



EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE IN PARKS AND RECREATION



NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



Cover image: Flooded park and playground.

Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock

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INTRODUCTION



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Sleeping arrangements in a large gymnasium used as an emergency shelter during an emergency.

When thinking of first responders, park and recreation professionals are not typically the people who come to mind. However, preparing for and responding to emergencies are among the many essential responsibilities of these professionals. Whether through the implementation of green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) for flood control or the provision of temporary shelter and emergency care during natural disasters, park and recreation professionals support their communities in times of greatest need.

With the recent rise in the number of extreme weather events and natural disasters, the role of park and recreation agencies on the front lines is more critical than ever. To better understand and support this important work, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) surveyed park and recreation agencies in January 2025 about their roles in the current landscape of emergency preparedness and response. The 181 survey responses summarized in this report highlight the experiences of, and challenges and opportunities for, park and recreation professionals in emergency situations.

INFOGRAPHIC

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE IN PARKS AND RECREATION



Most park and recreation agencies **(85%)** are highly involved with preparing for, and responding to, natural disasters — particularly those related to severe weather.



The top three groups park and recreation professionals partner with when preparing for and responding to emergencies are **other local government departments within agency jurisdictions, the Red Cross, and local area risk management.**



Funding for this work primarily comes from agency operational budgets **(78%)**.



Most agencies **(86%)** have developed or follow some form of formal emergency plan within their jurisdictions.



About a third of agencies **(32%)** face challenges with funding and staff time/capacity for this work.



More than three-fourths of park and recreation professionals **(78%)** believe that their role in emergency preparedness and response is highly essential.

KEY FINDINGS

PREPARING FOR AND RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

Volunteers standing on stairs with boxes filled with humanitarian help, clothes, goods, food and medications for people and animals in need.

The surveyed agencies reported their level of involvement in preparing for and responding to emergencies related to health/injuries, hazards, structural accidents, natural disasters and public safety. Results show that agencies that are highly involved in preparing for emergencies are also highly involved in responding to them.

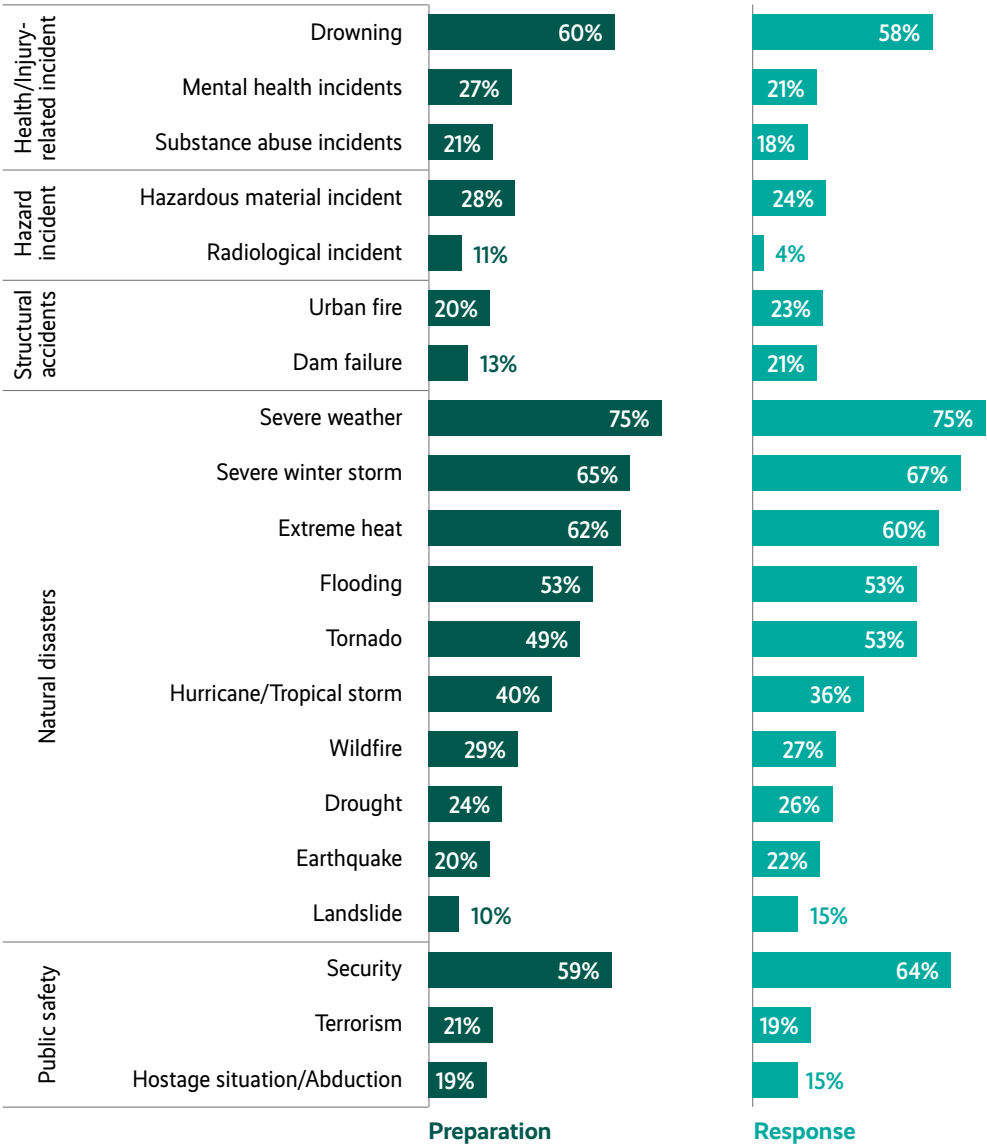
Most agencies (85%) are highly involved with preparing for and responding to any natural disasters, and most frequently responded to severe weather (reported by at least 60% of agencies), such as thunderstorms, high winds, lightning, winter storms and extreme heat. Agencies with formal emergency plans that include cooling or warming shelters during extreme temperature conditions typically used those shelters for one to nine days in the previous 12 months (of completing the survey).

Outside of natural disasters, about 60 percent of agencies also were highly involved in preparing for and responding to drowning and security incidents. Agencies were least likely to lend assistance in radiological incidents and landslides.

One professional with a variety of experiences with emergencies said, “I have navigated major regional events, including catastrophic flooding, EF-5 tornadoes and severe ice storms, as well as smaller, localized incidents such as drownings, shootings and the tragic loss of patrons or staff. Each of these situations has underscored the far-reaching impact emergencies can have on every corner of an organization and a community ... What’s vital is ensuring that preparedness is not just a policy, but a culture embedded at all organizational levels.”

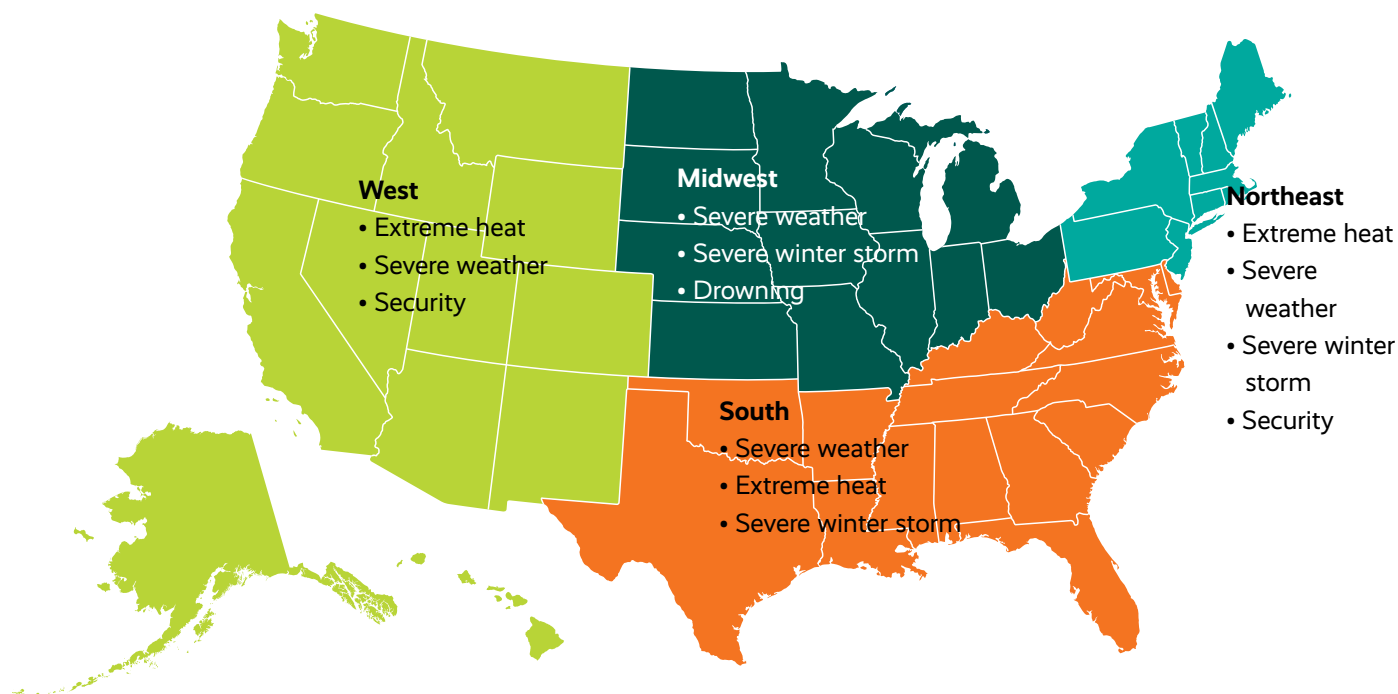
At least three in five agencies (60% or more) are highly involved in preparing for and responding to natural disasters related to severe weather, winter storms and extreme heat, as well as drowning and security incidents.

% of agencies that are highly involved in emergency preparedness and response



Across regions, agencies prepare for severe weather.

Top emergencies that agencies prepare for, by region



Lightning strikes as a thunderstorm moves over a small town.

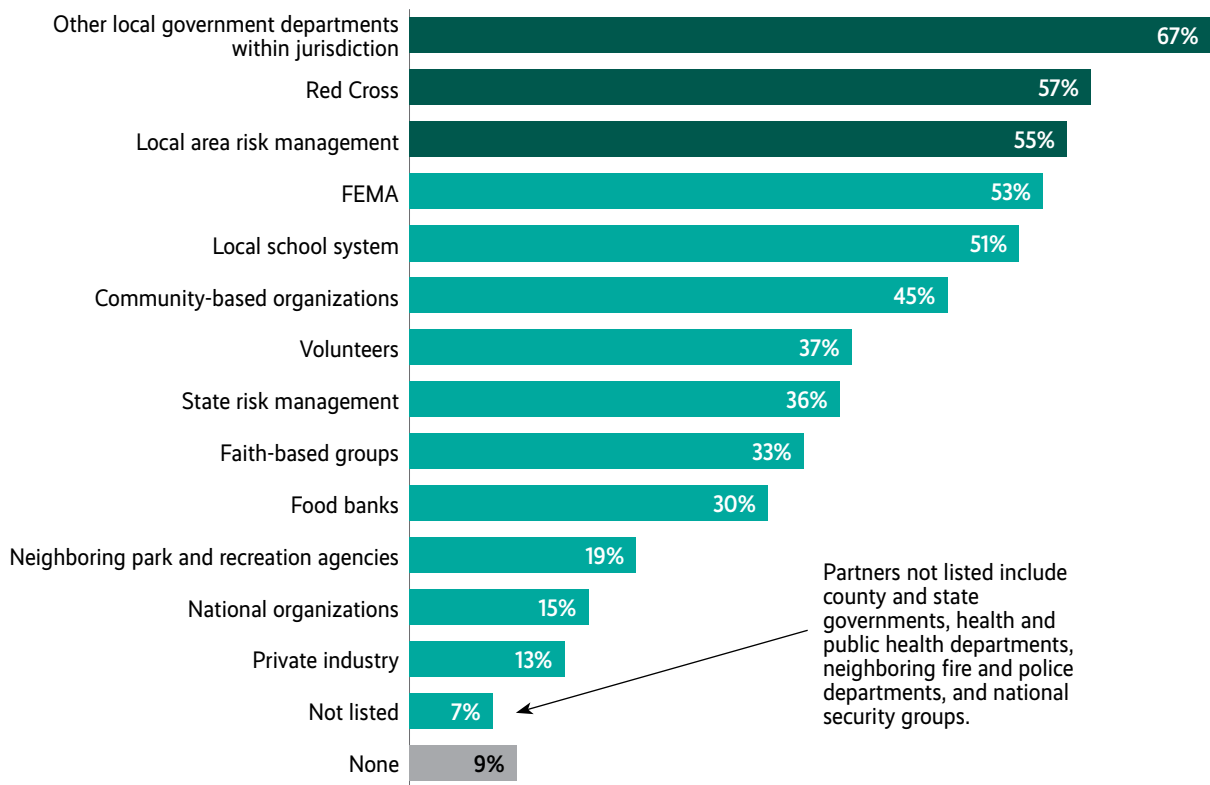
Compared to those in rural settings, agencies in urban areas are more likely to prepare for security issues (68% urban vs. 29% rural) and extreme heat (70% urban vs. 33% rural).

PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships in emergency preparedness and response allow for greater resources and responder capacity. Most agencies (91%) reported partnering with others to address emergencies in their communities.

Agencies are most likely to partner with **other local government departments within their jurisdictions, the Red Cross, and local area risk management** to address emergencies.

% of agencies



Special park districts are least likely to partner with other local government departments in their jurisdictions (41% of agencies) or the Red Cross (35% of agencies) than are agencies in cities and counties. Instead, special park districts rely mainly on local area risk management (reported by 71% of agencies).

Agencies mentioned that partners help to develop and support emergency plans, coordinate and provide resources and services, and sometimes even lead the response. Many agencies provide their partners use of agency facilities as shelters to deliver services during emergencies. Examples of such services include health and legal support, resource distribution (food, water and hygiene products), and reunification of families and friends.

“During times of crisis, such as natural disasters or large-scale emergencies, our recreation centers are designated as emergency shelters in partnership with the Red Cross. These facilities are equipped to house evacuees, provide food, water and basic medical assistance; and offer a safe space for those displaced.”



Aftermath of Hurricane Helene in Florida during clean-up efforts.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

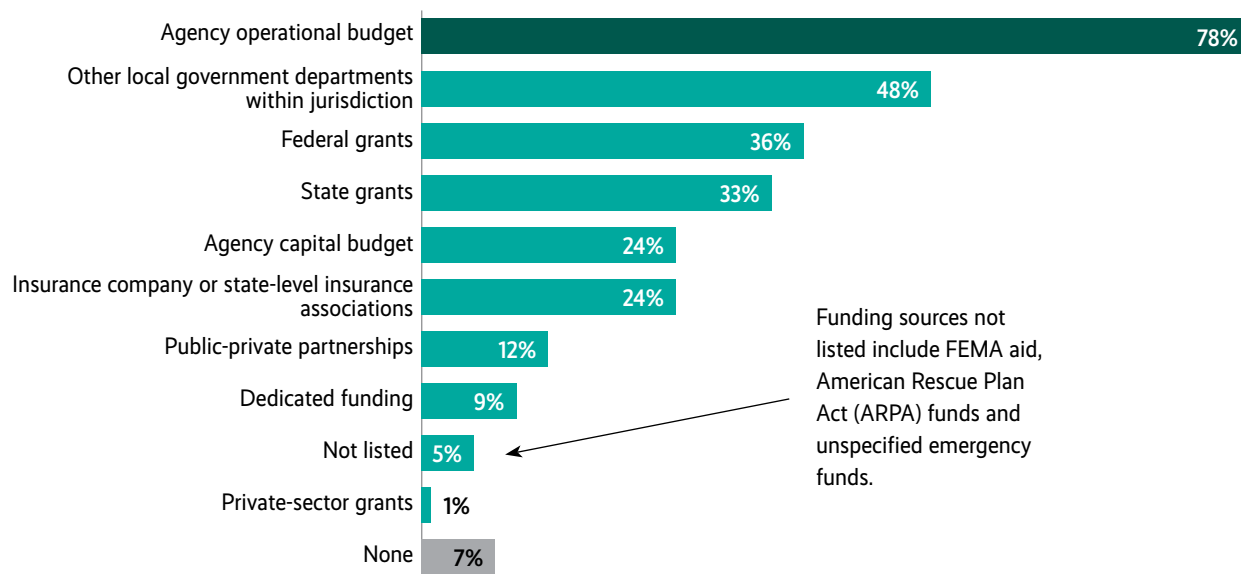
Regarding the importance of partnerships, one park and recreation professional said, “Working together is key ... Hurricane Ian totally submerged Sanibel Island (Florida), and it took everyone in every department working together for the community to get us back and ready to thrive again.”

FUNDING

The cost of emergency preparedness and response can include expenses for training, staff time, equipment and supplies, among other things. More than three-fourths of agencies (78%) fund this work through agency operational budgets.

Funding for emergency preparedness and response primarily comes from **agency operational budgets**.

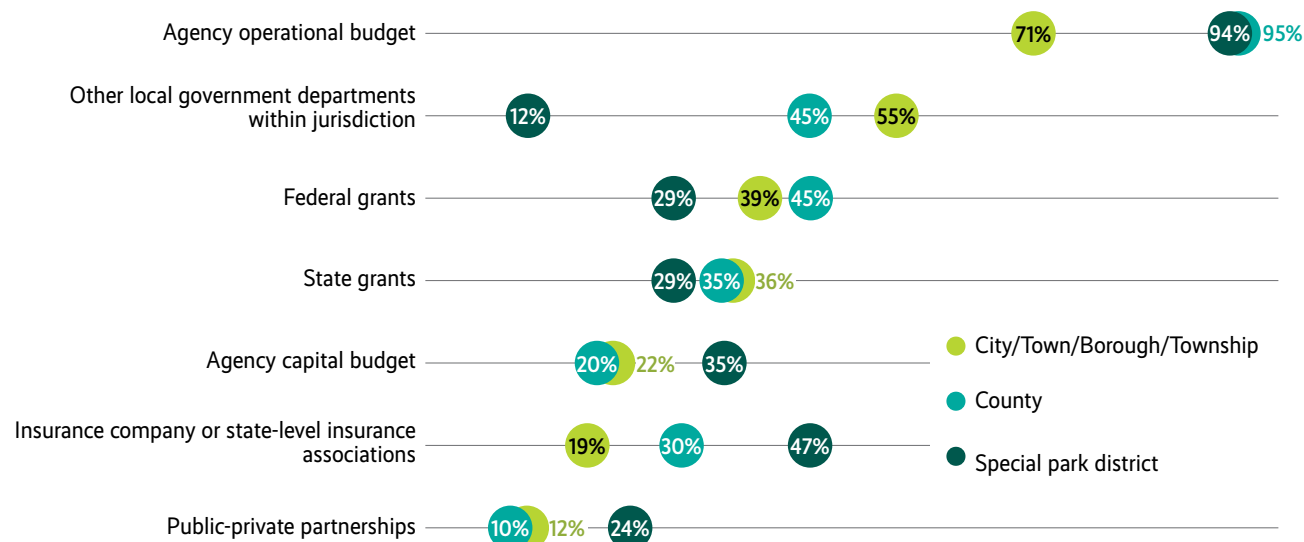
% of agencies



Agencies with budgets of \$10 million or more were more likely to include funding for emergency preparedness and response in their operational budgets (92% of agencies) than were those with budgets of less than \$5 million (62%). Agencies with budgets of \$20 million or more also drew on federal grants (50%) and agency capital budgets (43%) in their emergency response funding.

In comparison to agencies in **cities** and **counties**, **special park districts** rely less on government funds and more on their own agency budgets and insurance companies for emergency preparedness and response funding.

% of agencies with funding by jurisdiction type



n = City/Town/Borough/Township – 93; County – 20; Special park district – 17



EMERGENCY PLANS



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

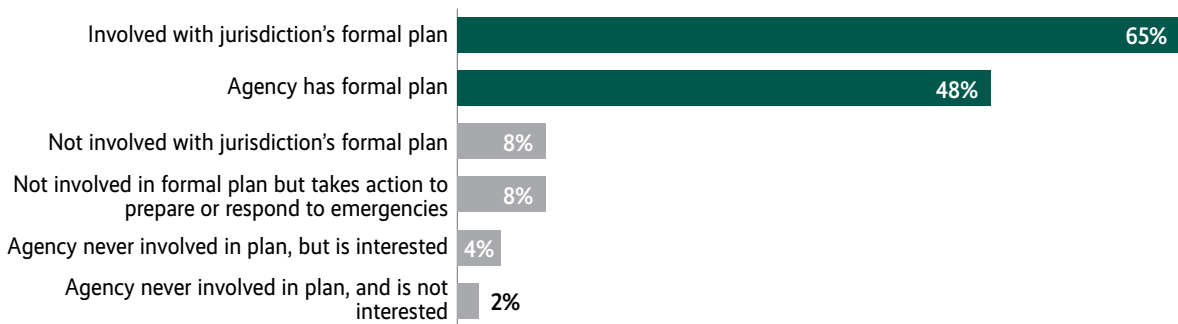
A participant learns CPR in a first aid class.

Planning supports community resiliency through emergencies and natural disasters. For park and recreation agencies, plans can clarify situations for which a response is needed, provide procedures on how to respond, and specify the roles and responsibilities of staff or partners. Most agencies are involved with developing their own plan or following a formal plan within their jurisdiction (86%).

One professional with 30 years of experience in parks and recreation said, “Advanced planning is critical, but no plan can account for every scenario ... Plans must be practical, adaptable and communicated effectively to front-line staff, who often serve as the first responders in crises.”

Most agencies (86%) reported following their jurisdiction's formal emergency plans and/or developing a formal plan of their own.

% of agencies



Agencies with their own formal emergency plans tended to have budgets of \$20 million or more or were in special park districts. Of 27 agencies that were not involved but were interested in a formal plan, 26 percent intend to become involved in planning within the next six months; 33 percent intend to become involved within the next two years.

Two of three (67%) agencies have been involved in emergency preparedness and response planning for 10 years or more.

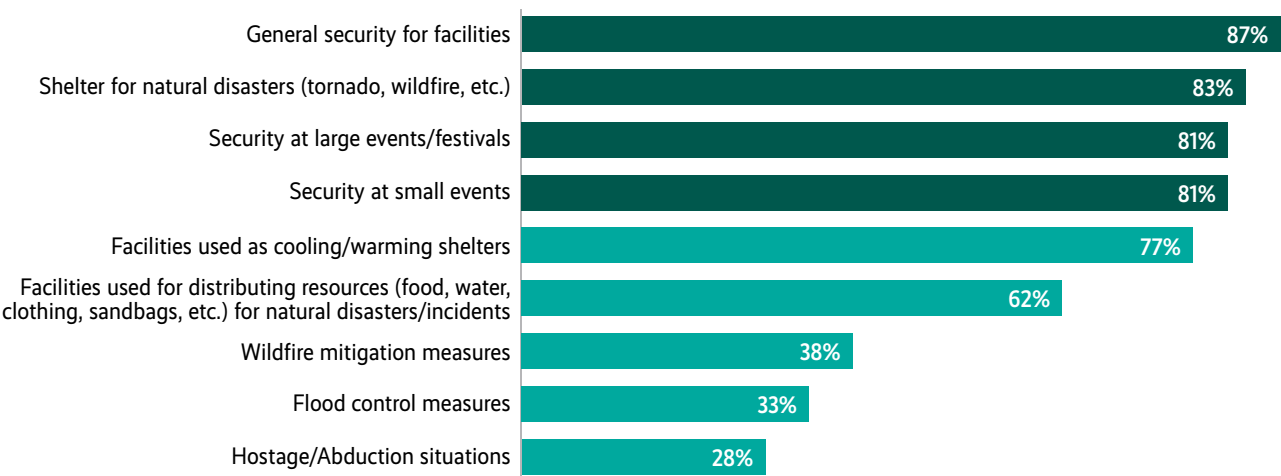
EMERGENCY PLAN CONTENT

Agencies involved in formal emergency plans provided information about their plans' content, including recommended responses to emergency situations and any necessary procedures and training. The typical guidance for responding to emergency situations found in formal plans aligns with the top natural disaster and security emergencies for which agencies prepare and respond.



Emergency Response: Most plans contain guidance on agencies serving as security and providing shelter during natural disasters.

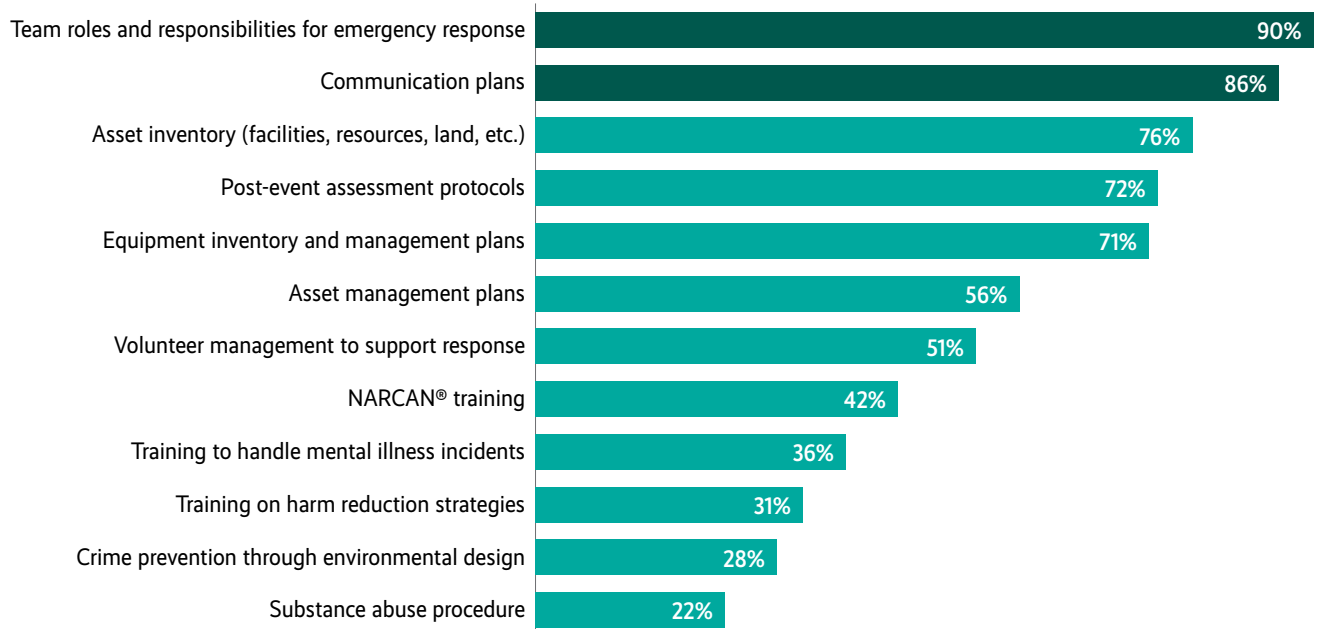
% of agencies





Emergency Procedures: Most plans outline **team roles and responsibilities** for emergency response and **communication procedures**.

% of agencies



Hurricane Helene causes flooding in Western North Carolina.

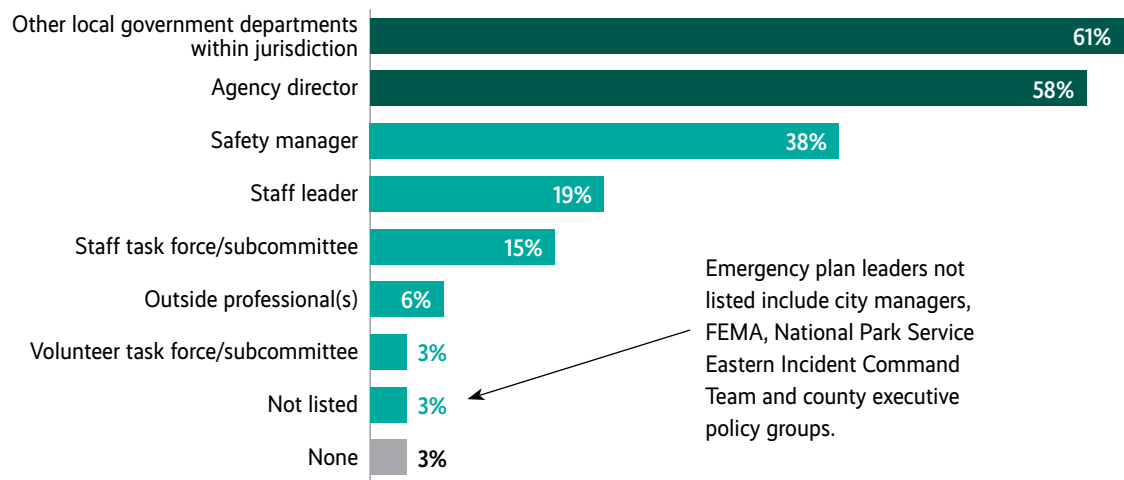
PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

EMERGENCY PLAN LEADERS

Most agencies (97%) designate leaders who support emergency plan implementation. Overall, the top leaders are other government departments within park and recreation agency jurisdictions (e.g., police, emergency management, fire, etc.), or agency directors and assistant directors. Leadership can vary by jurisdiction type. For example, special park districts tend to follow the lead of their directors (76%) and safety managers (71%) while counties (65%) and cities (70%) typically follow other departments within their jurisdictions.

Most emergency plan leaders are other local government departments within jurisdictions and agency directors.

% of agencies



Special park districts tend to follow the lead of their directors and safety managers.

% agencies with emergency lead by jurisdiction type



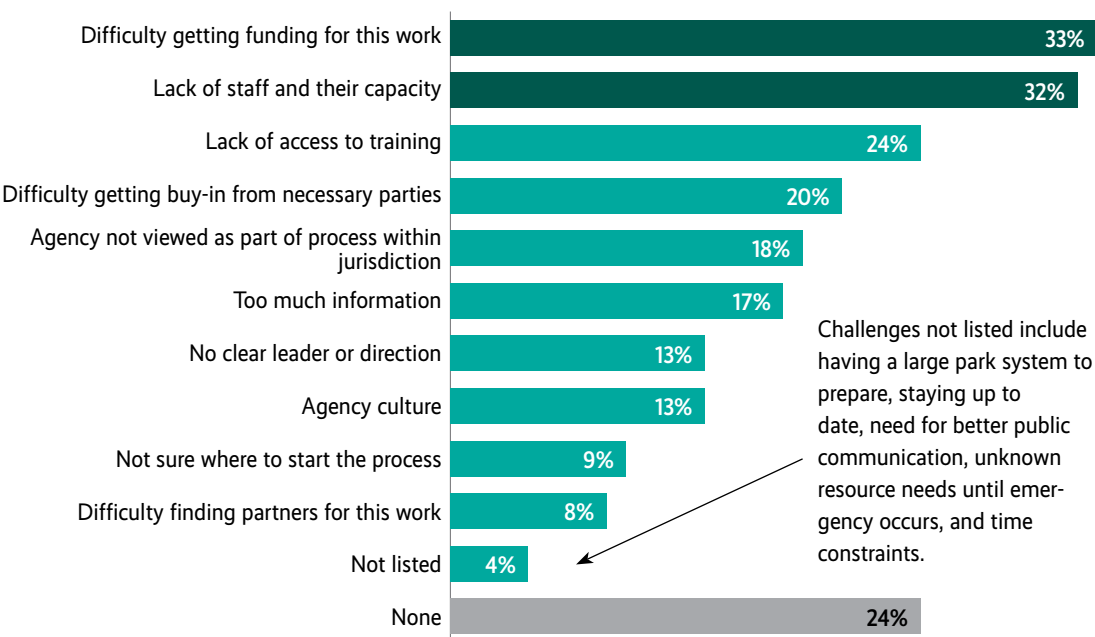
n = City/Town/Borough/Township – 93; County – 20; Special park district – 17

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARK AND RECREATION EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

Although most agencies (76%) reported facing challenges in their emergency field response work, about a quarter (24%) indicated no issues. Agencies that reported no challenges in emergency preparedness and response typically were found in cities/towns (78%), in suburban settings (61%) and in the South (56%). Budget did not appear to play a role in not reporting challenges, given this response came from agencies of all budget sizes.

Funding and lack of staff/capacity are the top two challenges that agencies face when preparing for and responding to emergencies.

% of agencies

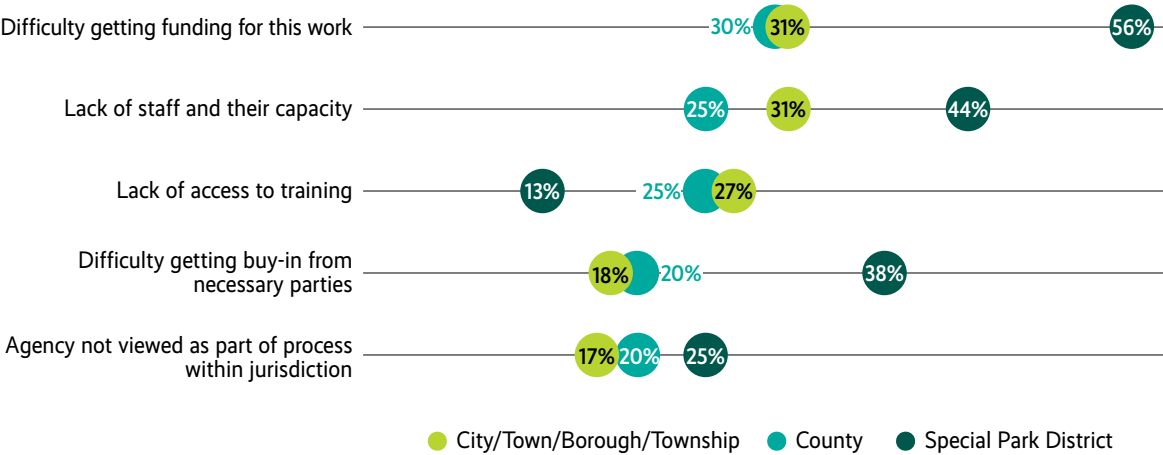


Regarding funding challenges, one survey respondent said, “Parks are underfunded and lacking critical resources necessary to have comprehensive emergency preparedness and/or emergency response standard operation procedures that keep up with best practices to manage current and future risks.”

Agencies with budgets of less than \$5 million were more likely to face challenges with funding (43%) than were those with budgets of \$20 million or more (25%). In terms of locale, agencies in rural areas struggled more with gaining access to training (38%) and being viewed as a part of the emergency response process (29%) than did those in urban areas (training 23%; part of process 13%).

Special park districts are more likely to cite funding, lack of staff and getting buy-in as challenges to their emergency preparedness and response work in comparison to **cities** or **counties**.

% agencies with challenge by jurisdiction type



n = City/Town/Borough/Township – 98; County – 20; Special park district - 16

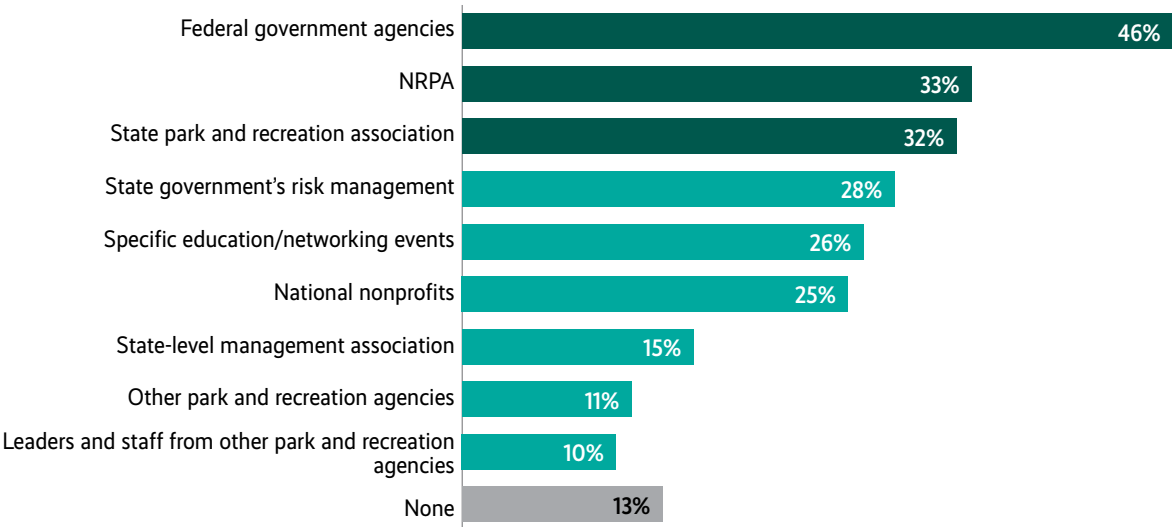
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Most agencies (87%) reported using educational resources to learn about and prepare for emergency situations. In addition, of the agencies involved in any formal plans, 77 percent offered emergency preparedness and response training.

One professional highlighted the importance of training, stating that during a recent emergency, “A key lesson was the value of staff training and preparation. While our employees were knowledgeable about day-to-day operations, many had never worked in an emergency shelter. We immediately put staff through basic emergency shelter management training, which helped them feel more confident and allowed us to better serve evacuees. This experience underscored the need for ongoing cross-training to ensure our team can handle diverse tasks, from managing intake procedures to assisting with basic first aid.”

The top sources for education on emergency preparedness and response for parks and recreation are **federal government agencies, NRPA and state park and recreation associations.**

% of agencies



Other sources of information cited by less than 10 percent of agencies included:

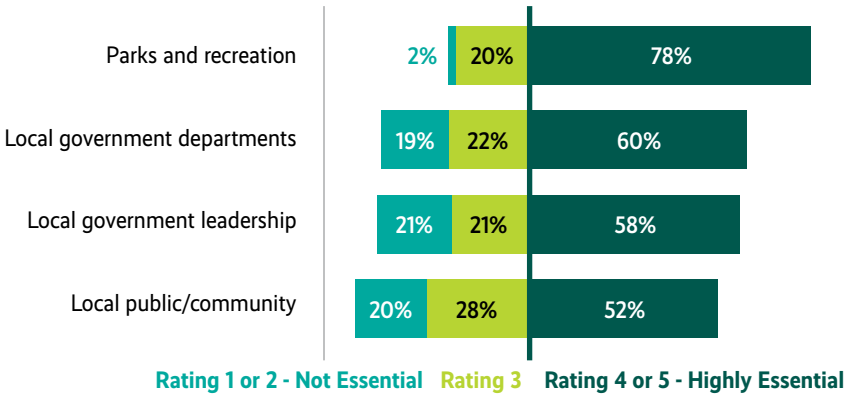
- ☒ State municipal league
- ☒ International City/County Management Association
- ☒ Park district risk management agency
- ☒ Local emergency management
- ☒ Police and fire
- ☒ Jurisdiction employees, departments or partners
- ☒ Universities



THE ROLE OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

Although the role of parks and recreation in emergency preparedness and response is regarded as highly essential by agencies themselves, agencies see an opportunity to enhance this perspective among local governments and the public. More than three-fourths (78%) of park and recreation professionals believe that their role is highly essential in emergency preparedness and response while 60 percent or less believe other local government departments, leaders and the community hold this same opinion.

More than three-fourths of park and recreation professionals (78%) believe that their role is highly essential in emergency planning and response.
% of agencies rating group perceptions of the essential role of parks and recreation in emergency response on a five-point scale



One respondent indicated that “it seems like there might be some misunderstanding regarding the role of our department in this [emergency response] process. While we may not be explicitly recognized or deemed necessary for its success, our facilities are actively utilized, highlighting our contribution to the overall operation.” Another professional believes that there is an opportunity to showcase the value of park and recreation assets through examples of open parks and community centers post emergency, and that in their experience this has been well received by their community.

Public perception data tells a story of support for parks and recreation in this capacity. Based on an [NRPA poll](#) of 1,000 U.S. residents in 2022, a high percentage of community members (90%) believed that it was important for park and recreation agencies to play a role in providing emergency shelter in their facilities and to serve as a distribution point for essential supplies during extreme weather events or natural disasters. In 2025, [another poll](#) of 1,000 people showed that 77 percent of the public agree that local governments, including park and recreation agencies, should invest in the community’s ability to prepare for, weather and recover quickly from natural disasters, providing emergency shelters and training staff in emergency management.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Park and recreation professionals described their firsthand experiences in responding to emergency situations. Their stories highlight the significant contributions of parks and recreation in supporting communities in need, mainly with emergency infrastructure. Through preparedness, collaboration and adaptation, parks and recreation provides essential services before, during and after incidents.

Emergency Infrastructure

“Parks and recreation is essential for communities in times of crisis. Parks and recreation serves as critical emergency preparation, emergency resiliency and emergency response infrastructure.”

Preparedness and Collaboration

“By fostering a mindset of readiness and proactive collaboration, park and recreation agencies ... transform challenges into opportunities for growth, ensuring safety and service excellence during even the most difficult times.”

Adaptation

“Our role has increased as we have been impacted by multiple hurricanes in recent years. We have found that ... [we] have had to adapt to meet the community’s needs. Along the way we have found strategies to better serve our roles and increase our situational awareness when threats emerge.”

Hurricane Helene made landfall on the Florida Gulf Coast in September 2024. One survey respondent recounted their agency’s experience responding to the situation.

“Our community was recently slammed by floods, winds and ... landslides resulting from Hurricane Helene. Our recreation facility ... housed as many as 102 displaced individuals in our gym immediately after Helene, with more than 40 individuals staying in our facility for 21 days before moving into local hotels. We also provided shelter for over 40 animals after the storm to include dogs, cats and birds. During these days and weeks, we served persons from all walks of life ... I am most proud of our community coming together ... as county departments joined together to serve those who had lost everything. From feeding survivors three fresh meals a day from our local hospital, to setting up an infirmary in one gym area staffed by our EMS members, to transporting truckloads of water ... from our pool across the street to simply flush toilets ... it was a time of trial and error but was fulfilling for all involved.”

CONCLUSION

Parks and recreation answers a community's call to respond to emergencies, especially during natural disasters, security incidents and drowning accidents. Through emergency plans, training and firsthand experience, park and recreation agencies are equipped for this response. Highlighting their stories and experiences during such emergencies is important for bringing awareness and increasing support from local governments and the public for the essential role that park and recreation professionals play as first responders. Aiding park and recreation professionals in their challenges with funding and staff capacity for this work means continued and strengthened emergency response capabilities and resilient communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, environmental resilience, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at nrpa.org/Research.



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**22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148
800.626.NRPA (6772) | nrpa.org**