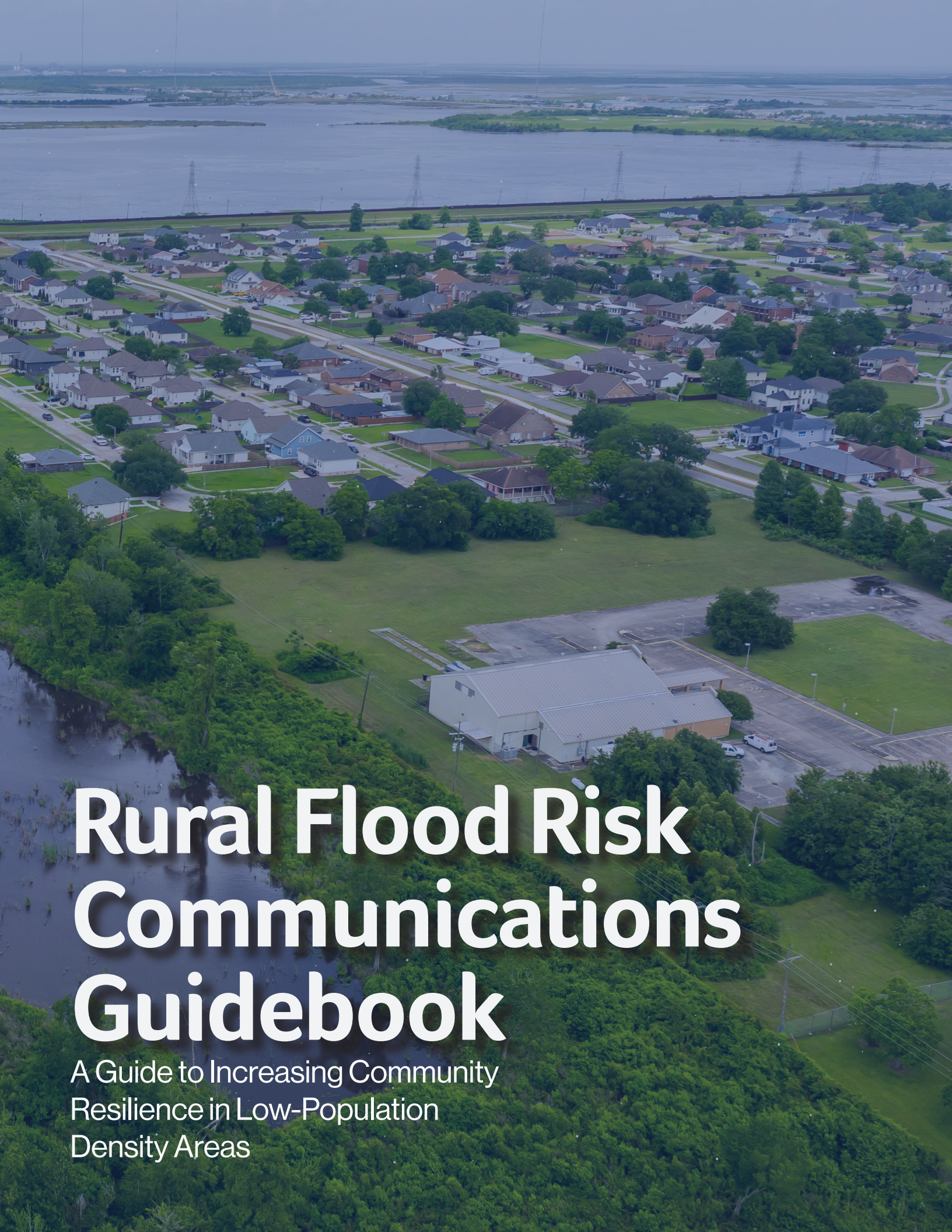
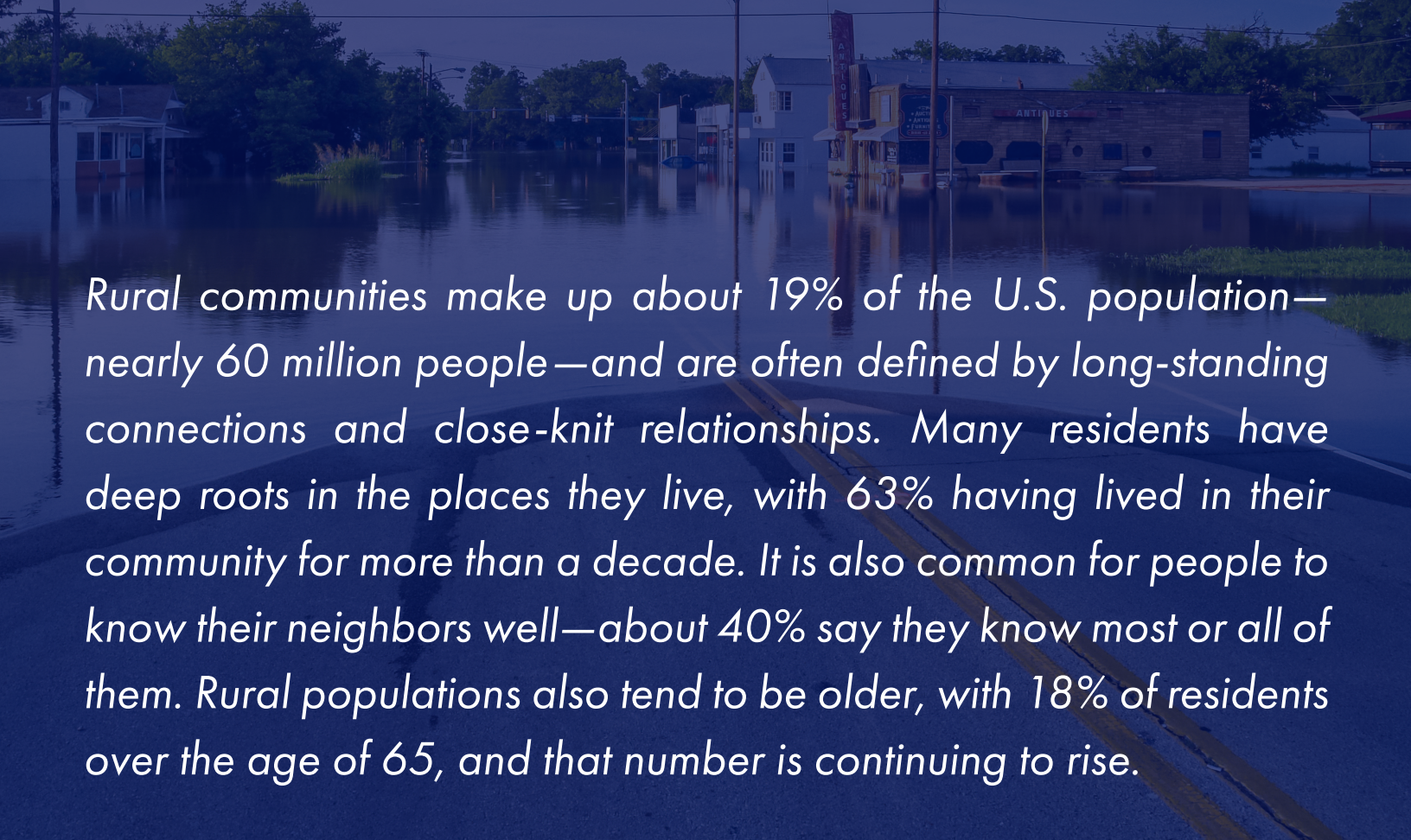




Rural Flood Risk Communications Guidebook

A Guide to Increasing Community
Resilience in Low-Population
Density Areas



Rural communities make up about 19% of the U.S. population—nearly 60 million people—and are often defined by long-standing connections and close-knit relationships. Many residents have deep roots in the places they live, with 63% having lived in their community for more than a decade. It is also common for people to know their neighbors well—about 40% say they know most or all of them. Rural populations also tend to be older, with 18% of residents over the age of 65, and that number is continuing to rise.

These dynamics play a big role in how communities experience flooding. When water levels rise, it can quickly disrupt essential services and limit access to first responders. Flooded roads often leave residents stranded and cut off from resources, and recovery can take longer when businesses are closed and access remains limited. These challenges underscore how rural communities are both tightly connected and especially impacted when infrastructure and access are disrupted. This guide is designed to help you understand your role as a trusted messenger in your community, leverage existing communications resources and networks before, during and after flood events, explain flood risk communications in your own words and navigate to FEMA and Ready.gov resources, check flood risk and resource communications for credibility, and communicate information clearly and responsibly during emergencies.

This guide was developed as part of the FEMA Cooperative Technical Partnership (CTP), by the Community Resilience Center at The Water Institute.

ABOUT THE WATER INSTITUTE

The Water Institute is an independent, non-profit, applied research institution advancing science and developing integrated methods to solve complex environmental and societal challenges. We believe in and strive for more resilient and equitable communities, sustainable environments, and thriving economies. For more information, visit www.thewaterinstitute.org

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USING THIS GUIDEBOOK

This guidebook is a resource for discovering your role in community flood risk communications.

Make notes in the back of the workbook to bring into your group or organization's discussion.

Use the discussion questions and activities to personalize your plan for building flood risk resilience in your community.

Additional resources are listed in the references section.



FRAMING RURAL FLOOD RISKS

When flooding hits rural communities, it is more than water on the ground. Families are cut off from essential services, small businesses close their doors, and communities struggle to maintain their way of life. Preparing for these events is not just the job of emergency officials—it is something all of us can help with: businesses, churches, and community organizations.

When flooding hits rural areas, communities are impacted by:

- Essential services and first responders being shut down
- Road closures due to flooding causing people to be stranded
- Longer recovery times due to road closures and business closures

Group Discussion Question:

How can you leverage existing trusted networks to create flood resilience in our community?

Activity 1: Your Audience's Needs

List two members of your audience/network and define unique flood risk challenges for them and the information needed to address their risk.

Your Audience Member:	Their Flood Risk Challenges and Information Needs:
Ex: Elderly patients at the Veterans clinic you volunteer at.	Ex: Losing access to power for medications that require refrigeration – Need to know where shelters are and how to access transportation

In the next section, we will discuss how you can become a trusted messenger of disaster information – bridging the gap between your existing audience and their information needs before, during, and after a flood event.

WHY TRUSTED MESSENGERS MATTER

Rural areas often lack resources and infrastructure. Existing networks in a community can get information out faster than general broadcast options like TV or radio, and the sources are trusted by community members. Responsible use of communication resources provided by officials from [ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov) or [fema.gov](https://www.fema.gov) is critical. In moments of crisis, people turn to the organizations they already trust—local businesses, church groups, and community leaders. That trust is a powerful tool for resilience.

In smaller networks, trust often comes from familiarity: the owner you always see at the hardware store, leaders or active members of a church, administrators from a child's school, or a radio show you've listened to on your morning drive for a decade.

Existing networks look like:

- Faith-based groups
- Community services such as healthcare
- Schools and school systems
- Business associations
- Alumni networks



In smaller networks, trust often comes from familiarity:

- Workers you see often
- Leaders or active members of a church
- Administrators from a child's school
- A radio show you've listened to on your morning drive



Responsible use of a communications channel looks like:

- Having a communication plan in place before flood events occur
- Knowing what your capacity is to communicate before, during, and after a flood event
- Knowing how to discern credible and non-credible information
- Working within local guidance and best practices
- Pointing your audience to credible resources



Activity #2: Who Does Your Audience Trust?

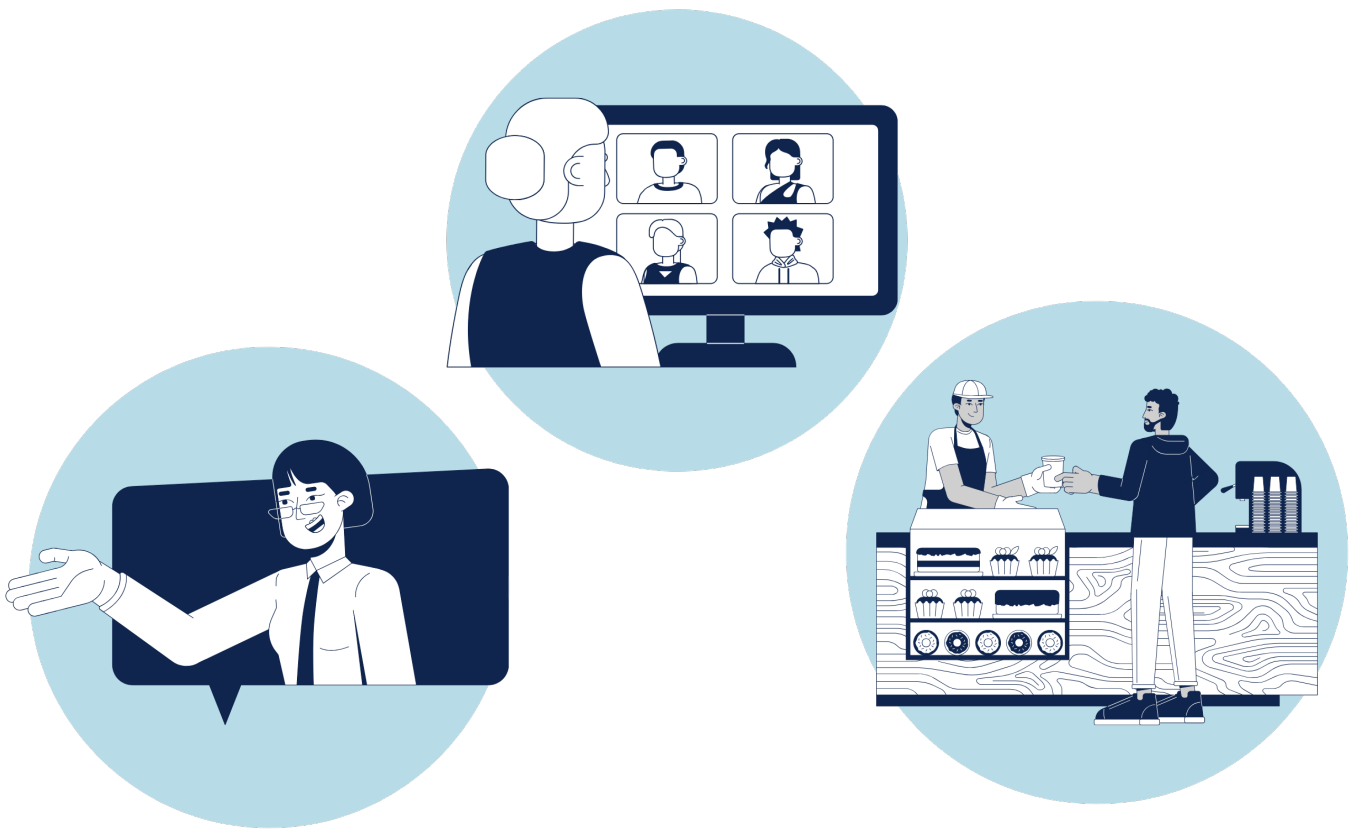
Using the previous activity, identify who in your organization, business, or group could act as trusted messengers to your audience to address their challenge.

<i>Your Audience Member:</i>	<i>Their Trusted Messengers:</i>
Ex: Elderly patients at the Veterans clinic you volunteer at.	Ex: The receptionist at the health clinic, medical practitioners.

In the next section, we will discuss the communications plans that help rural areas before, during and after a flood event. You will learn what existing messaging, templates and resources are available to efficiently build flood risk resilience.

Rural Flood Risk Communications Touchpoints

Touchpoints are instances in which you or your group have contact or exchange messages with an individual or group in your audience. Many touchpoints are communications or marketing channels, like using a social media platform to make an announcement. However, there are many existing touchpoints that can be leveraged to strengthen flood risk resilience in your community. These include moments that happen naturally during 1-on-1 visits between a practitioner and a patient, a conversation at a check-out counter, and community events that are not directly related to flood risk or disaster preparedness. Taking advantage of your existing touchpoints can help to efficiently and effectively get your audience the information they need most.



Group Discussion Questions:

What in-person events or gathering places could you use to share information (Ex: school fairs, town halls, church meals, community centers, resource drives)?

What broadcast or print materials could you use to reach people most effectively (Ex: newsletters, local homeowner guides, bulletin boards)?

What digital platforms or tools are most widely used by your audience (Ex: Facebook groups, WhatsApp, text alerts)?

Activity #3: What Existing Touchpoints Do You Have?

As we go through the before, during, and after phases of flood risk communications, consider which personal touchpoints, broadcast and print materials, and digital platforms you have available.

<i>Touchpoint</i>	<i>Information To Share</i>
Ex: Case workers monthly meetings with community members	Ex: Identify their flood risk and offer to help make a plan for the upcoming flood season.

Group Discussion Question:

What communications channels do you currently have that could be used to support flood risk communications in your community?



CREATING & CUSTOMIZING A FLOOD RISK COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

In the following pages, you will see an example flood risk communications plan for a rural community. This plan covers the goals, key messages and key resources that support communications before, during, and after a flood event.

This example plan is not meant to be a comprehensive example, but a resource to incorporate what you've learned about flood risk into your communications plan going forward.

Goals

How do the general goals of flood risk communications align with your mission or purpose?

Networks

Who are the trusted leaders or organizations in your community?

Which groups or associations have the strongest connections to residents?

Touchpoints

What in-person events or places could you use to share information?

What broadcast and print projects could be relevant to aspects of this plan?

What digital platforms or tools are most widely used?

Key Messages

What core messages about flood preparedness or safety are most relevant to your organization's work?

How can you ensure these messages remain consistent across different channels?

Key Resources

What materials already exist that you can adapt instead of creating from scratch?





EXAMPLE FLOOD RISK COMMUNICATIONS

Flood events bring different needs at every stage—before, during, and after the water rises.

Your organization may play a role in more than one phase of this communication cycle—or bring resources that are especially valuable at one point in time. The key is to:

- Commit realistically. Be clear about what you can take on.
- Avoid overextending. Protect your staff, volunteers, and resources.
- Plan for your own response. Consider how you, your team, or your members may also be affected—evacuation needs, potential power outages, or the ability to monitor official updates.

By setting honest commitments and preparing for your own challenges, you'll be better positioned to support your community when it matters most.

BEFORE

Goals

Raise awareness, encourage preparedness, and build trust.

Existing Networks

- Agricultural groups & neighborhood associations
- Business associations & employers
- Churches & faith leaders
- Schools & educators
- Military/National Guard

Touchpoints

In-person:	Broadcast & Print:	Digital:
Back-to-school fairs	Local radio	Facebook groups
Senior centers & health fairs	Billboards on high-traffic roads	School email/text systems
Tabling at hardware stores	Flyers/signs at stores, gas stations	Team sport messaging apps

Key Messages

- Know your zone. Know your plan.
- Stay prepared: It's not if, it's when.
- Make a plan today to keep your family safe tomorrow.
- Help others make their plans.
- Gather supplies, donate supplies.
- Sign up for emergency alerts from your local Office of Emergency Preparedness

Key Resources

- Flood preparedness info & emergency hotlines
- Social media toolkits for community groups
- Talking points for pastors, teachers, leaders, and outreach staff
- Presentations for association meetings
- Emergency alert sign-up materials

DURING

During a flooding event (or any disaster) the first priority should be safety. Always follow local guidances for driving, avoiding flooded roads, etc.

Goals

Share real-time, accurate safety info, reduce panic, and direct people to shelter and official resources

Existing Networks

Local radio & media

Neighborhood volunteers (only as safety allow)

EMS and first responders

Faith-based leaders

Schools & community centers

Touchpoints

In-person:

Door-to-door communication (only when safe)

Trusted messengers (EMS, pastors, clinicians)

Broadcast & Print:

Radio announcements (local stations)

Press briefings (radio, social media live feeds)

Digital:

Text, voice, and push notifications

Phone trees

Key Messages

Stay off roads unless evacuating

Flood waters can rise quickly.

Stay alert, stay safe.

Shelter is available at [designated location].
Bring ID, medications, and essential items.

Call 911 only for life-threatening emergencies

Key Resources

Pre-written emergency alert templates

Crisis communication playbook (scripts, FAQs)

Updated shelter location maps

Volunteer contact lists for door-to-door alerts

Social graphics for fast distribution

AFTER

Goals

Connect people to aid, support safe rebuilding, and promote emotional and physical recovery

Existing Networks

Faith-based and community leaders

Schools and trusted outreach staff

Public health agencies

Business associations

Recovery supplies businesses

Touchpoints

In-person:

Pop-up info booths at grocery stores, fire stations, and supply centers

Church and school outreach

Broadcast & Print:

Radio broadcasts with recovery updates

Printed flyers with key recovery contacts

Digital:

Text alerts about FEMA deadlines, debris pickup, and health clinics

Local government website

Key Messages

You're not alone—we're rebuilding together.

Check in on your neighbors, especially the elderly

Where to find long-term resources for basic needs.

Report damages at [Parish hotline or website]

Watch out for scams—work with licensed contractors

Key Resources

Recovery resource directories

FEMA and parish aid application guides

How to check permits and licensing for contractors

Multilingual recovery flyers

Free Resources for Rural Flood Risk Communications

No organization has to reinvent the wheel in rural flood risk communications. FEMA and Ready.gov provide excellent tools for every stage - preparation, response, and recovery.

Use these sites to access checklists, funding resources, and planning guides your organization can adapt for your community. Some materials, such as disaster preparedness coloring books are available by request for distribution within your community.

FEMA National Flood Insurance Program

This resource explains how flood insurance works, what policies may or may not cover, and how communities participate in programs like the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). They also provide guidance on reducing financial risk and improving long-term resilience before disasters occur.

FEMA National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP)	www.fema.gov/flood-insurance
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Outreach & Education

These materials support public outreach efforts through fact sheets, trainings, toolkits, presentations, maps, videos, and community engagement resources designed for residents, local leaders, educators, and professionals. They also include practical preparedness information for before, during, and after flooding events.

FEMA Flood Risk Resources	www.fema.gov/flood-maps/tools-resources/know-your-risk
Ready.gov Flood Preparedness Publications	www.ready.gov/publications
NOAA Digital Coast – Risk Communication Basics	www.coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/training/risk-communication.html
NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information – Extreme Precipitation in the U.S.	www.ncei.noaa.gov/news/when-it-rains-it-pours
NWS Flood Safety Tips and Resources	www.weather.gov/safety/flood
NOAA Digital Coast – Real Estate Training	www.coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/training/real-estate.html

Forecasts & Alerts

These tools support preparedness and emergency response by delivering timely information through mobile alerts, weather broadcasts, interactive maps, and official forecasting services. They help residents and decision-makers understand current conditions, anticipate impacts, and take protective action quickly.

NOAA Weather Radio	www.weather.gov/nwr/
NOAA Office of Coastal Management – Coastal Flood Exposure Mapper	www.coast.noaa.gov/floodexposure/
Weather Warnings on the Go – Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA)	www.fcc.gov/files/wea-factsheet-2021-finalpdf
FCC – Emergency Alert System (EAS)	www.fcc.gov/emergency-alert-system
NWS Flood Safety Tips and Resources	www.weather.gov/safety/flood
NOAA Digital Coast – Real Estate Training	www.coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/training/real-estate.html

These are only a few of the resources that are available to strengthen your personal and community resilience in the face of flood risks.

Check out the references section for more information on any of the topics in this workbook.



Credibility Check for Flood Communications

When the water is rising—and after it recedes—information spreads fast. Rumors and social media posts can cause confusion and even put people at risk if they go seeking aid that isn’t there. That’s why it is so important to know where to look for credible, local information.

Start with official sources: parish emergency management offices, local government websites, and trusted outlets like FEMA.gov or Ready.gov. Pair those with your community’s most trusted voices who can help share official updates quickly and clearly. The key is to verify before you amplify. If you aren’t sure, check two reliable sources before passing information along. By sticking to credible, local updates and using trusted community channels, you help ensure that families get the right guidance when they need it most.

Credibility Checklist	
Source	Is it from an official source (local government, parish emergency office, FEMA, Ready.gov, NWS) or relaying official guidance?
Verification	Can you confirm the same info from at least two reliable sources? Does it appear on an official site, radio, or verified social media or can it be confirmed with two sources?
Timeliness	Is the information recent, with a clear date/time?
Specificity	Does it provide enough information to be actionable?
Tone	Does it sound factual and calm, not panicked or sensational?
Sharing Responsibility	If I share this, will I be helping or possibly spreading confusion?

Activity #4: Supplies Giveaway Post Credibility Check

Using the Flood Information Credibility Checklist above, consider the sample messages on the next page. Which example messages are credible, non-credible, or need to be verified?

Consider the poster, context of the post, and the context of the channel it is being shared through. Also consider the risk associated with sharing incorrect or out-of-date information.

Remember - Verify Before You Amplify!



Local Community Center

@CountyCC



Emergency Supplies Distribution – September 20, 10AM. Free bottled water, cleaning kits, and non-perishable food are available for flood-affected residents.

Pickup location: Community Center, 54191 Court Street. Hours: 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM daily through September 23. Please bring proof of residence in county. Supplies are limited to one kit per household while available. Call 225-555-0123 for questions.



How would you verify this information with 2 sources?

Ex.: Call the community center and the number listed.

Is this post credible? If not, explain why.

Ex.: It appears credible with enough information to act on but no group is named in charge of the event.

Is there a risk of sharing this post if it is not true?

Ex.: Identification information could be copied or stolen if the group in charge is not legitimate.

NEIGHBORHOOD GROUP TEXT

Now

Relief Distribution — Today, 11:00 AM–3:00 PM. Volunteers are handing out bottled water, cleaning kits, and ready-to-eat meals at the Community Warehouse, 123 Front Street (near the Courthouse) in Springfield.

No ID required — first come, first served.

Organizers include local volunteers and a group called Faith & Neighbors. Supplies donated from local businesses. For more info or to confirm availability, call or text Maria Lopez at 225-555-6789. Please share with neighbors!



How would you verify this information with 2 sources?

Is this post credible? If not, explain why.

Is there a risk of sharing this post if it is not true?

Local County Buy/Sell Group



Katie A. reposted 3 days ago



Free Flood Relief Supplies – Claim Yours Now! All residents affected by recent flooding in our town are eligible to receive a personal emergency supply kit.

To claim your kit, click this link -> <https://forms.gle/flood-relief-supplies-iberville> and provide your full name, home address, and phone number FEMA is tracking. Supplies are limited – only the first 200 households will get a kit!"



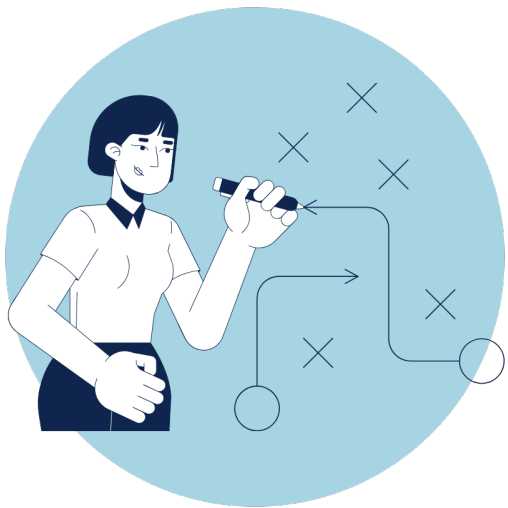
How would you verify this information with 2 sources?

Is this post credible? If not, explain why.

Is there a risk of sharing this post if it is not true?

Plan Your Next Steps

Review the information you read as well as your notes with your organization to discuss ways you can be useful during a flooding event. Work with your community or organization to identify next steps for building rural flood resilience using the questions below!



Identify Your Next Step	
Audience	• Which group(s) will we prioritize? Think back to the audience, needs and trusted messenger' activities.
Goal	• What unmet need(s) are you addressing? Look to the flood risk communications plan for goals relevant to your work.
Touchpoints	• What existing communications channels will you leverage? Review your brainstorming of communications channels and touch points.
Take Action	• What concrete action(s) will you take in the next 30 days?

Key Takeaways

Play to your existing strengths as trusted messengers.

Prepare for flood events to best support your community in the future.

Verify information before you amplify it.

Review the resources page to find ready-made publications and templates.

Refer to this guide throughout the year to refresh yourself and your team on how you are building resilience through flood risk communications.

References

FEMA, "A Guide to Supporting Engagement and Resiliency in Rural Communities," January 2021, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_rural-guide_jan-2021.pdf

FEMA, "Flood Risk Communication Toolkit for Community Officials," <https://www.fema.gov/floodplain-management/manage-risk/communication-toolkit-community-officials>

Ready.gov, "Floods," <https://www.ready.gov/floods>

FEMA, "Cooperating Technical Partners Program," <https://www.fema.gov/flood-maps/cooperating-technical-partners>

FEMA, "Communication Plan Guide," <https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-10/communication-plan-guide.pdf>

FEMA, "Common Disaster-Related Rumors," <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/recover/rumor-response> Note: FEMA recommends stopping the spread of rumors by finding trusted sources, sharing information from trusted sources and discouraging others from sharing information from unverified sources.

FEMA, "Disaster Fraud," <https://www.fema.gov/about/offices/security/disaster-fraud>. Note: FEMA warns that scam artists, identity thieves and other criminals may try to take advantage of disaster survivors.

Ready.gov, "Build A Kit," <https://www.ready.gov/kit>

Ready.gov, "Flood Safety Social Media Toolkit," <https://www.ready.gov/flood-toolkit>

FEMA, "Get Assistance After a Disaster," <https://www.fema.gov/assistance>

FEMA, "How to Apply for FEMA Assistance After a Disaster," <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/individual/how-to-apply>

Ready.gov, "Free Publications," <https://www.ready.gov/publications>

Ready.gov, "Prepare with Pedro," <https://www.ready.gov/kids/prepare-pedro>

FEMA, "Flood Insurance," <https://www.fema.gov/flood-insurance>

FEMA, "Participation in the NFIP," <https://www.fema.gov/about/glossary/participation-nfip>

Notes

Notes

Rural communities make up about 19% of the U.S. population—nearly 60 million people—and are often defined by long-standing connections and close-knit relationships.

When water levels rise, it can quickly disrupt essential services and limit access to first responders. Flooded roads often leave residents stranded and cut off from resources, and recovery can take longer when businesses are closed and access remains limited. These challenges underscore how rural communities are both tightly connected and especially impacted when infrastructure and access are disrupted.

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO HELP YOU:



UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE AS A TRUSTED MESSENGER IN YOUR COMMUNITY



LEVERAGE EXISTING COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES AND NETWORKS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER FLOOD EVENTS



EXPLAIN FLOOD RISK COMMUNICATIONS IN YOUR OWN WORDS AND NAVIGATE TO FEMA AND READY.GOV RESOURCES



CHECK FLOOD RISK AND RESOURCE COMMUNICATIONS FOR CREDIBILITY



COMMUNICATE INFORMATION CLEARLY AND RESPONSIBLY DURING EMERGENCIES



**COMMUNITY
RESILIENCE
CENTER**
AT THE WATER INSTITUTE



FEMA