

Crisis Agility for Community Action

Facing the Worst &
Building What's Next



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“It is well to be prepared for life as it is,
but it is better to be prepared to make
life better than it is”



Sargent Shriver

Former Director, Office of Economic Opportunity,
Point of the Spear, 1964

Optimism
*it's in our
roots*



The Community Action Promise is:

- *Rooted in the belief that conditions can change for the better...*
- *Built on dignity, participation, and opportunity*
- *Assumes progress is possible, even when times are hard*

The Promise of Community Action

Community Action changes people's lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.

community Action PARTNERSHIP
Helping People. Changing Lives.
AMERICA'S POVERTY FIGHTING NETWORK

PROJECT NOW
COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK

The graphic includes three circular inset photos: a family of four (father, mother, and two children), a young girl, and a young woman. It also features the logos for the Community Action Partnership and Project Now.



Crisis Management

*It's Our Daily
Reality*



Community Action leaders manage crises every day – even when no disaster has been declared.

- **Funding instability** – Late appropriations, shifting rules, compliance risk
- **Families in Acute Crisis** – Housing loss, utility shutoffs, food insecurity
- **Workforce Strain** – Vacancies, burnout, competitive salary challenges
- **Operational Complexity** – Multiple programs, overlapping rules, urgent decisions with imperfect information
- **External Shocks** – Utility rate spikes, evictions, employer layoffs

*So when
someone
says...*

***“We should really be
doing disaster
planning.”***

*...it may get filed under
“Yes, but not today.”*

Why this work is personal

Oakland Hills Fire, 1991



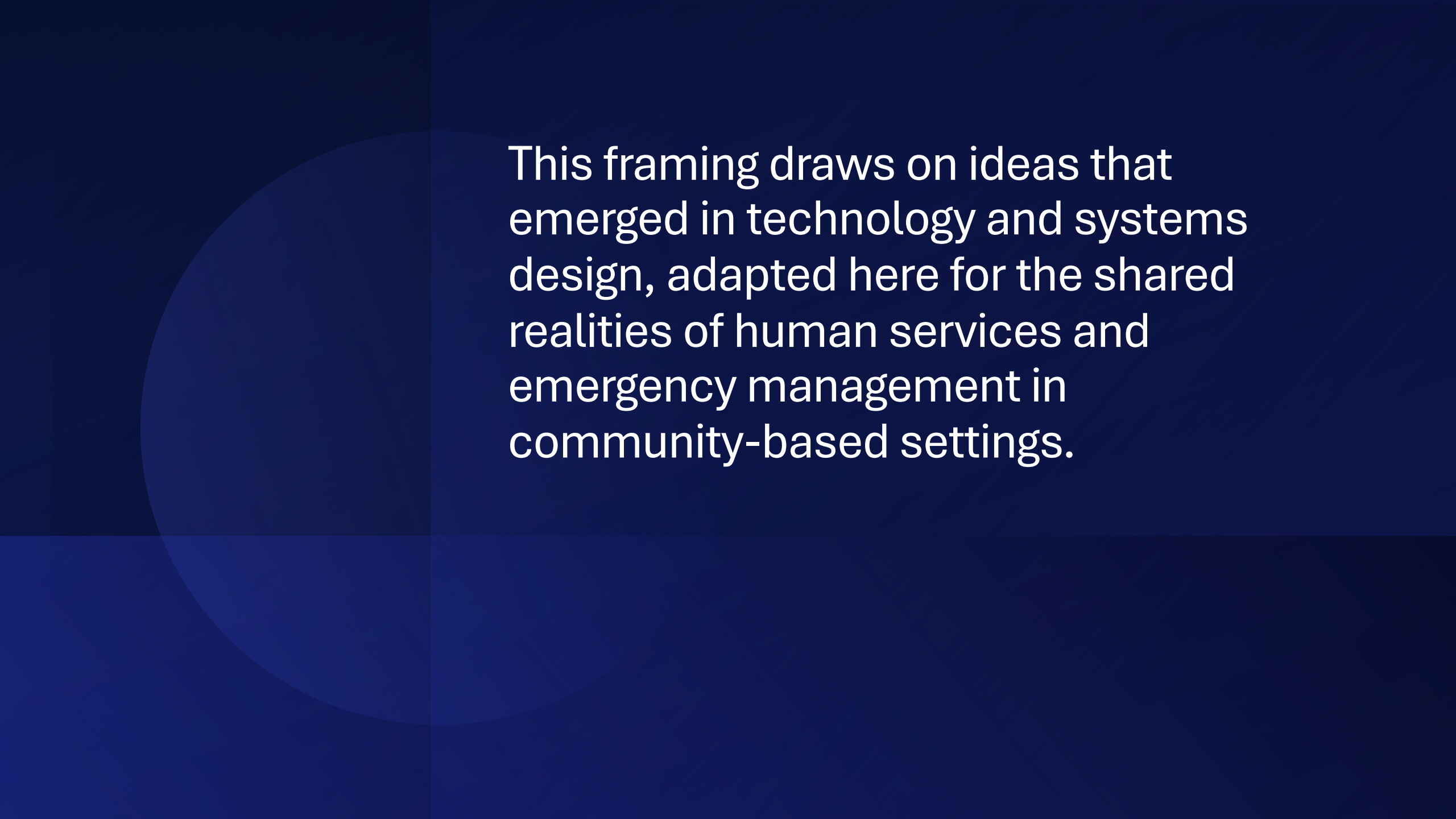
Photo: San Francisco Chronicle (1991)

Ground Zero Recovery Site, September 2001



What is Crisis Agility?

A Starting Place for Discussion
(and What to Avoid)



This framing draws on ideas that emerged in technology and systems design, adapted here for the shared realities of human services and emergency management in community-based settings.

What is Crisis Agility?

A Starting Place for
Discussion

Crisis agility is *a way of thinking* about what to pay attention to, how to stay ready under pressure, and how to act responsibly when conditions are uncertain and demands are high.

In practice, this means Community Action Agencies are supported by:

- Systems built for daily pressure
- Systems that enable scaling up and scaling back
- Anchoring in community voice and lived experience
- Starting with what is most likely (not just what we fear most)

What Should We Avoid?

A Few Guardrails from
Experience

Crisis agility should not be about having all the answers in advance. Instead, it is a way of navigating uncertainty without being paralyzed by analysis.

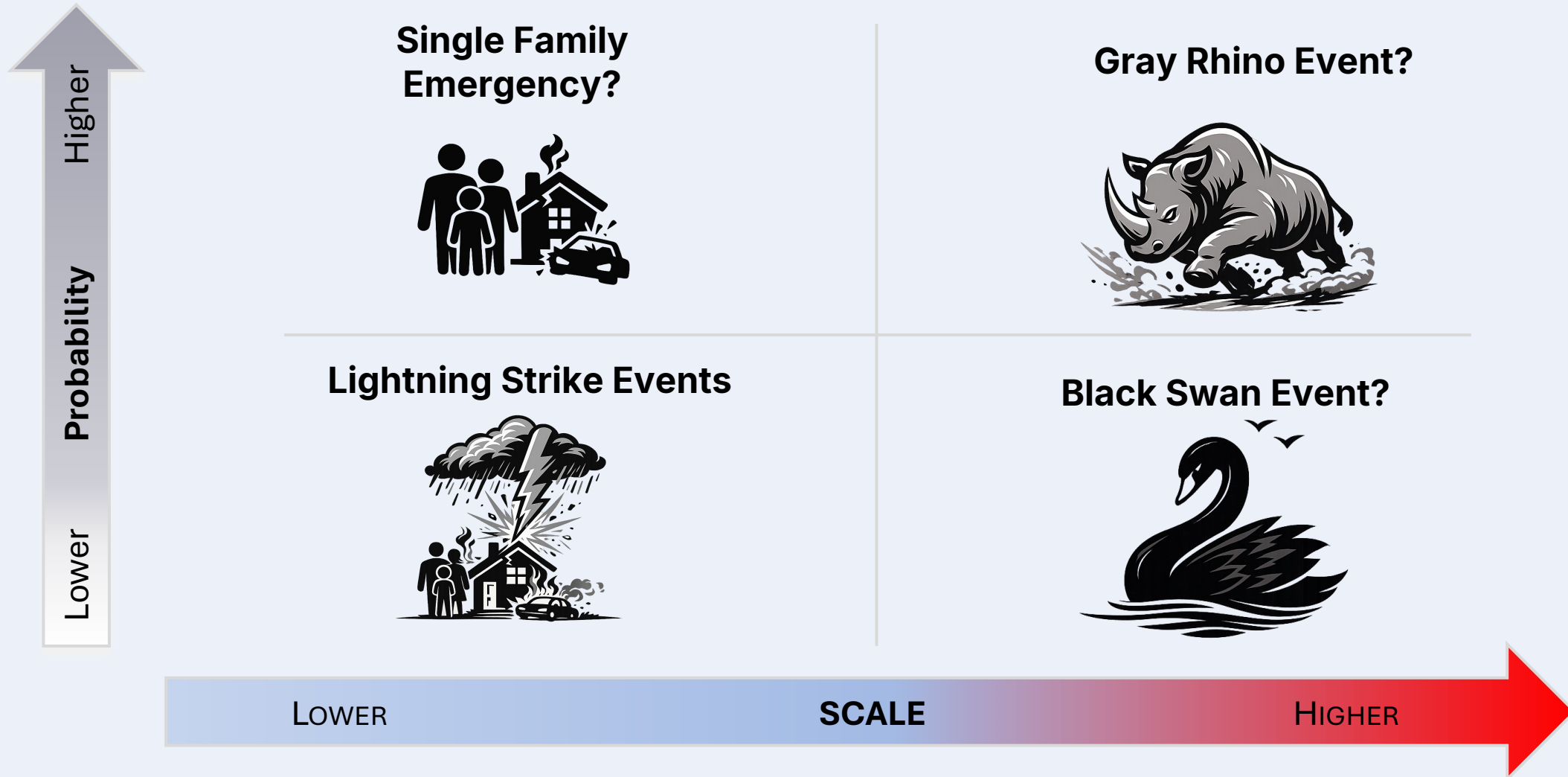
In practice, this means efforts to strengthen crisis agility should avoid:

- Trying to flawlessly predict the next crisis
- Expecting community agencies to have a detailed plan for every imaginable scenario
- A wait for perfect information
- An expectation to provide services outside organizational mission and resources
- Governance by separate mandates & checklists not integrated with current operations

Where Should We Focus?

Preparing Our Organizations
to Handle Risk & Scale Challenges

So What Emergencies Should Community Agencies be Most Prepared For?



Framework adapted from Juliette Kayyem (*The Devil Never Sleeps*), drawing on the “Black Swan” concept (Taleb, 2007) and the “Gray Rhino” concept (Wucker, 2016).

Potential Gray Rhinos

Extreme Heat &
Drought



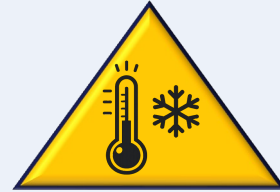
Economic Shock

Flooding



Wildfires

Mass Violence



Winter
Storms/Extreme Cold

Severe Storms



Tropical
Cyclones

Public Health
Emergency

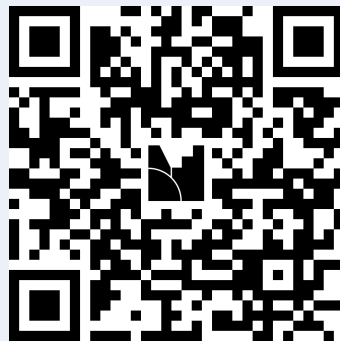


Earthquake/Other
Regional Hazard

Rank Each Potential Crisis Event

Based on likelihood of impacting your community

Go with your first instinct.
We're looking for informed judgment—not perfect answers.



Join at menti.com |
use code #####

Drought & Extreme Heat



Flooding



Mass Violence



Severe Storms



Public Health Emergency



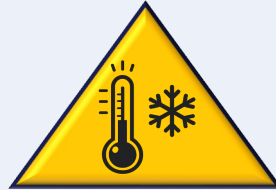
Economic Shock



Wildfires



Winter Storms/Extreme Cold



Tropical Cyclones










Earthquake/Other Regional Hazard



Billion Dollar Weather Disasters

<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/risk>

Billion-dollar events to affect the United States from 1980 to 2024 (CPI-Adjusted)

| Disaster Type | Events | Events/Year | Percent Frequency | Total Costs | Percent of Total Costs | Cost/Event | Cost/Year | Deaths | Deaths/Year |
|--|------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|------------------|
|  Drought | 32 | 0.7 | 7.9% | \$367.6B <small>CI</small> | 12.6% | \$11.5B | \$8.2B | 4,658 [†] | 104 [†] |
|  Flooding | 45 | 1.0 | 11.2% | \$203.3B <small>CI</small> | 7.0% | \$4.5B | \$4.5B | 765 | 17 |
|  Freeze | 9 | 0.2 | 2.2% | \$37.4B <small>CI</small> | 1.3% | \$4.2B | \$0.8B | 162 | 4 |
|  Severe Storm | 203 | 4.5 | 50.4% | \$514.4B <small>CI</small> | 17.6% | \$2.5B | \$11.4B | 2,145 | 48 |
|  Tropical Cyclone | 67 | 1.5 | 16.6% | \$1,543.3B <small>CI</small> | 52.9% | \$23.0B | \$34.3B | 7,211 | 160 |
|  Wildfire | 23 | 0.5 | 5.7% | \$147.9B <small>CI</small> | 5.1% | \$6.4B | \$3.3B | 537 | 12 |
|  Winter Storm | 24 | 0.5 | 6.0% | \$104.2B <small>CI</small> | 3.6% | \$4.3B | \$2.3B | 1,463 | 33 |
|  All Disasters | 403 | 9.0 | 100.0% | \$2,918.1B <small>CI</small> | 100.0% | \$7.2B | \$64.8B | 16,941 | 376 |

[†]Deaths associated with drought are the result of heat waves. (Not all droughts are accompanied by extreme heat waves.)

Flooding events (river basin or urban flooding from excessive rainfall) are separate from inland flood damage caused by tropical cyclone events.

The confidence interval (CI) probabilities (75%, 90% and 95%) represent the uncertainty associated with the disaster cost estimates. Monte Carlo simulations were used to produce upper and lower bounds at these confidence levels ([Smith and Matthews, 2015](#)).

Where to Start

Pick Three based on ...



Historic Likelihood for Your Communities



Potential Impact for Low-Income Community Members



Current Level of Readiness

The Role of Community Action

Building on the Historic
Mission & Promise

How Disasters Interact with Economic Insecurity



Before Disaster

*Higher exposure.
Thinner buffers.*

- People with low incomes **more likely** to live in hazard prone areas
- Homes with **deferred maintenance** = greater damage
- Lower rates of **insurance** and emergency savings
- **Preparedness** competes with rent, food, utilities, childcare

During Disaster

*Fewer safe choices
in real time.*

- **Limited ability to evacuate** (transport, care, caregiving, job risk)
- **Missed work** quickly triggers cascading crises
- **Sheltering is harder** with health needs, disability, or crowding

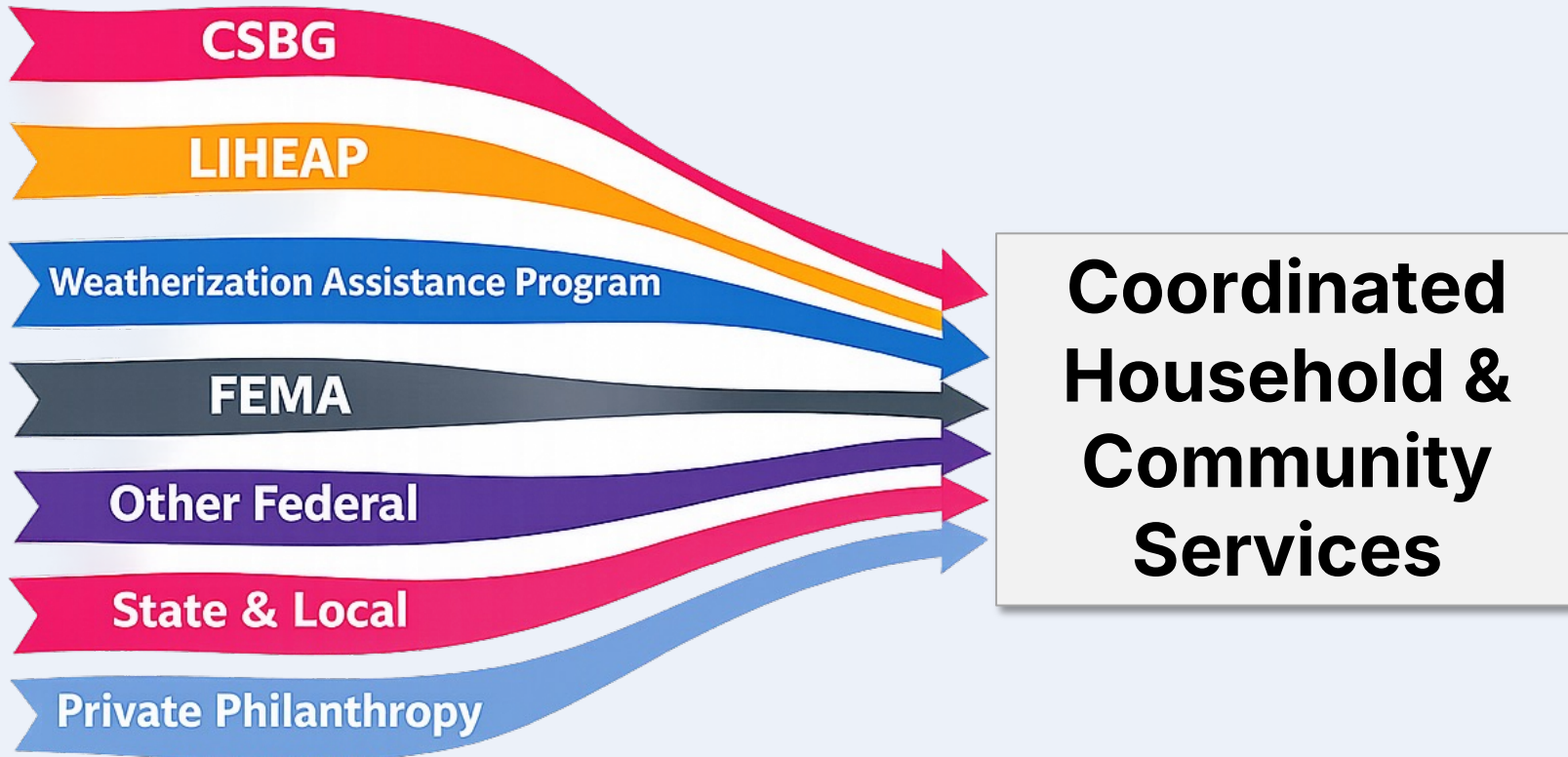
After Disaster









*Recovery is slower...
displacement is common.*

- Assistance is **uneven and paperwork-heavy**
- **Renters** face repair delays, displacement, **loss of housing**
- **Loss of affordable housing** can reshape communities
- **Lingering health risks** from unsafe or unhealthy living conditions.

The Community Action Contribution

Different crises. **Connected Services.**



- Emergency Food Assistance 
- Emergency Rental Assistance 
- Home Energy Assistance 
- Weatherization & Home Repair 
- Childcare & Youth Services 
- Older Adult Services 
- Employment and Training 
- Strengthening Communities 



How Complexity Grows with Scale

From Single Household Emergencies to
Large Scale Community Crises



Single Household Emergency

- **One disruption can cascade**
- **Needs are interconnected**
- **Stress complicates decisions**

- **Sudden financial shock**
Loss of income, unexpected expenses, or a missed paycheck can destabilize an already-tight household budget.
- **Housing disruption or damage**
Fire, flooding, or utility shutoff may make a home unsafe, temporarily unlivable, or at risk of eviction.
- **Health and safety risks**
Injury, illness, or exposure (e.g., carbon monoxide, extreme temperatures) can escalate quickly without intervention.
- **Caregiving strain**
A death or serious illness can force family members to take on caregiving roles with little notice or support.
- **Transportation breakdown**
A car accident or vehicle loss can cut off access to work, school, childcare, medical care, or services.
- **Administrative overload**
Navigating insurance claims, landlords, utilities, employers, schools, and benefits systems during a crisis.
- **Emotional and cognitive stress**
Grief, shock, and anxiety reduce decision-making capacity at the exact moment complex choices are required.



Single Household Emergency x 100

- Simultaneous need
- Shared bottlenecks
- Uneven recovery



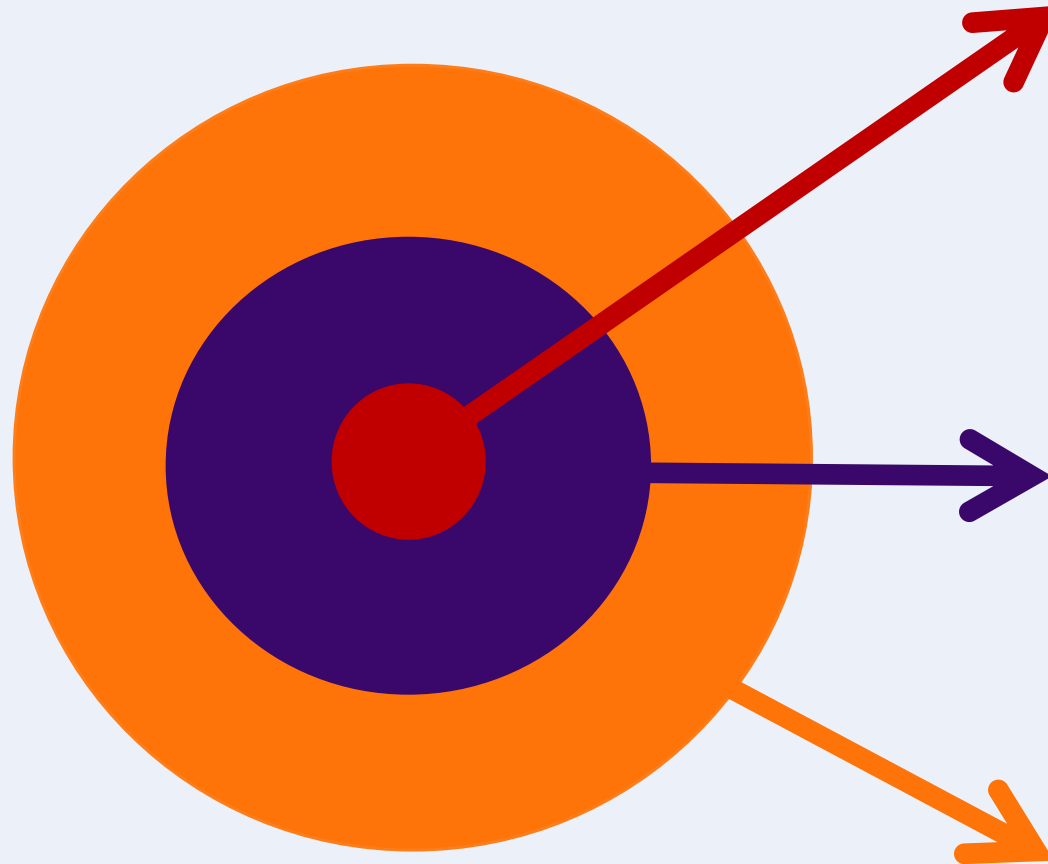


Single Household Emergency x 1000

- Delays create losses
- Losses trigger new crises
- New crises overwhelm recovery

The “Ripple Effect”

Community-Level Exposure in Catastrophic Events



Direct Household Impacts

Loss of income or employment; Loss or damage to personal property or housing; Displacement or evacuation; Physical injury or disability; Death of a household member or loved one.

Secondary Household Impacts

School closures or disruptions to education; Caregiving burdens (e.g. for children, elders, or injured family members); Strain on household mental health and relationships; Transportation or access barriers to work, care, or services; Reduced household stability due to compounding pressures.

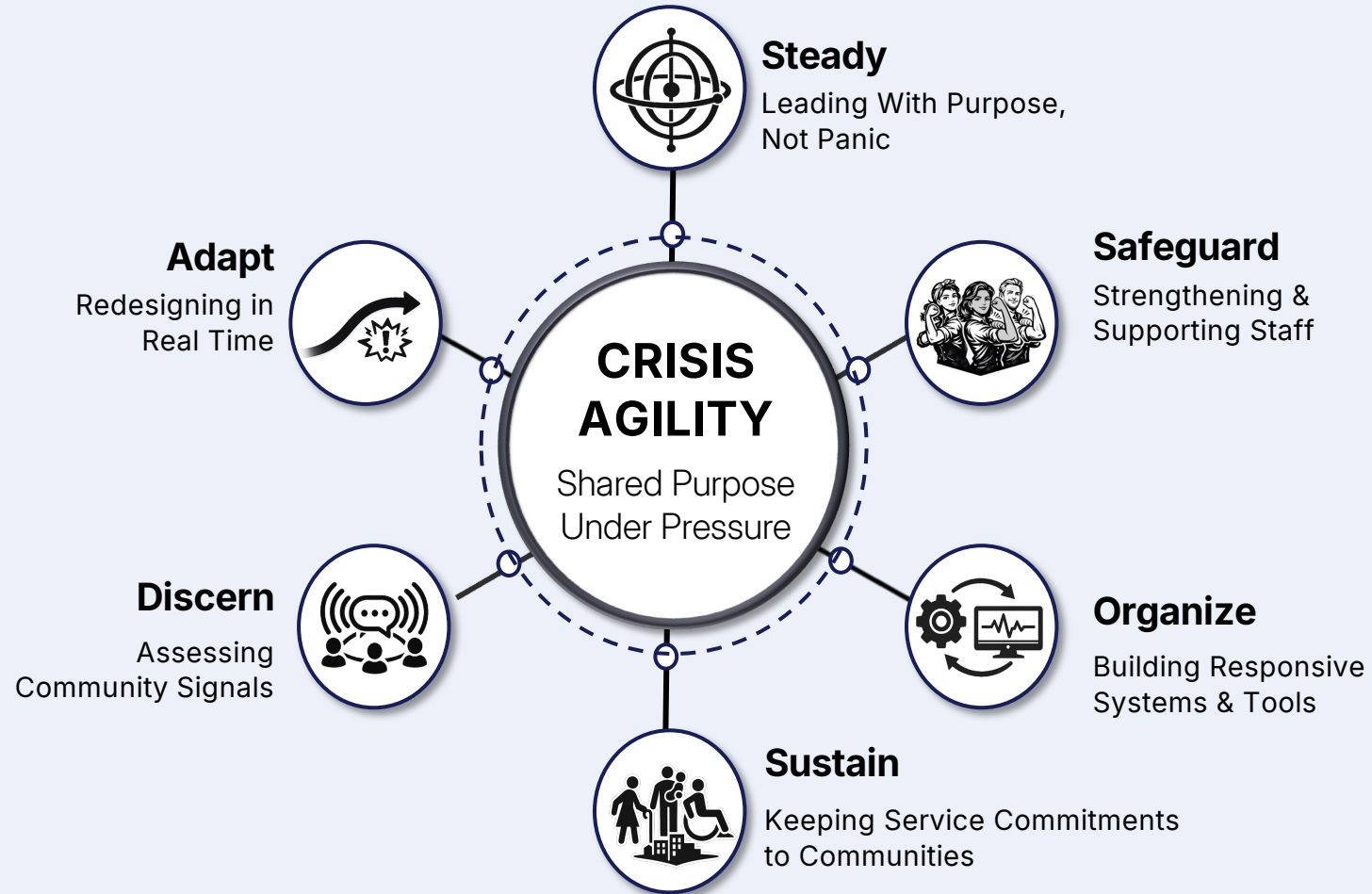
Community-Level Impacts

Potential for widespread job loss or economic disruption; Loss or reduction of housing stock; Disruption or closure of health and social service systems; Infrastructure failures (e.g., utilities, transportation, communications); Erosion of community trust, safety, and cohesion .

Building Crisis Agility

Six Capacities to Consider
for Staying Effective in Crisis

Crisis Agility - Six capacities for staying effective in crises



Steady

Leading with purpose, not panic



How leaders show up when pressure is high and information is incomplete

- **Self-Regulation & Trust**
 - Leaders model self-care
 - Delegation & empowerment
 - Trust maintained organization-wide
- **External Presence & Direction**
 - Calm presence during uncertainty
 - Decisions guided by values
 - Clear, transparent communication
- **Continuity & Learning**
 - Flexibility over perfection
 - Continuity through succession and trusted partners
 - Learning captured after crises

Crisis Agility - Six capacities for staying effective in crises



Safeguard

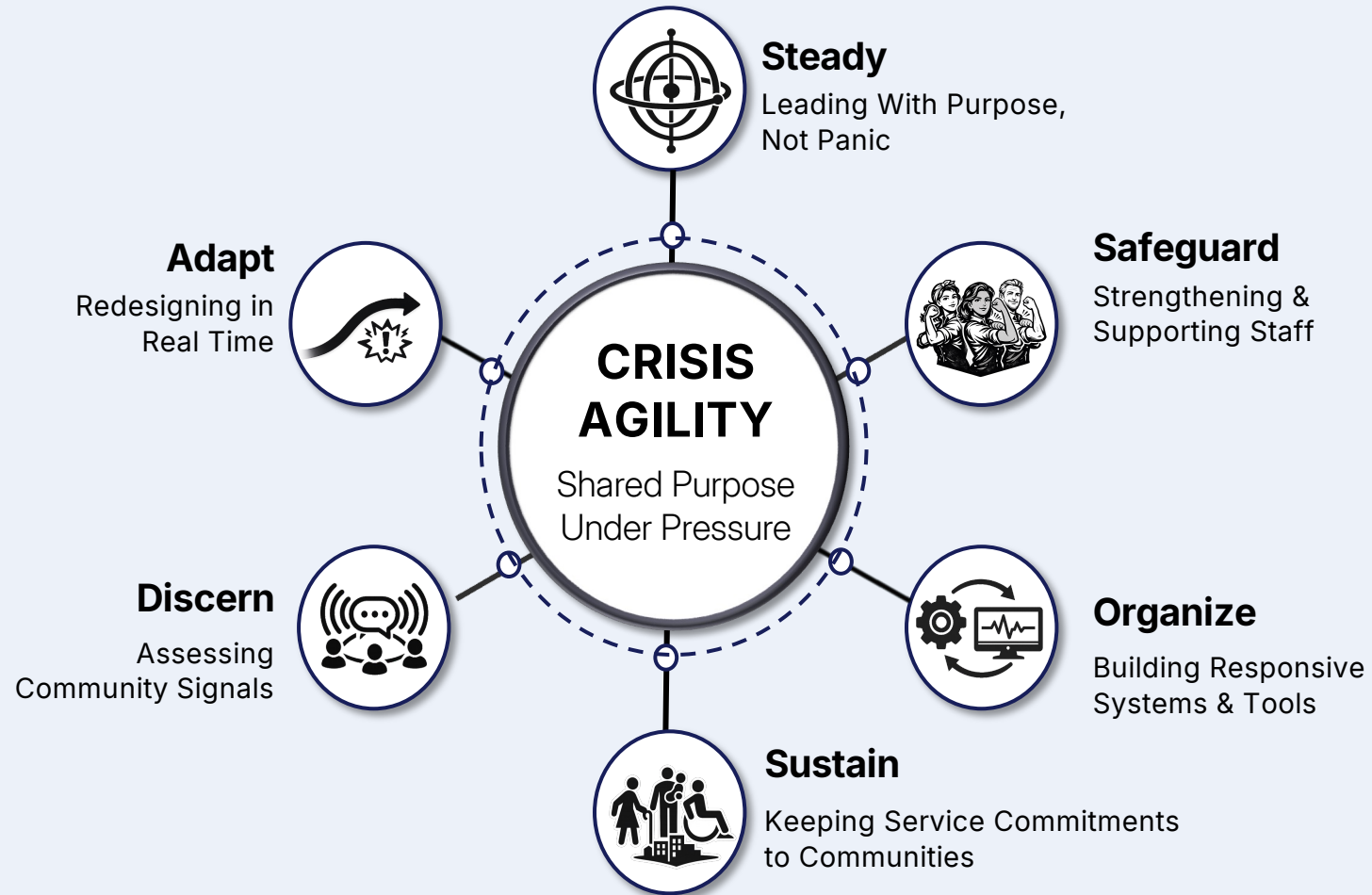
Strengthening & supporting staff



How organizations protect and support their workforce during prolonged strain

- **Physical and Practical Protection**
 - Safety protocols and access to PPE
 - Backup staffing and coverage plans
 - Cross-training for critical roles
- **Emotional & Personal Support**
 - Mental health and peer support options
 - Support when staff are personally impacted
 - Child care and elder flexibility
- **Stable & Supportive Supervision**
 - Flexible pay and leave policies
 - Clear crisis communication channels
 - Supportive supervision and onboarding for crisis roles

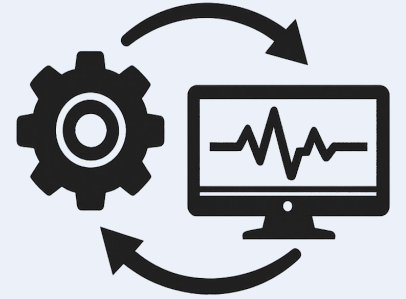
Crisis Agility - Six capacities for staying effective in crises



Organize

Building Responsive Systems & Tools

How organizations structure systems, tools, and roles to function under disruption



- **Accessible & Resilient Infrastructure**

- Could access to documents and data
- Redundant data storage and backup communications
- Remote work functionality

- **Operational Readiness**

- Staff trained in critical systems
- Avoid reliance on one person or system
- Cyber readiness and response planning

- **Flexible & Connected Systems**

- Mobile intake or service tools
- System interoperability with partners
- System flexibility guided by community impact

Crisis Agility - Six capacities for staying effective in crises



Sustain

Keeping service commitments to Communities

How organizations maintain essential services when conditions are unstable



- **Essential Service Continuity**

- Utility and energy assistance
- Housing stabilization and homelessness prevention
- Food distribution and pantry services

- **Protection for High Concern Households**

- Child, family, and disability supports
- Emergency financial assistance
- Domestic violence and safety response

- **Connection & Ongoing Access**

- Referral and navigation services
- Outreach to high concern households
- Legal and consumer protection supports

Crisis Agility - Six capacities for staying effective in crises



Discern

Assessing Community Signals



How organizations detect emerging needs early through real-time community-rooted awareness

- **Operational & Administrative Signals**

- Shifts in service volume and waitlists
- Early warning signs in intake and eligibility processes
- Changes in patterns or service pathways

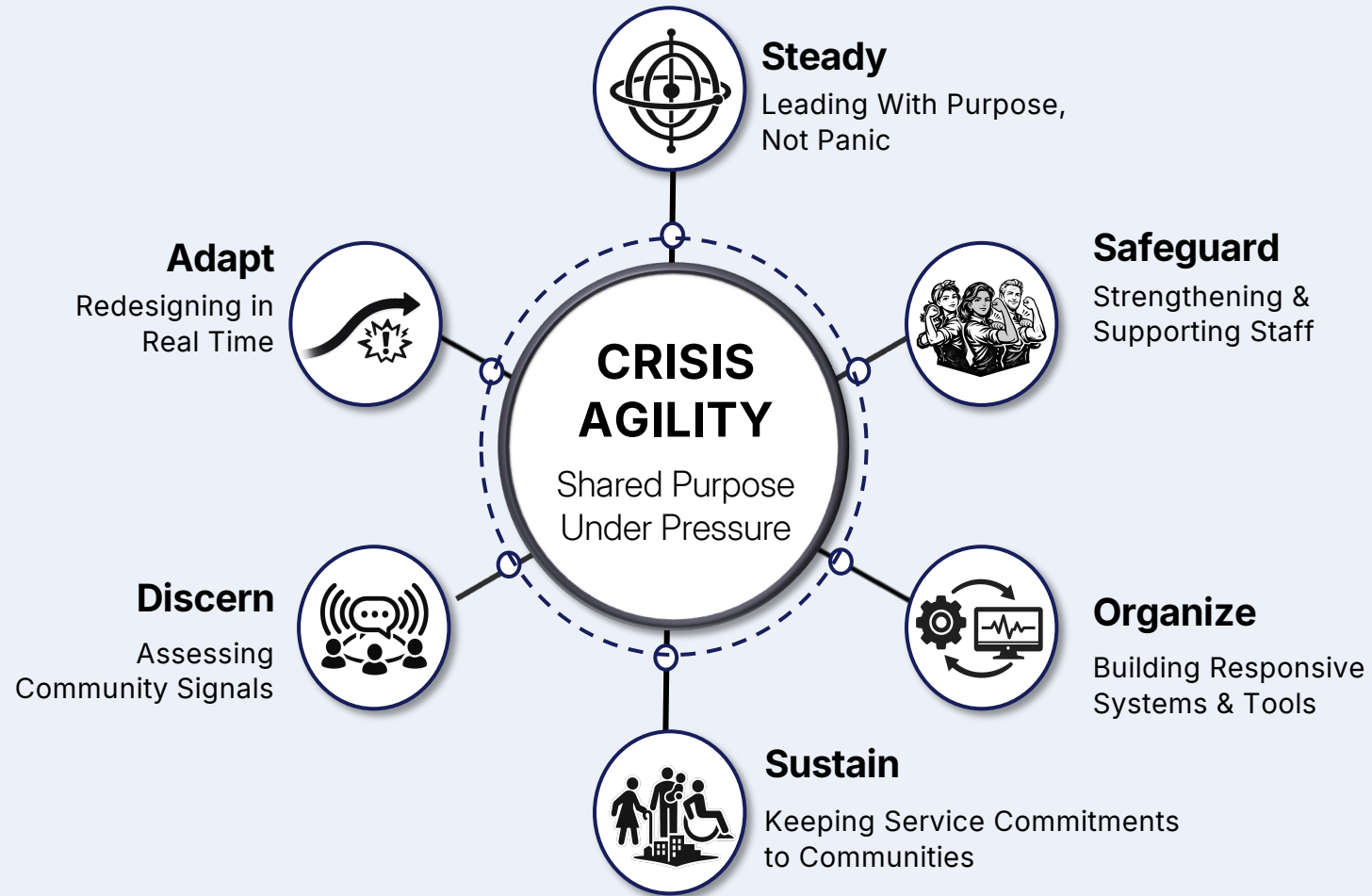
- **Frontline & Partner Insight**

- Frontline staff observations and internal feedback
- Partner input from disaster management, schools, clinics, other housing providers, etc.
- Post-event impact reviews and data analysis

- **Community Pulse & Population Lens**

- Media, social, or community sentiment signals
- Rapid community check-ins or pulse surveys (when feasible)
- Population-focused review of who is newly impacted

Crisis Agility - Six capacities for staying effective in crises



Adapt

Redesigning in real time



How organizations adjust how services are delivered when standard approaches no longer work

- **Flexible Delivery Models**

- Remote or tele-casework
- Mobile or pop-up services
- Multi-modal service delivery options

- **Adaptive Rules & Targeting**

- Flexible eligibility during disruption
- Reduced documentation requirements
- Data-informed targeting of need

- **Reaching Beyond Usual Channels**

- Door-to-door or place-based outreach
- Context-aware engagement
- Trusted grassroots partners to reach new or underserved groups

So What Does This Mean for You?

Applying in real organizational and
community contexts

What's Resonating (and What Needs Attention)

- What capacities feel strongest in your organization right now?
- What capacities feel most fragile or under strain?
- What surprised you—or felt missing—in this model

Where you might focus first

- One capacity we should protect, because it is working
- One capacity that deserves focused attention this year
- One capacity that may require new partnerships or support

Crisis agility is not about heroics

It's about staying oriented to Community
Action purpose, handling daily pressure, and
being ready for what's next