



**American  
Red Cross**



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# **NORTH AMERICAN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE SUMMIT (NAHRS)**

## **INITIAL CONVENING MEETING REPORT**

**November 14, 2017**

**PREPARED BY AMERICAN RED CROSS  
& GLOBAL EMERGENCY GROUP**

**COMMISSIONED BY THE AMERICAN RED CROSS**

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***“Barriers are seen as problems instead of as opportunities. We need to think in a different way – be a part of something new. We need to have the legacy and history of solidarity.”***

-- Walter Cotte, Regional Director for the Americas, IFRC

When emergencies occur, communities all over the world are connected through their common humanity. Numerous entities mobilize to provide relief – governments, components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the UN system, NGOs and others. We know that collaboration is key and yet often lacking, which can cause delays and inflict greater harm than the disasters themselves. The goal of the North American Humanitarian Response Summit (NAHRS) initiative is to improve the effectiveness of cross-border response to a potential catastrophic disaster in North America. The design of the project is focused on opportunities and solutions in the United States, Mexico and Canada. Its objectives include:

- Identifying barriers and relevant work completed to date;
- Measurably improving communication, coordination, collaboration and diplomatic relations and the exchange of ideas amongst all major parties involved; and
- Identifying clear and quantifiable next steps to prepare for a major catastrophic response.

From September 26-27, 2017, NAHRS stakeholders met at the American Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington, DC to launch a series of meetings to socialize the project’s goal and lay the groundwork to achieve its objectives.

Participants in the NAHRS Initial Convening Meeting were from the American Red Cross, agencies of the United States Government, the Mexican Red Cross, the Canadian Red Cross, the Canadian Government, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), partner NGOs and academia. Meeting participants noted the importance of the inclusion of representatives of the private sector in future meetings.

Participants in this Initial Convening Meeting had a diversity of perspectives. They asked: How do we communicate in ways that respect our range of backgrounds in the policy, operational, and technical dimensions of cross border disaster response? How can we learn from our differences? Are we incorporating the perspectives of those we serve who would be affected by a catastrophic disaster, and how can we gather their input to better understand our deliverables? How do we unify our efforts to strengthen cross border support during a crisis and avoid siloed approaches?

The NAHRS project seeks to identify barriers to improve policies that fall within five areas during a cross border response:

- International triggers for accepting assistance
- The movement of people and equipment
- Licensure issues
- The movement of supplies, resources and tools
- Migration

In connection with these five areas, participants were divided into groups that rotated through breakout sessions designed to explore gaps and hindrances in cross border response, migration, and defining a catastrophic disaster. The following are takeaways from these sessions.

#### **1. Gaps and Hindrances in Cross Border Response**

Some of the challenges that were identified in this session included border control, liability issues, mobility of goods, licensure requirements, visas, insurance, and interoperability. The groups observed the importance of preparedness and not waiting for a disaster to happen. There must be good will to create partnerships and relationships critical for response, and develop appropriate Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to establish effective protocols. The academic sector was identified as an important constituent to research response modalities before, during and after a catastrophic disaster. There are questions related to the legal frameworks in play when people are crossing borders, and the ability of border control mechanisms to accommodate the influx of volunteers.

The project provides an opportunity to focus on past successes and to understand what the day-to-day challenges are for border control and country embassies. While conversations at the local level may be happening, national institutions may not be aware. There are mechanisms to ensure that those with decision-making authority can convene and provide inroads into problem solving. Opportunities reside in testing the five identified focus areas in the context of a simulation exercise to inform the path forward.

#### **2. Migration Issues in Cross-Border Response**

The terminology around migration was debated. Are those fleeing a catastrophic disaster migrating or are they displaced? Participants observed that displaced people are not looking to stay for a long period of time at the point of destination. The definition applied to people on the move as a result of a disaster is extremely important as the label has impact on those affected.

Moreover, the preparedness level of a receiving state is extremely important. If countries are not ready to receive those affected by a catastrophic disaster, the situation could be very chaotic. Even without a disaster, the issue of migration and displacement is complicated. It is vitally important to highlight the definition of “displaced” versus “migrant” – even for pre-disaster displacement versus post-disaster displacement. These terms directly connect to the issue of alleviating human suffering.

Each country in North America has different legal frameworks. The question from an operational standpoint is around decisions made by authorities at the border. Would people actually move across borders and really think of this as a possibility in reaction to a catastrophic disaster? Other concerns relate to the scale of a potential catastrophic disaster and how quickly procedures could be activated to facilitate the processing of documentation and respond to a diversity of displacement issues, including the issue of unaccompanied minors.

### **3. What is a Catastrophe?**

Participants were asked to explore the nature of a catastrophic disaster. There was general agreement that this is a situation of such magnitude and scope that it destroys the ability of institutions that provide for basic human needs to respond, and requires multinational support. Human suffering is excessive, and there is a breakdown of social, economic and government infrastructure that jeopardizes national security, which could lead to insecurity and requires prolonged recovery efforts.

The groups discussed the intergenerational effects of disasters, and the need to really define “catastrophic” while leaving flexibility for cultural dynamics. The participants wrestled with the need to “scale up” to a catastrophic for purposes of this project versus learning from the convergence of current events (e.g., Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria; the wildfires in the United States and Canada, and the earthquakes in Mexico). How do we support what we do now such that the three governments, their respective Red Cross National Societies and other vital stakeholders can tackle these issues together? The definition needs to tie back to what the mission is. Different stakeholders have different service packages to provide, but the focus is on human suffering – so the definition must be sensitive to this. Additionally, the private sector voice should be incorporated into this discussion.



### **Next Steps:**

Targeted Preparatory Meetings in Mexico, the United States and Canada are scheduled to take place in late 2017 through early 2018. These meetings will focus on country-specific barriers to coordination during major disaster responses, discuss gaps and hindrances in cross-border policy as well as examine operational challenges facing North American disaster response practitioners and policymakers.

**Attendance at the Preparatory Meetings is limited to participants determined by the host National Society and a small, targeted group of representatives from the other North American countries (National Societies and/or government) identified by the American Red Cross as the NAHRS project convener.**

The NAHRS project commenced earlier in 2017 and follows this timeline:

- January-April 2017: Inception Phase
- September 26-27: Initial Convening Meeting
- December 7-8: Mexico Preparatory Meeting (Mexico City)
- January 17-18: US Preparatory Meeting (Tucson)
- February 13-14: Canada Preparatory Meeting (Ottawa)
- March 14-15: NAHRS Summit (Washington, DC)