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Housing Displaced Persons and Families

"The housing issue was an immediate problem, but we knew it would have even more long-range complications." (Henry Renteria, Director of Emergency Services, Oakland, California, 1989)

5.1 Typical Situation

The loss of dwelling units reduces the inventory of local housing and adds to the community's homeless population. Elements of the displaced population may never have looked to government for housing assistance of any kind, but others traditionally have been dependent on government support for their housing. The economic status, values, attitudes and expectations of each segment vary greatly.

Because wood-frame, single-family (or small multi-family) dwellings built since the mid-1950's generally perform very well, residents of these structures probably will not require housing assistance unless their homes are damaged severely. The greatest percentage of earthquake-caused homeless will fall into the following groups: (1) residents of older, unreinforced masonry apartment buildings (often low-income, elderly and non-English speaking); (2) residents of older (pre-mid 1950's), wood-frame houses because these structures usually have inadequate foundations, are not anchored to foundations or have inadequate bracing; (3) tenants in large apartment buildings that have open first stories such as ground-level and subground-level parking spaces because these structures tend to perform poorly; and (4) a scattering of others, depending on their particular circumstances.

The quantity of displaced residents depends on the shaking intensity in the area and the number of buildings and occupants at risk in the community. In general, the repair and reconstruction of housing follows a well-understood process. Phase one is the use of emergency shelters such as those set up in local schools. People accept them for the short term (a few days to two weeks), until other solutions become available. But many prefer to stay with friends and relatives. Some camp or live in trailers or recreational vehicles on

their property because many prefer to remain in or near their residences and strenuously resist relocation to other areas.

Phase two involves the repair of lightly damaged residences or the provision of temporary housing such as mobile homes. Homeowners with adequate funds independently secure contract help or do the work themselves. Some have insurance or qualify for commercial or low-interest government loans such as those available through the Small Business Administration. Those without such resources expect financial or in-kind government assistance and make up the greatest workload for community officials.

Phase three is the long-term reconstruction (and, perhaps, betterment) of the community's housing stock. Again, those people who are able to repair and rebuild on their existing sites probably will do so. Those who are dependent on government support find local replacement housing with assistance, voluntarily relocate to nearby (or distant) communities, await the repair or rebuilding of large-occupancy buildings or become part of the chronically homeless. The last situation is particularly true in communities that have a major shortage of low-income housing, suffer extensive losses to that stock and have no nearby communities with housing capacity.

5.2 Key Issues Likely to be Raised

1. **Can the structure continue to be occupied and who determines that and when?** There is a general unwillingness to vacate buildings. If evacuation is necessary, tenants and owners want to know quickly so that they can take appropriate actions. This creates a massive inspection workload for which the building department probably does not have adequate staff. A system for using professional volunteers and posting buildings will be needed. More-detailed inspections might have to follow preliminary inspections. In addition, aftershocks often require reinspection and may change the status of a posted building. Moreover, some, perhaps many, occupants will fear returning to buildings in which they live or work. Structurally unimportant but visible damage could accentuate this problem. Local officials should be ready to provide reassurance to people experiencing such fear.

2. **What standards, permits and inspections are required if a contractor is used to repair the structure?** Many homeowners and contractors will do repairs. They will need explicit information about the requirements and processes. Some will make unauthorized repairs, especially to interiors, to avoid inspections or reappraisals. Shortages of and major price increases in materials and services could occur depending on the severity of the situation. Occasionally, some victims experience outright fraud. Building departments generally respond to customer demand on a first-come, first-served basis without regard to the severity of the damage or to the importance of the building to the community. Sometimes special permit and inspection processes are set up, but the process may be lengthy in cases in which state or federal assistance is sought.

3. **How can government help solve housing problems after a disaster?** One of the most complex and emotional post-disaster problems for local officials is victim expectations, which range from minimum to maximum, with the latter being full replacement or better. A number of things can be done to ameliorate the problems, but all are aimed at helping the victim recover to his or her pre-earthquake level of living. The Red Cross and others will open emergency shelters where displaced people will receive basic necessities. These shelters are intended to operate for a very short period of time, but this becomes a real problem in earthquakes, especially if the damaged area is very large. Aftershocks may continue for weeks and produce more damage, increasing the shelter population.

The damage assessment, inspection and repair processes take time. Emotional trauma and the reluctance to leave "safe" locations will be present. The institutions providing the shelter space will apply pressure to return to their normal activities. Lastly, volunteers who can give only a limited amount of time to the effort usually staff the shelters. Consequently, there is pressure to vacate the emergency shelters within about two weeks. Shelter management must be planned carefully so that providers know that the space may be required for a lengthy period and managers understand and plan for staff rotation, several case-load "peaks and valleys" and the need for extended services and resupply.

Temporary housing takes many forms. Some may become "permanent." Housing officials may give priority to disaster victims over others who are awaiting housing. Mobile homes and tent cities may be set up for several months or longer. Victims will be housed in hotels and motels. Direct financial assistance may allow some to locate housing elsewhere. The speed of repairs reduces the problem provided that previous occupants or others displaced by the earthquake can afford to move back into the buildings. (This has been a problem in some places.)

Some complicating factors include difficulties implementing federal disaster housing programs in areas that are short of housing, the interjurisdictional movement of displaced people between neighboring communities and other laws and regulations such as eligibility requirements for designating a head of household, and the length and permanence of previous residence.

5.3 Recommended Actions for Local Governments

5.3.1 During the Preparedness and Mitigation Phase

1. Work with other communities, legislators, the private sector and state and local agencies to financially support the strengthening or replacing of existing (and usually dilapidated) housing for the most vulnerable residents.
2. Assure that the community's response plans contain an emergency shelter element and that procedures for opening, supplying, managing and closing such shelters recognize the complexities caused by earthquakes.
3. Identify and maintain a list of potential sources of local temporary housing that might be useable for an extended period of time after the emergency shelters have closed. Several nearby communities might benefit from working together on sheltering. Possible sources include government-owned housing, motels, hotels and apartment buildings.
4. Try to estimate the number of people likely to become homeless after an earthquake. Use existing housing data and building inventories if they are

available. Try to compile a demographic and socio-economic profile of the potential homeless and the types of buildings they occupy.

5. As part of the recovery plan, identify sources of sites for and types of temporary housing such as hotels, vacant areas and parks as well as actions that are required to use them. Whenever possible, the sources of temporary housing should be located as closely as possible to normal residential areas. Victims strongly resist leaving familiar areas.
6. Identify private, state and federal agencies that play roles in providing post-earthquake housing. Provide a mechanism such as a special task force to help integrate their activities for the optimum benefit of the displaced.
7. Assure that response and recovery plans provide for the rapid opening and local government support of the Federal-State Disaster Application Centers and an extensive multilingual information program to advise victims of the centers' locations and the programs available.
8. Assure that the building department has standards for repairs and procedures, forms and inspection placards. It also should have a process for securing additional personnel to help with the inspection of damaged housing.

5.3.2 During the Emergency Relief Phase

1. Assure that shelters are operating and be aware of their anticipated closing dates. Intervene to request extensions so that tenants can make a reasonably smooth transition from shelters to temporary housing.
2. Immediately identify the earthquake's general effects on the community's housing stock based on damage assessment information. Begin estimating the numbers and composition of the displaced. Start identifying practical alternative solutions and the requirements and time needed to implement each.

3. Initiate preliminary damage inspections of dwelling structures and provide owners and occupants with information regarding posting, notification and appeal procedures. If people can or want to remain at their normal residences, allow occupancy--or at least use of the unit's facilities--to the extent possible to ameliorate the housing problem. Also consider providing temporary services such as water and waste disposal to the area to allow residents to be as self-sufficient as possible and reduce the demand for temporary housing.
4. Monitor the assistance applications process to see what the demand is and work with the other agencies to start setting priorities for those likely to receive temporary housing. It is important to track the applicants in a case-work style and know how to contact them.

5.3.3 During the Short-Term Recovery Phase

1. Set up special procedures for reviewing plans, granting permits and scheduling inspections to promote self-help and contractor-assisted repairs.
2. Starting with available sources of temporary housing in the community or nearby, begin relocating the highest-priority qualifying applicants.
3. Define the expected unmet needs and identify alternatives for providing housing assistance. Federally provided mobile homes may have to come from a great distance. Or, it may be easier to use a combination of standard plans, expedited permit procedures and round-the-clock labor to rapidly demolish and rebuild housing on existing sites.
4. Monitor the rents and prices landlords and contractors charge to help assure that rates remain in normal and acceptable ranges. Consider controls on prices and rents and take early legal action against violators if prices and rents do not remain in normal and acceptable ranges.

5.3.4 During the Long-Term Reconstruction Phase

1. Help facilitate the transition from temporary to permanent housing as replacement stock comes on line. Carefully monitor and adjust the situation to assure that the new stock is available to those who are actually displaced. You may need subsidies, controls or other regulatory measures.
2. Revise the Housing Element of the General Plan to reflect changes and update the emergency housing procedures in the community's recovery plan.

5.3.5 Typical Groups Likely to be Involved

Housing is a major issue in nearly every community, and the groups likely to be active are well-known. They include neighborhood and homeowners' associations, preservation and redevelopment groups, local merchants, civic and religious organizations that are concerned about low-income and "affordable" housing, representatives of various ethnically focused groups and representatives of assorted government housing programs.

However, the earthquake could bring into the housing issue others who are seldom involved. These people will be displaced from rented or owned single-family and multi-family dwelling units. To a large extent, they have occupied older units whose earthquake resistance was inadequate. Economically, displaced residents might include a spectrum of higher-income people living in older and recently "gentrified" areas, elderly people on lower-fixed incomes whose homes are paid for, renters from middle- and lower-income groups, single people and single parents, non-English speaking residents and the homeless.

The last group is a particularly complex one with which to deal because most public disaster assistance housing programs base eligibility on the applicants' pre-earthquake status, and, to a large extent, homeless people do not have standing. To the extent possible, local governments should consider how the reconstruction process also could lessen, rather than accentuate, the chronic homeless problem.