2024–2025 Winter Storm Recovery Focus Groups Summary
COAD / Sonoma CAN

Residents across Sonoma County are experiencing increasingly severe and unpredictable winter storms. Participants in COAD's Spanish and English language focus groups reported that storms have become more intense and frequent, with destructive flooding, landslides, culvert damage, fallen trees, and extended power outages. The growing threat of atmospheric rivers and windstorms has caused significant property damage, road closures, and community isolation. These worsening conditions have created a constant state of fear and stress during the storm season, as many residents feel increasingly vulnerable and unprepared.

The personal and community impacts of these storms have been profound. Homes were damaged or completely lost, leading to displacement and homelessness for some families. Many residents particularly caregivers, tradespeople, and informal workers lost wages or jobs due to storm-related disruptions. Mold, rodent infestations, and other health hazards became widespread. The emotional toll was also severe, with stress, anxiety, and trauma exacerbated by the loss of essential belongings such as furniture, clothing, and children's toys. Low-income and undocumented families were hit especially hard, often facing compounded difficulties in accessing resources and support.

Recovery has been described as slow, expensive, and ongoing. Some individuals have yet to recover from the 2019 floods, and each new storm season adds to the burden. Access to federal support, such as FEMA assistance, was largely unavailable to undocumented residents. Insurance coverage was often inadequate rarely covering essential tools, income loss, or the full cost of repairs and premiums have risen significantly. Families found themselves trying to replace critical items while simultaneously paying for basic needs, often without a financial safety net.

Participants highlighted a range of unmet needs during the recovery process. Food, clothing, furniture, and safe storage for salvaged items were among the most commonly cited. Displaced families needed immediate financial aid, while many also expressed a pressing need for emotional and mental health support. Informal workers, whose income depends on access to tools and mobility, were especially vulnerable in the aftermath of storms.

Despite these challenges, residents reported using a variety of preparedness strategies, such as sandbagging, clearing drains and culverts, stockpiling essentials, and creating emergency kits. Many learned from experience to lift valuables off the ground or share tools and trailers with neighbors. However, major barriers to preparedness remain, including high costs, lack of time, physical limitations, and insufficient knowledge of available resources. Language and technology barriers further restricted access to aid, and many found that help often came with complicated paperwork that they couldn't complete.

To better prepare for future storms, participants expressed a strong need for more accessible and less bureaucratic forms of assistance. Requests included easier access to financial support, legal aid, rental and housing assistance, physical help with sandbagging and cleanup, and localized shelters especially for those without transportation. Participants also stressed the importance of emergency planning education and resources tailored to their language and cultural needs.

While emergency alert systems have improved in recent years, post-storm communication remains a major gap. Many residents don't receive real-time updates and rely instead on neighbors for information. There is a clear need for better outreach, culturally appropriate messaging, and more accessible communication systems that work across multiple platforms and languages.

Looking ahead, participants offered several ideas for improving community resilience over the next 3–5 years. These include strengthening infrastructure like culverts and retaining walls, creating local resource hubs, deploying emergency supply trailers, and stockpiling fuel or propane. A central theme was the desire for a more coordinated, community-based disaster response system, one that breaks down silos between organizations and ensures consistent support. Most importantly, residents expressed a strong desire to remain in their homes, but recognized that this will only be possible with sustained, proactive support from local agencies and organizations.

Evacuation during storms presented another set of challenges. Some residents had to evacuate without guidance or support, while others stayed behind due to lack of options. Participants highlighted the need for clearer, multilingual evacuation plans, accessible transportation, local shelters, and community-based support for elders and people with disabilities. Without these resources, many felt stranded during the most dangerous moments of the storm season.

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1. Worsening Storm Conditions

- Participants observed storms are more intense and frequent, with increased flooding, landslides, culvert damage, and fallen trees.
- Constant fear and stress during the winter storm season was a recurring theme.

- Atmospheric rivers and windstorms have led to road blockages, property damage, and isolation.
- Participants are noticing that storms are longer, more destructive, and unpredictable.

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2. Personal and Community Impacts

- Storms led to:
    - Home damage or total loss
    - Lost wages or jobs (e.g., caregivers, carpenters)
    - Rodent infestations and mold
    - Mental health strain
    - Destroyed furniture, clothes, and toys
- Several families evacuated and lost access to basic needs.
- Low-income and undocumented families faced compounded challenges.

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3. Recovery Is Slow and Expensive

- Recovery takes months or years—some are still not recovered from 2019 floods.
- FEMA support was inaccessible to undocumented individuals.
- Insurance often doesn't cover everything (especially tools or lost wages), and rates have risen significantly.
- Families struggle with basic needs while paying bills and replacing what was lost little by little.

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4. Unmet Needs During Recovery

- Most common unmet needs:
    - Food
    - Clothing
    - Furniture
    - Storage for salvaged items
    - Financial assistance for displaced families
    - Emotional and mental health support

- Informal workers were especially vulnerable when tools and income sources were lost.

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5. Preparedness Strategies

- Residents prepare by:
    - Sandbagging
    - Clearing drains and culverts
    - Stocking up on food, wood, and water
    - Creating emergency kits and document boxes
    - Lifting valuables off the ground
    - Sharing trailers/tools with neighbors
- Many learned through experience to save ahead or move valuables to higher ground.

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6. Barriers to Preparedness

- Common obstacles include:
    - High cost
    - Lack of time
    - Physical limitations
    - Not knowing what resources exist
    - Language and technology access issues
- Many said help comes with too many paperwork requirements.

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7. Support Needed to Prepare

- Participants requested:
    - Easier access to financial aid
    - Legal assistance
    - Rent or housing support
    - Local shelters (Santa Rosa is too far)
    - Physical assistance with sandbags or cleanup
    - Education on emergency planning and tools

- Emphasized need for assistance that doesn't require burdensome documentation.

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8. Communication & Alerts

- While alerts have improved, post-storm updates remain poor.
- Many rely on neighbors or don't get real-time information.
- There's a need for better outreach, more accessible alert systems, and culturally appropriate messaging.

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9. Ideas for Future Improvements (3–5 years)

- Participants want:
    - Stronger infrastructure (culverts, drainage, retaining walls)
    - Community-based resource hubs
    - Emergency supply trailers (tarps, batteries, water)
    - Fuel or propane reserves
    - Coordinated, non-siloed disaster response by local groups
- Many expressed desire to remain in their homes but need ongoing support.

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10. Evacuation Challenges

- Some evacuated without help or clear instructions; others stayed due to lack of options.
- Desired supports:
    - Local shelters
    - Transportation help
    - Clearer, multilingual evacuation plans
    - Community assistance for elders or those with disabilities