



## ***FLOODING IN IOWA: A Responsible Response***

*First in a series*

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# **Guiding Principles for Rebuilding in Iowa**

## ***Perspective for Public Policy Choices in Iowa's Flood Response***

A disaster of major proportions hit Iowa this summer as record flooding forced over 30,000 Iowans to evacuate their homes and businesses, and flooding and storms caused tremendous losses of property in many communities. Flooding devastated downtown Cedar Rapids and adjacent residential neighborhoods, driving at least 12,000 Iowans in Cedar Rapids alone from their homes. Many are still unable to return. Flooding also took almost a million acres of farmland from corn and soybean production. Great damage to Iowa's infrastructure included water treatment plants, roads, bridges, recreational facilities, sewage treatment plants and government buildings. Losses go well beyond property. At a personal level, these losses have consequences to those households affected well beyond housing and need a public response. This is especially true of lower-income families, who lived in higher proportions in the worst-flooded areas of Cedar Rapids. In addition to the floods, tornadoes hit other families and communities, leaving the same multiple needs for public action.

Iowans are resilient, but rebuilding will take a cooperative effort on the part of all Iowans in both the private and public sectors. Developing a strategy that meets both short-term needs for relief and longer-term needs for recovery and rebuilding requires careful thought and strategy. The Rebuild Iowa Advisory Commission established by the Governor an important first step.

Iowa is not the first state to face considerable rebuilding after devastating disasters in recent years. California has experienced earthquake and fire disasters. Gulf Coast states had Hurricane Katrina. North Dakota experienced major flooding from the Red River, especially in Grand Forks. At the same time Minnesota saw flooding along the Red River and Minnesota River Valleys. New York City had the attacks of September 11, 2001. A look at other jurisdictions' responses to disasters can provide insights and lessons to help guide Iowa's relief and rebuilding action.

The Iowa Fiscal Partnership (IFP) reviewed reports, analysis and legislative actions by other states that faced major disasters. In reviewing this material, it becomes clear that three major principles should guide Iowa's response. Iowa's responses should be:

- **Timely**
- **Targeted**
- **Transitional**

Measuring different proposals and recommendations against these principles can help ensure that approaches are focused ones that both meet the needs for relief and recovery and do not, in the name of disaster response, put at risk the state's long-term economic future.

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### ***Timely***

There are two stages to timeliness. Relief efforts must occur when people are experiencing disruptions and have a need for relief. This can occur immediately after the disaster when people are displaced from their homes or jobs and have immediate needs for food, housing, health care and income. Iowa has responded very well to this initial need, with expansion of food assistance and extending unemployment benefits. The Department of Human Services has streamlined processes for applying for public programs. Cedar Rapids has requested some FEMA trailers for immediate relief. United Way and the Red Cross have provided channels for contributions of funds from concerned Iowans to provide immediate relief, and Iowans have responded. The principle of timeliness is not limited to the immediate response, however. Even in the relief period, experience shows that emergency needs for assistance often occur down the road. For example, time-limited housing emergency housing options expire, emergency savings are depleted, employment is disrupted and families need to replace personal and real property. Experience suggests that even short-term disaster relief for large-scale disasters can extend for up to a year. Opportunities to move beyond relief to rebuild devastated areas need to be presented when people are ready and have the capacity to take advantage of those opportunities to rebuild. Stabilizing lives after disruption is a first step, but the next step involves rebuilding. People cannot live with friends and relatives or in FEMA trailers forever. Clearly, more permanent housing needs must be addressed, especially for lower-income families who are more likely to be renters, and if homeowners, less likely to have adequate insurance and other resources to address their needs. In addition, rebuilding involves establishing new businesses and employment options and creating public infrastructures, including schools and community resources that respond to the needs of families. The timeliness of resources for this rebuilding may be as important as the actual size of the investment that is to be made. Done well, such rebuilding actions even have the potential to result in economic development and community infrastructure that better reflects the 21<sup>st</sup> century than some of the infrastructure and business that existed prior to the disaster.

### ***Targeted***

Relief and rebuilding assistance efforts both should be focused on those impacted by the disaster itself. There should be a particular emphasis and priority on those who face the most challenges in rebuilding; primarily lower-income families with limited resources and elderly on fixed incomes. Experience from other state rebuilding experiences suggest that it is especially important that families who are impacted by the floods are themselves actively involved in planning relief efforts to meet their needs. These families will face a wide variety of needs beyond the immediately visible needs of food, housing, health care and income. Many children will be attending new schools bringing with them all the needs such a change involves, in addition to all the other stresses placed upon them and their families as a result of this disaster. Recognition of these needs and addressing them effectively are likely to require responses that go beyond current school district financing and capacity. The broad variety of support systems upon which all families rely will have to be rebuilt and reinforced. The families themselves know best what is needed and how they should be assisted. In addition, some of the relief and rebuilding efforts – including cleanup and construction activities – lend themselves to very local business and microenterprise activities. To the extent possible, creating opportunities for individuals who have been affected to take leadership in cleanup and rebuilding provides dual benefits in both providing employment and entrepreneurship opportunities and in accelerating needed recovery actions.

While there may be temptation to work as quickly as possible to “get things back to the way they were,” that should not be the “be all and end all” of relief and rebuilding efforts. Rebuilding after the disaster can provide an opportunity that should not be missed to make things better. Jobs and services lost by the

disaster need to be replaced, but also can be improved. Rebuilding efforts, in particular, provide an opportunity to incorporate green technologies into rebuilt businesses, housing and public infrastructure.

### ***Transitional***

Full rebuilding efforts will take years, but most should be time-limited to the initial rebuilding and should not be permanent. Recovering from this disaster should not become an excuse for adopting every tax incentive or economic development grant program that was not able to stand on its own merits in the past. These are extraordinary times, and any extraordinary efforts that are necessary for rebuilding should be designed as time-limited. In particular, they should not be framed as responding to a disaster and then made a permanent part of either public funding or tax policy.

One of the “lessons learned” from other rebuilding efforts is that planners need to be very careful in making these distinctions, as there will be a wealth of plans and proposals, framed in terms of disaster recovery, that really are plans promoted for different purposes. While some of these proposals may have merit in terms of housing, economic development, infrastructure, or household support, they should be subject to review and policy adoption in the same manner as traditional state and community policy processes.

To achieve this objective, the use of public funds for rebuilding must be held to clearly defined and transparent accountability standards that further Iowa’s goals. Time-specific goals, objectives and benchmarks should be established for any publicly financed rebuilding incentives and assistance. Recipients of incentives should be held accountable to meet these standards; if standards are not met, recipients should be responsible for repaying the assistance provided.

### ***Conclusion***

Iowa has faced and rebuilt from disasters in its past and will do so again. Iowans have always been a people who, while priding themselves on self-reliance, have always been willing to pitch in and help friends and neighbors. The old community barn-raising spirit is still living and well in Iowa and just needs to be effectively tapped. Public and private partnerships that help to build upon this community spirit and recognize the public sector’s important, but limited and targeted role, need to be stressed as ultimately the most effective approaches.

Iowans are an educated people who have learned from its experiences and those of others. Now is the time to put these characteristics to use. By establishing and applying sound principles to guide rebuilding, the commission and Iowa policy makers will rebuild in a more effective and efficient manner. As devastating and costly as this disaster has been, Iowans have an opportunity not only to rebuild what was lost, but to make Iowa a better and more attractive place to live and do business.

***GUIDING PRINCIPLES  
RESPONSES TO DISASTERS NEED TO BE:***

***TIMELY***

- Focused relief efforts need to occur when people are experiencing the disruptions and have immediate need for relief (recognizing the phases that families are likely to experience in dealing with loss)
- Rebuilding opportunities need to be presented when there is a readiness and capacity to take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild

***TARGETED***

- Rebuilding efforts need to be focused upon those impacted by the disaster, with a particular emphasis upon those for whom rebuilding will be most problematic (low-income and limited resource families)
- Rebuilding efforts need to involve those impacted in the planning and, to the extent possible, make use of their own skills and talents in rebuilding
- Rebuilding efforts need to pay attention to 21<sup>st</sup> century demands and pay particular attention to “green” strategies and to inclusion in responding to an increasingly diverse Iowa population

***TRANSITIONAL***

- Although rebuilding efforts will take years, most policies should be designed as temporary and not permanent ones
- Accountability for results requires that clear, time-specific goals and objectives be established for investments

## Iowa Fiscal Partnership

The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is a joint initiative of the Iowa Policy Project and the Child & Family Policy Center, two nonprofit, nonpartisan Iowa-based organizations that cooperate in analysis of tax policy and budget issues facing Iowans. IFP reports are available on the web at <http://www.iowafiscal.org>.

The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is part of the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative, a network of state-level organizations and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to promote sound fiscal policy analysis. IFP work is supported by the Stoneman Family Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

### **The Iowa Policy Project**

Founded in 2001, the Iowa Policy Project produces fact-based analysis to inform and engage Iowans on policy alternatives on economic opportunity, budget issues, energy and the environment. IPP's principal office is in Iowa City, with reports at <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org>.

### **CHILD & FAMILY POLICY CENTER**

The Child & Family Policy Center was established in 1989 to "better link research and policy on issues vital to children and families and to advocate for evidenced-based strategies to improve child outcomes." CFPC, based in Des Moines, is on the web at <http://www.cfpciowa.org>.