

Emergencies happen across the state. The communities that we live in can be irreparably damaged by forces of nature, communicable diseases or humanmade and technological hazards.

Communities can declare a local emergency and request assistance from the State ([20 V.S.A. § 10](#)) through their Local Emergency Management Director contacting Vermont Emergency Management using the VEM Watch Officer phone number, which is staffed 24 hours a day, at 800-347-0488. A State of Emergency may be declared by the Governor and a disaster declaration may be issued by the President. The Governor's request for a federal disaster declaration is made through the regional Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) office. Prior to granting a declaration, state and federal officials conduct a preliminary damage assessment to estimate the extent of the disaster and its impact on individuals and public facilities.

Public officials will be brought together in emergencies to protect public health and respond to infrastructural and environmental damage. It is important for THOs to prepare for these events before they happen and to be aware of how they can help during and after a public health emergency.

## Before an Emergency

THOs should:

- Maintain [their complete and accurate contact information with the Health Department](#). It is important that alternate methods of contact are listed, including email address, fax, and home/work/cell phone numbers if available. The Health Department will automatically enroll THOs in [Vermont's Health Alert Network](#) to receive important health information
- [Sign up for VT Alert](#) – This system is utilized by local responders to notify the public of emergency situations. [Create an account](#) and provide your contact information. You can choose to receive messages via SMS/Text, e-mail, phone calls, and/or TTY/TDD Device. You can also tailor these messages to your specific location and up to 5 additional locations.
- Become familiar with the concepts of the Incident Command System and the National Incident Management System. During an emergency, all responders (local, state, tribal and federal) will function under these systems. Free online training is available from [FEMA through the Emergency Management Institute](#). Some suggested courses include ICS 100, ICS 200, ICS 700, and ICS 800 and/or ICS 402.

### KEY POINTS

- **THOs should ensure their contact information is complete and accurate to receive timely emergency communications.**
- **THOs should consider participating in the development of their Local Emergency Management and Climate Adaptation Planning**
- **THOs are in a unique position to encourage the public to volunteer to protect public health during emergencies.**

## Emergency Preparedness and Response

- Review and become an active participant in the development of their Local Emergency Management Plan. Each community maintains this plan as their “guidebook” for how to respond to an emergency and submits an annual update after Town Meeting Day to the [Regional Planning Commission](#). THOs can also engage in local planning surrounding climate change adaptation.
  - Learn more about individuals with access and functional needs in your community. Advocate for the inclusion of this population in emergency planning processes. Here are a few resources to assist you:
    - [HHS emPOWER Program Platform](#) – uses federal Medicare data sets to provide mapping, AI tools to provide information on individuals (down to a county level) who rely on electricity-dependent medical and/or adaptive equipment and devices or services. Great tool for planning for power outages. Most backup batteries only last 8-10 hours.
    - [Vulnerability Indicators | Vermont Department of Health \(healthvermont.gov\)](#)– These indexes provide information on different themes including population, socioeconomic, health, demographics, housing/transportation, and heat vulnerability.
    - Health-related emergency information is available in many different languages on the [Vermont Department of Health website](#). This information can be used in developing emergency-related local communication plans.

### During and After an Emergency:

THOs should:

- Support, coordinate with or work within their community’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC). This will be the physical location where all response activity during an emergency where THOs can get and provide up-to-the-minute information about their community’s public health needs. Contact your local Emergency Management Director for more information.
- Provide information and feedback to the Health Operations Center (HOC) when called to do so. The HOC coordinates statewide public health and medical response during an emergency. The HOC works closely with the State’s 12 local health district offices. THOs can be of great assistance to their local health district office during an emergency by providing accurate and timely information about their community’s current situation and public health needs. The HOC also maintains constant contact with and provides specialized assistance to the State EOC during times of activation.
- Note that when serving individuals during a disaster, people experience needs beyond what a THO can serve. Resources such as [Vermont 2-1-1](#) may assist with housing or food insecurity needs, mental health, and a number of other human services programs.

## Public Health Volunteerism

THOs are in a unique position to encourage the public to volunteer to protect public health. People with existing health or medical experience and those individuals who would like to become involved by volunteering with their local Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) Unit or local Emergency Medical Service (EMS) agency should be referred to [On Call for Vermont](#). Community members who are interested in other opportunities to help in the wake of an emergency should contact Vermont Emergency Management at [www.vermont.gov/volunteers](http://www.vermont.gov/volunteers).

## Emergency Condemnation

After Tropical Storm Irene, THOs were granted authority to condemn buildings or properties in emergency circumstances. [24 V.S.A § 2291\(27\)](#) grants authority to municipal building inspectors, health officers, fire marshals, or zoning administrators to declare a property “condemned to be destroyed” **only if the following three items are true:**

1. The Governor makes a disaster or emergency declaration, **and**
2. The property has been damaged by the disaster or emergency, **and**
3. The property is dangerous to life, health, or safety due to the disaster-related damage.

However, according to 20 V.S.A. §11, a condemnation order cannot be used to force occupants to vacate their home.

The [Municipal Condemned to be Destroyed Declaration Form](#) is provided by the state and posted online. The Health Department recommends health officers coordinate with building inspectors, fire marshals and other experts if issuing an order using this authority.

Property owners can appeal condemnation orders to the Civil Division of the Superior Court under 18 V.S.A. Chapter 83. THOs should work with their selectboard and town attorney when pursuing enforcement actions and if they have legal questions about a particular situation.

## Resources:

- [Are You Ready? An In-Depth Guide to Citizen Preparedness](#)
- [Climate Change Adaptation Planning: Guidance for Community Managers](#)
- [Vermont Statutes - Emergency Management](#)
- [Municipal Guidance for Flood Emergencies in Vermont](#)
- Learn more about [preparing for and responding to public health emergencies online](#)