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National Emergency Management Agency

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Disaster Resilience

Evacuation planning: Stage 5 – Return

Speed read

- Final stage of the evacuation process where those who have left the hazard impact area can return or relocate on a temporary or permanent basis.
- Return can be stressful for people who have lost loved ones, pets, employment and/or property.
- Integration with recovery planning is important in the Return phase.

Key points

Return early – when safe to do so. Returning is not without risk, but to delay return in the hope that all risks will be eliminated is not realistic. To delay return carries risks and have negative impacts on the wellbeing and recovery of returnees.

Authority and responsibility. Evacuation plans identify the lead organisation with authority and responsibility to manage returnees. This responsibility will vary depending on the hazard threat.

Risk assessments. Conduct a risk assessment and determine risk treatments for the return phase. Risks to be assessed include: the residual hazard and possibility of the hazard returning; availability of emergency and health services; new hazards; safety of structures.

On an individual level, evacuees will make a risk assessment based on their needs, access to local information, and risk appetite – which can depend on (for example) whether they have animal welfare responsibilities on their property, whether there is damage to their house or loss of possessions.

Managing return:

- Enable service providers to enter impacted areas to restore services and infrastructure as soon as possible.
- Phased return. Manage phased return of affected people (such as householders, business owners, and farmers) prior to opening the hazard impact area to the broader community.
- Temporary re-entry may be enabled to assess damage, collect belongings, or attend to livestock. Establish a permit system and vehicle checkpoints as needed to manage temporary re-entry.

Transition to recovery. The return stage overlaps with the recovery. During this stage there will be a transition of control and coordination. Coordinate between relevant agencies and services and **integrate recovery planning into evacuation planning.** Not all who left the hazard impact area will be able to return permanently until their home or business is restored or rebuilt, and there will be some who do not wish to return at all. The process for return or relocation for both these groups has a big impact on their recovery.

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Communications for the return stage. Support evacuees to make well-informed decisions before returning by sharing relevant information prior to and after their return, including: what to expect when they return (what they may see, feel, hear); impacts to essential services such as sewerage and power; residual risks; travel and accommodation arrangements; location of restricted areas; support services available.

Documentation. Document risk assessment and treatments; maps with indication of high-risk areas, entry and egress routes, check-points; a communications sub-plan; and link with recovery plans.

Take action

- Understand more about the recovery process by reading Community Recovery (AIDR 2018)
- Consider evacuees / returnees psychosocial experiences and needs – read Coping after a crisis (Australian Red Cross 2024)
- Plan for an influx of spontaneous volunteers in affected areas - Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers (AIDR 2017)

More information

- Evacuation Planning Chapter 7 (AIDR 2023)
- Emergency Planning (AIDR 2020)
- Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience (AIDR 2020)
- Community Recovery (AIDR 2018)

This brief is part of the quick guide series produced by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR). Quick guides for other handbooks in the collection can be found on the knowledge hub: knowledge.aidr.org.au

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