



FEMA

Restoring Flow of Private Sector Lifelines Partnership Guide for Grocery Distribution Centers

This Partnership Guide helps emergency managers build relationships with grocery distribution centers that serve their communities. FEMA coordinates with grocery companies across the country and does not endorse any specific grocery chain.

This guide is a companion document to the video, [FEMA Field Notes: An Introduction to Grocery Distribution](#), which provides an overview of the grocery supply chain, addresses how to build relationships with distribution center management, and offers action steps to help restore the flow of private sector capacity after disasters. Please be sure to watch the video before contacting grocery distribution centers in your area. These resources are available at [Community Lifelines Implementation Toolkit | FEMA.gov](#).

Why Build this Partnership?



The grocery industry manages the food, beverages, and household supplies supporting your communities every day. This daily capacity far exceeds what the government and non-profit organizations can provide using temporary distribution networks. Emergency managers can expedite community recovery by prioritizing support to private sector lifelines. Restoring private sector flow allows the government to target areas like vulnerable populations, islanded communities and those survivors most in-need.

Working together, emergency managers and the private sector can:

- build a shared understanding of interdependencies and vulnerabilities and
- identify ways the government can support the private sector to rapidly restore these critical flows.

Four Steps to Building Your Partnership

1. **Make Contact:** identify who to contact and request a meeting.
2. **Prepare to Meet:** do some research on the company and invite neighboring jurisdictions within the company's service area.
3. **Visit the Grocery Distribution Center:** learn from the grocery distributor and discuss how government can help restore grocery sector.
4. **Follow Up After the Meeting:** maintain this critical relationship.

Step 1: Make Contact

Who to Contact

Grocery distribution companies often supply supermarket chains with different retail names; they also may operate the stores. For example, Kroger is the parent company that owns Harris Teeter, Food 4 Less, and Ralphs. Ahold Delhaize's associated supermarkets include Food Lion, Giant, and Stop & Shop. C&S Wholesale Grocers supplies Piggly Wiggly and Grand Union Supermarkets. While each grocery distribution center will have different specific protocols, the fundamental management will be similar.

An easy way to identify the grocery distribution companies that serve your community is to ask the managers of your local supermarket chains. Focus first on the chains that provide the biggest share of the retail grocery market in your area. Explain to the supermarket managers that you would like contact information for the **Operations Manager/Director** of their distribution center to discuss helping them continue operations during and after disasters.

Make the Introduction

Once you have the contact information, call or send an email to schedule a meeting. Here is a sample email you can edit as needed.

Dear (Distribution Center Operations Manager/Director),

I am the emergency manager of _____. When disasters happen, our goal is to restore community lifelines as quickly as possible. Because you manage such a high volume of food, water, and household products for our community, I would like to schedule a meeting to help me better understand your operations and what your needs would be to maintain or restore operations after a disaster.

In addition to understanding your operations, I would also like to discuss how we can provide more information about the hazards we face in our area, how we can include you in situational awareness reports during disasters, and what kind of resources and waivers you would need to maintain operations.

I would like to schedule a visit to the _____ Distribution Center at your convenience. In addition to an office meeting, we would appreciate the opportunity to tour the facility and to understand the inbound/outbound flow of product, and your operational dependencies, including trucking and fuel.

Because you serve multiple communities, I would be happy to contact other emergency managers in your service area to organize a joint visit. Please let me know which communities you recommend I coordinate with.

We look forward to developing a stronger relationship to support the critical services you provide our communities.

Step 2: Prepare to Meet

Pre-meet with emergency managers from other communities

Most grocery distribution centers serve multiple communities. Consider connecting with other emergency managers in your area to schedule a joint visit. Understanding the network of stores served by each distribution center will help you coordinate better before, during, and after disasters.

If you are coordinating a distribution center site visit with other emergency managers in the company's service area, schedule a meeting to discuss your goals, the questions you'd like to ask, and how you want to propose developing and maintaining the relationship. Review the sample questions listed in Step 3 and add in specific questions for your locations.

Remember: This first visit is about understanding distribution center operations and how you can help them maintain or re-establish flow during a disaster. Be prepared, however, to share emergency management planning considerations for your area, including hazards, transportation systems, and emergency management protocols.

Get Ready

As you prepare for your distribution center visit, spend some time learning about supply chains and your new partner. Resources to help you prepare include:

- **FEMA Field Notes: An Introduction to Grocery Distribution.** While each distribution center is different, this video provides an overview of common areas and functions, including inbound trucking/receiving; shelf stable warehouse, fresh and frozen warehouse, outbound trucking/shipping, and facilities and fleet maintenance to help you have a sense of what to expect. [FEMA Field Notes Video: An Introduction to Grocery Distribution](#)
- **FEMA PrepTalks.** There are two PrepTalks that discuss private sector capacity, the role of emergency managers in supporting private sector supply chain restoration, and how analysis can help with operational collaboration during a crisis.
 - [PrepTalks: Dr. Jarrod Goentzel "Aligning Public and Private Supply Chains for Disaster Response" | FEMA.gov](#)
 - [PrepTalks: Dr. Yossi Sheffi "Private Sector Resilience: It Is All In The Supply Chain" | FEMA.gov](#)
- **FEMA Supply Chain Resilience Guide, April 2019.** This document provides emergency managers with recommendations on how to analyze supply chains and to work with the private sector to enhance supply chain resilience in support of Comprehensive Preparedness Guide (CPG) 101: Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans. This document also identifies how the results of the supply chain resilience process can inform logistics planning. [Supply Chain Resilience Guide \(fema.gov\)](#)

- **National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine: Strengthening Post-Hurricane Supply Chain Resilience, 2020.** This report makes recommendations to strengthen the roles of continuity planning, partnerships between civic leaders with small businesses, and infrastructure investment to ensure that essential supply chains will remain operational in the next major disaster. Focusing on the supply chains food, fuel, water, pharmaceutical, and medical supplies, the recommendations of this report will assist FEMA as well as state and local officials, private sector decision makers, civic leaders, and others who can help ensure that supply chains remain robust and resilient in the face of natural disasters. [Front Matter | Strengthening Post-Hurricane Supply Chain Resilience: Observations from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria | The National Academies Press](#)
- **FEMA Independent Study Course 238: Critical Concepts of Supply Chain Flow and Resilience, June 2022.** This two-hour course covers the lessons learned from the 2017 hurricane season, with the effort of improving post-disaster supply chain management to strengthen understanding of local supply chain dynamics; improve information-sharing and coordination among public and private stakeholders; and provide state, local, tribal and territorial emergency managers with the knowledge of potential and experienced post-disaster supply chain disruptions, management efforts, and best practices. [IS 238: Critical Concepts of Supply Chain Flow and Resilience Course](#)

Step 3: Visit the Grocery Distribution Center

This first meeting is to open the door for an ongoing relationship with this critical lifeline partner. Be sure to ask for a tour of the campus, and request an explanation of how product is moved, who moves it, and where does it go. This will provide the beginnings of a substantive relationship. The goal is to understand distribution center operations and their capacity to bring food, water, and household products to your community and the wider distribution area. Also seek to understand their needs and priorities in a disaster and how you can help.

The questions below are not a rigid interview guide, but rather prompts to help get you started thinking about the breadth of distribution center operations. Additional questions will likely come up during your tour. Be curious, demonstrate an interest in what they do every day to feed the people in your jurisdiction! Give them an opportunity to educate you and show you how the facility works.

Note that some companies may not share finer details of their operations. This is not a reflection of an unwillingness to collaborate with emergency managers, but protections for private sector competitiveness. You can build a strong partnership while also respecting their company policies.

Capacity, Volume, and Geographic Reach

Can you tell me a little about the scale of your facility?

- What major cities/towns are served by this distribution center? How many stores are served over what geographic footprint?
- How many employees work at this facility? What are the range of skills needed? How many work shifts do you have?
- What is the square footage (acreage, equal in football fields) of the Distribution Center?
- What is the volume of produce you have on site?

Can you walk me through a typical day at the facility?

- What type of commodities do you provide (e.g., fresh, frozen, dry, general merchandise, health and beauty care)?
- What are your hours of operation? Do you have specific day- and night-shift operations?
- How many inbound trucks arrive and are unloaded every day? How many different suppliers do you coordinate with?
- How many trucks are sent out per day? What are typical outbound truck-routes? How many store deliveries can be on one route? What's the closest and farthest store you deliver to? Do drivers drive more than one route per day?
- What staff functions do you need on site to maintain operations?
- How much gasoline do you use on any given day? What type of fuel do you need? What do you use it for? Trucks? Generators?

What do you monitor to ensure operations keep running smoothly (e.g., single points of failure/bottlenecks)?

- Equipment: refrigerated trailers, fuel for backup generator
- Skilled staff: drivers, selectors/pickers, inventory managers?

Dependencies to Maintain Operations

What is the geographic footprint for items that you bring into the Distribution Center?

- Do you get any products internationally? From the ports? From railroads?
- What are the critical transportation routes for inbound products?

What types of transportation assets do you have?

- What is the size of the fleet?
- Do you use outside vendors for truckers?
- Do you require different trailer sizes or types?
- Are trucks maintained on the property?

What systems do you need to maintain operations?

Electricity

- Do you have backup generators? If so, what do they maintain (e.g., life safety only – such as lights, or the entire campus)?
- Do you have sufficient generators to charge electrical equipment (pallet jacks, forklifts, selector inventory systems, etc.)?

Fuel

- Do you have a fuel rack on site? What is the capacity of on-site fuel storage?
- How often do you need to re-supply your fuel reserves?
- If you do not have fuel on site, how do you fuel your generators? Your trucks?

Communications and Internet

- Do you have backup systems in place (i.e., cellular, satellite, microwave, other) if the primary communications link is interrupted and the facility is unable to connect to the internet?
- Can you revert to a manual/paper-based process?
- Is there a data center within your organization that is critical to keep the distribution center operating?

Water

- What water requirements do you anticipate having under emergency operations?
- What are the water requirements for the refrigeration elements?

Essential Workers and Staff

- How do you manage having adequate numbers of essential workers on site? Are you able to shift workers from other sites to this site?

Disasters and Emergency Management

How long can you continue operations without outside support (fuel, electricity, water, etc.)?

If you have experienced a disaster, how did your operations change during the disaster? If you have not experienced a disaster, how do you expect your operations will change during a disaster?

- Do you prioritize certain functions or halt any functions during emergencies?
- What actions do you take to support your employees before and after a disaster?
- Do all your employees have consistent company identification?
- Do you have challenges with getting critical employees to the distribution center, including drivers, pickers, management. Examples of challenges include road closures, damage to employee vehicles, suspension of public transportation, or curfews.
- Do you have critical vendors or service providers that you depend on? Would they also be on location during an event?
- What are examples of products that are more in demand in a disaster?

What would you prioritize to be able to continue long-term operations in a disaster?

- Support to bring skilled workers on site?
- Waivers for hours of operation? Waivers for access to residential areas? Waiver for weight limits?
- Priority access to transportation routes?
- Priority access for fuel?

What is the biggest hazard you are concerned about for this site?

- What disasters has this distribution center encountered, and what was the impact?
- If this distribution center has been through a disaster, what was most surprising?

What type of information and situational awareness do you need from the government during disasters?

How can we best communicate with you?

Maintaining the Relationship

What is the best way to maintain a relationship with you?

- What would be a good frequency for check in discussions?
- Are there specific times of the year when this frequency should increase, e.g., hurricane season, wildfire season, high tourist times, summer heat and high electricity demands?
- Are you in contact with other state and local emergency managers? What is the best mechanism for us (group of emergency managers) to communicate with you?
- Do you have a strong relationship with your local police/fire department? If so, would you like an introduction?

How can we as emergency managers best support grocery distributions centers before, during, and after disasters?

How can we ensure you receive regular situational awareness reports in disasters? Options may include sending emails or inviting distribution centers to participate on conference calls.

Optional: If your jurisdiction has a Business Emergency Operations Center or an Emergency Support Function for Long-Term Community Recovery (sometimes called ESF-14), or a Business/Private Sector Coordination Group, ask if they would like to participate.

Step 4: Follow Up After the Meeting

After the meeting, be sure to send a thank you. Summarize your discussions and mention plans for how you will continue to work together. Make it a point to stay connected with regular check in calls and follow-up visits. Continue to focus on understanding their perspective and their needs for restoring the flow of goods. Build the relationship on a mutual and shared concern for the communities you both serve.

Choose Collaborative Topics and Follow-up

Which topics (issues, challenges) and in what sequence are most promising to collaborate on? Be sure to continue to coordinate with other emergency managers in the service area. Example topics include:

- Confirm a shared understanding of terminology, priorities, data capabilities, information needs, and response strategies.
- How can emergency managers integrate private sector capacity and coordination in the Emergency Operations Plan?
- Catalog and prioritize relevant local regulations, ordinances, and policies that may unintentionally impede restoration of flow in response/recovery e.g., curfews, weight restrictions, route restrictions, other restrictions.
- Test decision points and information sharing practices through tabletop exercises, workshops, and continuing conversations.
- Establish information sharing protocols to share mutual situational awareness.
- Offer to provide an overview of emergency management and the likely hazards in the area.

Tabletop exercises and related workshops that reflect a blend of private and public sector priorities can be a way to sustain meaningful private-public collaboration.¹ Integrate private sector concerns and viewpoints into plans and planning from the beginning. Private sector participants are often more responsive to requests to review and vet a tabletop proposal or workshop concept rather than make bottom-up contributions to a planning process.

Regularly scheduled, normalized engagements with the private sector are imperative to maintaining ongoing relationships. Coordination calls, e.g., quarterly (or monthly in a high hazard season), as an example can provide a rhythm of ongoing contact to ensure that real relationships, shared understanding, and mutual benefit are already in place when disasters occur.

As the number and intensity of disasters continue to increase, we must continue to build an integrated capacity to respond. With shared goals and clearly defined lines of responsibility, we can work together effectively to best serve the public on their worst day.

It is only through collaboration between the government and the private sector that we can address the complex challenges of disasters and achieve meaningful outcomes.

¹ At the Federal level, any engagement with more than one non-federal stakeholder must comply with the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).