

Focus Areas

- Disaster Resilience
- Community Resilience
- Strategic Planning

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Arbor Housing and Development
CORNING, NY / ARBORDEVELOPMENT.ORG

Empowering Rural Communities Through: Disaster Resilience and Business Continuity Planning

Background

Based in Corning, New York, Arbor Housing and Development supports safe, affordable housing and supportive services across a broad footprint in upstate New York and northern Pennsylvania. With growing weather-related challenges, Arbor recognized the need to strengthen its disaster preparedness and business continuity capabilities to increase resilience in its housing communities. Through the Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI), Arbor partnered with Pacific Community Solutions to build internal capacity for emergency planning, resulting in the creation of a replicable business continuity disaster plan (BCDP).

The Challenge

Arbor Housing and Development spans a wide and diverse geography, managing 18 housing sites across multiple counties, including affordable housing and supportive housing for populations in need. While individual sites had some emergency procedures in place, such as fire drills and evacuation points, the organization did not have a unified plan to guide disaster response or continuity of operations across its various locations. Arbor originally aimed to develop a community-wide disaster resilience plan, however, given

“We tested our own plan through a mock disaster and it immediately led to refinements; super small things, but things we didn’t think of until we lived it.”

— **SUSAN BULL, CEO, Arbor Housing & Development**

the size of its geographic footprint, decided to narrow the scope to a more manageable goal. Arbor shifted its focus to creating a detailed business continuity disaster plan for its Eaton headquarters and Sedgwick residential site. This approach enabled Arbor to focus its efforts on developing a replicable template to foster resilience and preparedness in each of its housing communities.

RCDI Support & Technical Assistance

Technical assistance included regular virtual planning sessions, structured agendas, and two in-person visits to observe operations and facilitate staff engagement. The staff also conducted a scenario-based drill to test the BCDP prior to implementation, resulting in real-time refinements and

increased staff confidence in the plan's usability. Arbor also introduced practical tools and immediate policy shifts, such as a new leave policy for staff impacted by disasters. The staff successfully used the tools and policies during a flooding event that occurred during the project timeline.

A central focus of the engagement was capacity-building. With consultant support, Arbor formed a cross-functional disaster preparedness leadership team made up of staff from information technology, human resources, residential services, property management and administration. This team took ownership of the plan, overseeing implementation and positioning the organization for long-term sustainability. Leadership also worked to shift from a centralized planning approach to one that empowered internal champions, fostering broader organizational ownership and engagement in preparedness efforts. The organization further solidified leadership buy-in and institutional backing by involving the board of directors in reviewing the plan.

Key Achievements

- Completed a disaster resilience plan covering Arbor's headquarters and one pilot site, with plans to expand across all properties.
- Trained staff using a scenario-based disaster drill to assess preparedness.
- Formed a disaster preparedness leadership team to oversee implementation.

LESSONS LEARNED & BEST PRACTICES

- 1 **Forming a dedicated disaster preparedness team helped give leadership the confidence to empower team members to take on key roles, ensuring broad engagement across departments.**
- 2 **Starting with two sites made it possible to build a strong, scalable model without overwhelming staff capacity.**
- 3 **Ongoing coaching and structured meetings proved more effective than templates alone in guiding Arbor's planning process.**
- 4 **Implementing policy changes during the planning phase — such as paid disaster leave — showed that meaningful progress doesn't have to wait for a finalized plan.**
- 5 **Scenario-based drills helped staff test their knowledge, identify areas for improvement and build organizational resilience in responding to real emergencies.**

WHAT'S NEXT?



With its BCDP in place for two sites, Arbor will extend this work across its remaining 16 locations using the established framework in developing site-specific plans. The disaster preparedness team will continue meeting quarterly to support plan rollouts, conduct drills and update protocols. Arbor also plans to formalize partnerships with local emergency response agencies and explore agreements with hotels for the relocation of residents in disaster scenarios. While broader regional planning remains aspirational, the organization is exploring ways to build capacity and may pursue future funding to support a dedicated emergency preparedness role. In the long term, Arbor's approach could serve as a model for peer organizations across the NeighborWorks network.