

When the Dust Settles: A 72-Hour Guide to Emergency Response

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, while 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 staff from Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) and the New Zealand Police to explain what happens in those critical first 72 hours after a disaster – so you know what to expect and how to prepare.



The First Hour – Immediate Response and Critical Actions

The first hour, after a disaster, is the most chaotic. People are trying to understand what's just happened while facing ongoing hazards, like aftershocks, unsafe buildings, flooding and fire. Many people will experience a surge of adrenaline, making everything feel like it's moving quickly. Other people experience paralysis and struggle to make decisions about what to do and where to go. Cell towers which are often damaged or overwhelmed, make it hard to contact loved ones. Information is scarce as traditional news sources - radio and television – are often down, adding to the uncertainty. It is and will be very overwhelming, and causes anxiety and fear.

Emergency responders act immediately, but with widespread damage, their focus is on life threatening situations where they can save as many lives as possible, and they are often stretched with not enough responders or resources to help everyone. Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams search for people trapped under rubble using specialist tools and search dogs. FENZ crews fight fires caused by gas leaks, electrical faults, or collapsed structures. Police coordinate evacuation and set up cordons around dangerous areas. They also deal with any deaths.



However, their efforts are often hampered by blocked roads, downed communication lines, and the sheer scale of the disaster. Civil Defence and emergency management teams activate their response plans, set up command centres, and begin prioritising resources. Helicopters may be deployed for aerial assessments, while medical teams establish triage areas as hospitals become overwhelmed.

It is important to remember that help may not arrive immediately.

Emergency services will be overwhelmed. Individuals and communities must rely on their own preparedness in the first hours. Those with supplies and a plan will have an advantage.

What You Should Do in the First Hour:

- Ensure your own safety and check on family, friends, and colleagues.
- Provided First Aid where required.
- Leave damaged structures and move to higher ground if there is a tsunami risk.
- Avoid floodwaters and fire-affected areas.
- Watch out for downed power lines.
- Expect outages in 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, the full extent of the disaster begins to unfold. Some communities are still cut off, fatalities are confirmed, and damage assessments reveal a long road ahead. Many are still unable to contact loved ones, increasing stress and anxiety. Emergency response resources are still stretched.

With nightfall, power outages leave entire neighbourhoods in darkness, complicating rescue and relief efforts. Supplies start to run low. Those without emergency kits feel the strain first. In some areas, people begin searching for food and water, quickly realising that supplies are running out faster than expected. Community centres and marae begin operating as makeshift shelters.

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, and conduct reassurance patrols to identify urgent community needs. Local councils and Civil Defence share updates, enact policies, and declare states of emergency as needed.

***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
- Conserve food, water and other essential supplies.
- Be patient, emergency services are prioritising life threatening situations.
- Continue to expect disruptions to power, water, and communications.
- Listen to radios for updates and aid distribution locations.
- Find shelter before dark, especially if your home is unsafe.



The 24th Hour – Ongoing Impacts and Necessary Preparations:

One day in, the disaster's impact is still unfolding. Emergency teams have worked through the night rescuing people and evacuating danger zones. But fatigue is setting in, and more help is needed. Requests go out for reinforcements from unaffected regions or, in major events, from overseas.

The humanitarian response is also ramping up. Community hubs, including marae and churches, play a crucial role in offering support to those in need including providing temporary shelters, food, water and medical care.

Emergency services continue to save lives but also shift their focus to logistics: setting up team stations, coordinating aid, and managing staff fatigue. Police increase their presence to deter crime and looting.

People are growing more anxious, and while relief efforts are underway, some people are unreachable or have greater needs. Those who prepared ahead of time are better off – disparities begin to show.

What You Should Do At 24 Hours:

- Continue to be self sufficient if possible.
- Avoid unnecessary travel if you're in a safe location.
- Respect emergency workers and give them space to operate.
- Take only what you need from shared resources to allow fair access.



The 48th Hour – Increasing Demand and Community Led efforts

Two days in, most rescues have been completed. Emergency services focus on recovery as more personnel arrive, including specialist teams like dog handlers and disaster victim identification officers. Still, some communities are without power or water, aid stations are stretched, and hospitals are overwhelmed.

The reality of the situation is becoming clearer

People who initially coped are now struggling. Welfare checks for the elderly and disabled become a priority. Community groups, volunteers, and organisations like the Hono, the Red Cross, and the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) are stepping up and in.

Mental health concerns rise. The trauma and uncertainty lead to an increase in family harm incidents and mental health crises. Emergency services and social agencies work together to provide support. Response times vary due to demand.

Despite the hardships, there is hope. The first major deliveries of aid arrive. Some essential service may be restored including power and internet. But access to key resources, food,

water, medical supplies, is still limited. Many discover their homes or businesses are too damaged to return to. This creates frustration.

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

What You Should Do At 48 Hours:

- 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 and safe – many people are in need, and services are stretched thin.

The 72nd Hour – Transition to Recovery

By the third day, the response shifts toward long-term recovery (maybe medium-term recovery). Most survivors have been located. Police and emergency services increase their presence for reassurance and security. With some areas abandoned, looting becomes a concern, prompting curfews and patrols.

For families who have lost loved ones, identifying and returning victims is now a priority. Police work with forensic teams and Interpol to support international families as well.

Engineers and USAR begin assessing the safety of buildings, roads, and bridges. Local governments start drafting recovery plans for housing, services, and rebuilding efforts.

Despite ongoing hardship, a sense of resilience emerges. Communities come together to support one another with food, shelter, and care. The path ahead is uncertain, but people begin to adapt and look toward the future.

Despite the challenges, there is also a sense of resilience.



What You Should Do At 72 Hours:

- Stay informed through official emergency channels.
- If you have not received aid yet, check local relief stations.
- Understand that emergency services are working as fast as they can.
- Be patient – some restrictions may remain for safety.
- Support others in your community if you are able.

Final Thoughts:

Disasters are unpredictable, and no one is every fully prepared. But communities that are informed and proactive can significantly reduce the impact. Preparedness means having a plan, keeping 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, USAR, and NZ Police for speaking with us and helping our communities be better prepared.



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