



The ground shakes violently, the deafening roar of collapsing buildings fills the air, and for a moment, time seems to freeze. Then, reality rushes back in. Dust clouds rise, car alarms blare, and the cries of those around you echo through the chaos.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, confusion and danger are everywhere. People scramble to check on loved ones, but the world around them has changed in an instant. Aftershocks may still rattle the ground, fires may spread, and floodwaters may rise. In the middle of it all, emergency services are racing into action. We asked FENZ (Fire and Emergency New Zealand) and NZ Police staff to tell us what happens in those critical first 72 hours after an emergency, to help you stay informed on what to expect and to help you prepare for when an emergency happens.

### ***The First Hour – Immediate Response and Critical Actions***

Within the first hour after a disaster, confusion and danger are at their peak. People are coming to terms with what has happened while facing ongoing hazards such as aftershocks, unsafe buildings, flooding and fire. Many people will experience an array of heightened emotions, and potentially an adrenaline rush. Everything will feel like it is on 2x speed during a crisis, focused on trying to reach loved ones and family. Cell Towers will either be damaged, out of order, or immediately overloaded with people trying to contact loved ones. Radio, television and other news sharing sites will most likely be down, leaving people with anxiety and frustration at the unknown. It is all very overwhelming and scary, and during that first hour, Emergency Services are stretched thin, trying to get to as many places as they can, prioritising life threatening situations.

Emergency responders spring into action the moment disaster strikes, but with widespread damage and multiple crises unfolding at once, their focus is on saving lives. Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams work to locate and free people trapped under debris, often using specialist equipment and search dogs to navigate dangerous rubble. FENZ crews battle blazes caused by broken gas lines, electrical faults or structural collapses. Police coordinate evacuations from high risk areas and begin setting up cordons around unstable buildings or hazardous zones.

Despite the urgency, response efforts are often hampered by impassable roads, downed communication lines and the sheer scale of destruction. Civil Defence and emergency management teams activate their response plans, establishing command centres and prioritising resources. Helicopters may be deployed for aerial assessments, while medical teams rush to provide first aid to the injured. With hospitals potentially overwhelmed, makeshift triage areas are set up to treat those in critical condition.

For the public, help may not arrive immediately. With emergency services focused on the most life threatening situations, individuals and communities must rely on their own preparedness in these crucial first hours. Those with emergency supplies will have an advantage. With first responders focused on the most critical situations, self reliance is crucial.

***What You Should Do in the first hour after an emergency:***

- Ensure your own safety and check on family, friends, and colleagues.
- Leaving damaged structures and seek higher ground if there is a tsunami risk.
- Avoid floodwaters and fire-affected areas.
- If you are safe and not required to evacuate, stay put.
- Expect a loss of electricity, water, internet and phone service.
- Listen to emergency broadcasts via radio or Civil Defence channels.
- Follow instructions from emergency services.

***The Eighth hour – Emerging Challenges and Priorities***

As the first day progresses, emergency response efforts continue, but resources remain stretched. More details about the extent of the disaster begin to emerge – some communities remain cut off, fatalities are being confirmed, and damage assessments show the long road ahead. While some communities may be restored, many people are still unable to reach their loved ones, leading to heightened anxiety and frustration.

With nightfall approaching, a new set of challenges arises. Power outages leave neighbourhoods in darkness, making rescue and relief efforts more difficult. In some areas, people begin searching for food and water, quickly realising that supplies are running out faster than

expected. Those without emergency kits or stored provisions feel the strain first, and makeshift shelters start forming in safe locations such as community centres and Marae.

Emergency services continue their focus on rescue, but they also shift towards securing dangerous areas. Police extend cordons around unstable buildings, bridges, and roads restricting access to prevent further injuries. Reassurance patrols are deployed in affected communities, checking in with residents and identifying the most urgent needs. Meanwhile, local councils and Civil Defence officials begin enacting policies, sharing updates and declaring states of emergency where necessary.

For many, reality is setting in – this is no longer just an emergency, but the beginning of a prolonged crisis.

***What you should do during the first 8 hours:***

- Stay safe and support those around you
- Be prepared for the long haul – emergency services are prioritising life threatening situations
- If possible, conserve food, water and essential supplies.
- Expect continued disruptions to power, water, and communication services.
- If you have a radio, keep listening for updates and resource distribution location.
- Seek shelter before dark, especially if your home is damaged.

***The 24th Hour – Ongoing Impacts and Necessary Preparations:***

A full day has passed, but the disaster’s impact is still unfolding. By now, emergency responders have worked tirelessly through the night, making significant progress in rescuing trapped individuals and evacuating those in immediate danger. However, exhaustion is setting in, and the need for reinforcements is clear. Requests for additional resources go out to unaffected areas, and in large scale disasters, international assistance may be sought.

The humanitarian response is also ramping up. Temporary shelters and relief stations are being established, providing displaced residents with food, water and medical aid. Community hubs, including Marae and churches, play a crucial role in offering support to those in need.

For emergency services, priorities begin shifting. While life saving operations continue, attention turns to logistics – where to station response teams, how to coordinate aid distribution, and how to manage staff fatigue. Police presence increases in vulnerable areas to prevent opportunistic crime and looting. In affected communities, the stress of the situation starts to take a toll, with tensions rising and emotions running high.

For the public, self sufficiency is still key. While relief efforts are underway, they cannot reach everyone at once. Those who prepared in advance find themselves in a better position, while others begin to feel the strain of dwindling supplies.

***What you should do:***

- Continue to be self sufficient where possible.
- If you are in a safe location, avoid unnecessary travel.
- Be mindful of emergency workers and give them space to operate
- If resources are available, collect only what you need to allow others access.

***The 48th Hour – Increasing Demand and Community Led efforts***

Two days after the disaster, most rescues have been completed. Emergency services transition to recovery efforts, and more resources start arriving. More emergency personnel have arrived, including specialist teams such as search and rescue experts, dog handlers, and disaster victim identification officers. The reality of the situation is becoming clearer – some communities remain without power or running water, and hospitals and aid stations are overwhelmed with the injured and displaced.

Calls for help increase as people who initially managed on their own now find their situations worsening. Welfare checks on vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly and those with disabilities, become a major focus for emergency responders. With government agencies stretched thin, community groups, volunteers, and organizations such as the Red Cross and NZDF step in to assist.

Mental health concerns also become more prominent. The stress, trauma, and uncertainty of the situation lead to an increase in family harm incidents and mental health crises. Police and

medical responders work alongside social services to provide support, but with so many demands on resources, response times vary.

Despite the hardships, there are signs of progress. The first major deliveries of aid begin arriving, including food, water, and medical supplies. Essential services, such as electricity and road access, are slowly being restored in some areas. However, restrictions may still be in place, limiting movement and access to affected zones. Some people, frustrated with these limitations, attempt to return to their homes or businesses, only to find them destroyed or deemed too unsafe to enter.

For many, the uncertainty of what comes next is the hardest part.

***What you should do:***

- Expect to see more emergency personnel in your area.
- If you need assistance, reach out to designated relief organisations
- Conserve resources – while supplies are arriving they may be rationed
- Stay patient – many people are in need, and services are stretched thin.

***The 72nd Hour – Transition to Recovery***

Three days after the disaster, the focus shifts from emergency response to long-term recovery. While there are still areas in crisis, the overall situation is stabilizing. Most survivors have been located, and now efforts turn toward rebuilding and restoring order.

Police and emergency services increase their presence in affected communities, providing reassurance and security. With some businesses and homes left abandoned, there is a heightened risk of looting, prompting authorities to enforce curfews and patrol restricted zones.

For families who have lost loved ones, the identification and return of deceased victims become a priority. Police work with forensic teams and Interpol to identify international victims, ensuring families receive closure as quickly as possible.

Infrastructure recovery efforts gain momentum, with engineers assessing the safety of roads, bridges, and buildings. Meanwhile, local governments begin formulating long-term recovery



plans, addressing everything from housing for displaced residents to the rebuilding of essential services.

Despite the challenges, there is also a sense of resilience. Communities come together, supporting one another through food sharing, sheltering neighbours, and organising local relief efforts. As people begin adapting to their new reality, they also look ahead—towards rebuilding, healing, and moving forward.

Though the immediate disaster has passed, the recovery process is just beginning.

***What You Should Do:***

- Stay informed through official emergency channels.
- If you have not received aid yet, check with local relief stations.
- Understand that emergency services are working as quickly as possible.
- Be patient – some restrictions may remain in place to ensure safety.
- Support your community – help neighbours and vulnerable individuals if you are able.

***Final Thoughts:***

Disasters are unpredictable, and no one is every fully prepared. However, communities that are aware and proactive can significantly reduce the impact. Being prepared means having a plan, stocking emergency supplies, and understanding that emergency responders must prioritise life threatening situations first.

Stay informed, stay safe and look out for one another.

*Thank you to the Representatives of FENZ and NZ Police for taking the time to speak to us about emergencies and being prepared.*