an emergency, such as power-generating stations, telecommunication centers, and water and sewage treatment plants.
2. House a large number of people or house people with a limited ability to escape, e.g., prisons, theaters, nursing homes, and schools and daycare centers, especially if designated as shelters or evacuation centers.
3. Produce, use, or store highly volatile, flammable, explosive, toxic, or otherwise extremely hazardous materials that would threaten the public if released.⁵



THREE ROADS TO AN LHMP

School districts can participate in an LHMP in three ways, but no matter which you ultimately choose, the first step is to determine if your city or county already has a valid LHMP. If so, what does it cover and where is it in the five-year cycle? The answers may affect which option is possible, feasible, or desirable.

The first option is participation with another agency or jurisdiction in their LHMP process. Cities and counties can include school districts in their required public outreach, but typically the district only informs the jurisdiction about its mitigation needs. If the district is not a partner in the plan, it may not be able to apply for grants. However, a district can use the existing plan to undertake its own process. With a lot of the work already completed, the district's task is easier. Nevertheless, if a district straddles multiple jurisdictions, the plan can become complex and difficult to administer.

In the second option, the district partners with at least one other agency or jurisdiction in a multi-jurisdictional HMP. Many projects

HAZARD MITIGATION IN ACTION

- » In the recent wildfires in **Sonoma County**, some areas had PVC storm drains that melted, interfering with drainage after the fire. FEMA would normally award recovery costs to replace the drains, but with a valid LHMP, FEMA could award mitigation funds to develop a more resilient drainage system.⁶
- » The **San Bernardino County Office of Education**, on behalf of Redlands and Colton School Districts, applied for a Hazard Mitigation Grant for nonstructural mitigation for earthquake hazards. The grant was used to anchor and secure cabinets, computer hardware, kitchen appliances, and furniture in schools throughout the two districts.⁷
- » Before the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, schools in the **Los Angeles Unified School District** had suspended ceilings with hanging light fixtures, but so many fell during the earthquake that the district decided to retrofit or replace pendant lights in all its schools. Through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the district received \$3.1 million to replace damaged lights and another \$45 million to replace undamaged but hazardous pendant lights.⁸

that reduce vulnerabilities on a school site also require another jurisdiction's participation. If the district has a good relationship with that jurisdiction, partnering can help reduce costs for both, while increasing benefits for the community. This strategy usually works best when the district and jurisdiction have the same boundaries. However, the schedule for completing the plan may depend on staff capacity outside the district's control. This type of HMP works best if all the entities involved commit to a mutually agreed-upon time frame and process.

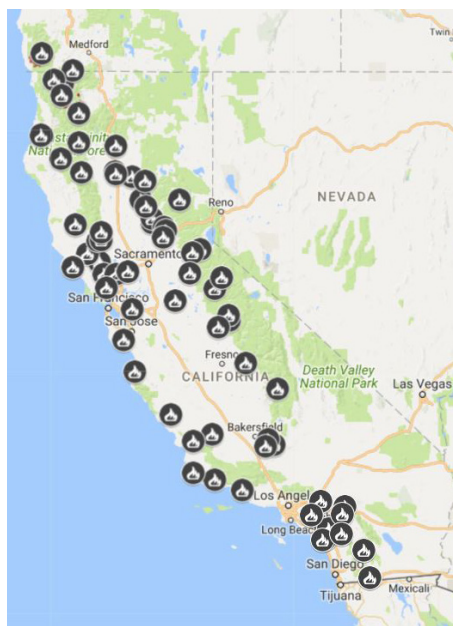
The third option is for a school district to undertake the planning process itself. This option gives a district the most control—it can focus on district properties, decide which projects are most pressing, gather its own data, and develop strategies that work best for its facilities. Also, as the lead agency for an LHMP, the district can apply for grant funding as opportunities become available.

Under this option, however, mitigation actions involving assets not owned by

the district, such as streets and nearby properties, will require additional follow-up and coordination with neighboring jurisdictions, utility providers, etc. When providers of key services are not already part of the process (as in a multi-jurisdictional HMP), the district may find it more difficult to secure and sustain their participation.

CONCLUSION

No matter what kinds of hazards your district may face, a local hazard mitigation plan can give you a clear picture of the potential vulnerabilities and establish realistic, rational strategies to address them. Funding is available to help districts develop LHMPs, and there are a range of approaches and partnerships that you can undertake to meet the needs of your district and community. In the wake of the fires, floods, and other natural disasters of the past few years, we want to do the best we can to minimize future damage from similar events. That makes it a good time to think about hazard mitigation planning.



California wildfires, October 2017

Source: CAL FIRE



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Endnotes

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