

Tabletop Exercise (TTX) Toolkit

Developed by the Community Health Care Association of New York State (CHCANYS)

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V.1 June 2026

This toolkit was supported by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response under award number 24-CHCANYS-01_AMD 1 . Its content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response.

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Introduction

Successful response to an emergency or disaster relies on effective preparedness that goes beyond writing a plan and includes:

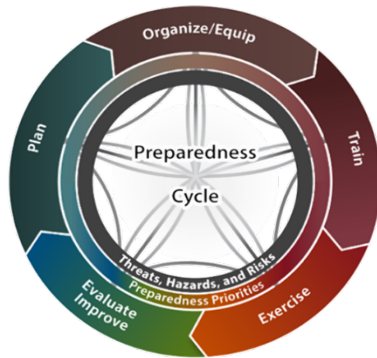


Figure 1. Integrated Preparedness Cycle

- An emergency management structure, protocols, and supplies to carry out plan strategies
- Staff that understand the plans and their individual roles in implementing them
- Testing of plans that allow staff to safely practice response under simulated conditions, solely to determine what works, and what could be done better
- An improvement planning process that includes evaluation, identification of lessons learned, and the application of lessons learned to improve plans

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) require health centers to have comprehensive emergency management programs (CEMPs) that incorporate these preparedness elements. Applying these “best practices” enhances a health center’s preparedness, and its compliance with related regulatory requirements.

This toolkit was created to support health centers in meeting the exercise requirements defined in the 2016 [CMS EP Rule](#) and 2019 [CMS EP Rule revisions](#). These require health centers to test their emergency plans through a full-scale, community-based exercise or an individual, facility-based functional exercise every 2 years, and an additional exercise of the health center’s choice on alternate years*. Individual states and the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) also have emergency preparedness requirements/expectations for health centers. A tabletop exercise (TTX) is a discussion-based exercise that health centers may choose to conduct as their “exercise of choice.”

**Note: real-world activation of a health center’s emergency plans satisfies the requirement for the next scheduled full-scale or functional exercise. For more information on CMS exercise requirements, please review 2016 [CMS EP Rule](#) and 2019 [CMS EP Rule revisions](#).*

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is organized to take the user through a series of steps to develop, conduct, and evaluate a tabletop exercise (TTX), and apply lessons learned through an improvement planning process. The draft exercise and evaluation templates, including sample objectives and scenarios, should be customized to meet each health center's preparedness goals. Please note the following:

- ❖ [Bracketed areas shaded in gray] indicate where organizations may customize the content. Remove the shading after finalizing the content.
- ❖ [Bracketed areas shaded in gold] are instructions that should be deleted from final documents.
- ❖ Notes are shaded in blue.
- ❖ A glossary, acronyms, and references/resources are included for additional information.

Note: While this document provides exercise guidance and templates adapted from the [Homeland Security and Exercise Evaluation Program \(HSEEP\)](#) that may be applied to the development of any type of exercise, it is not intended to be a comprehensive review of HSEEP.

Step 1: Prepare for Exercise Success

- ☐ Secure executive-level approval for the exercise before starting the planning process.
- ☐ Designate an Exercise Director to oversee the exercise process. The Exercise Director should understand and know how to apply the HSEEP guidance and is responsible for exercise program management, including the use of any consultants to support the exercise.
- ☐ Convene an Exercise Planning Team (EPT) that includes stakeholders from across the organization to support and provide input into exercise development, evaluation, and related improvement planning.
- ☐ Review the plans, policies, and/or procedures to be tested to ensure they are complete enough to achieve the exercise objectives the EPT sets.
 - The exception to this is when the exercise is being conducted with the goal of exploring issues to create new plans, policies, and/or procedures, e.g., through a discussion-based exercise such as a workshop or tabletop exercise.
- ☐ Unless the exercise is intended to test “just-in-time” training and materials, staff should be trained before the exercise in the plans, policies, and procedures (including use of any materials or equipment) to be tested.

Step 2: Develop Exercise

Follow the HSEEP Exercise Cycle (Figure 2., [HSEEP Policy and Guidance 2020](#)) and associated guidance for each phase to plan individual exercises.

- ☐ Conduct a series of meetings with defined goals and outcomes, adapting the templates provided for all documentation, as needed.
- ☐ Schedule more development time for more complex exercises.
- ☐ If multiple locations from the organization participate, determine if objectives will be the same for all sites, or if each will have unique objectives.
- ☐ Conduct exercise planning meetings in the order below to achieve the primary objectives noted for each. (Figure 3) To streamline exercise development, when possible, combine the Concept & Objectives (C & O) Meeting with the Initial Planning Meeting (IPM).



Figure 2: HSEEP Cycle

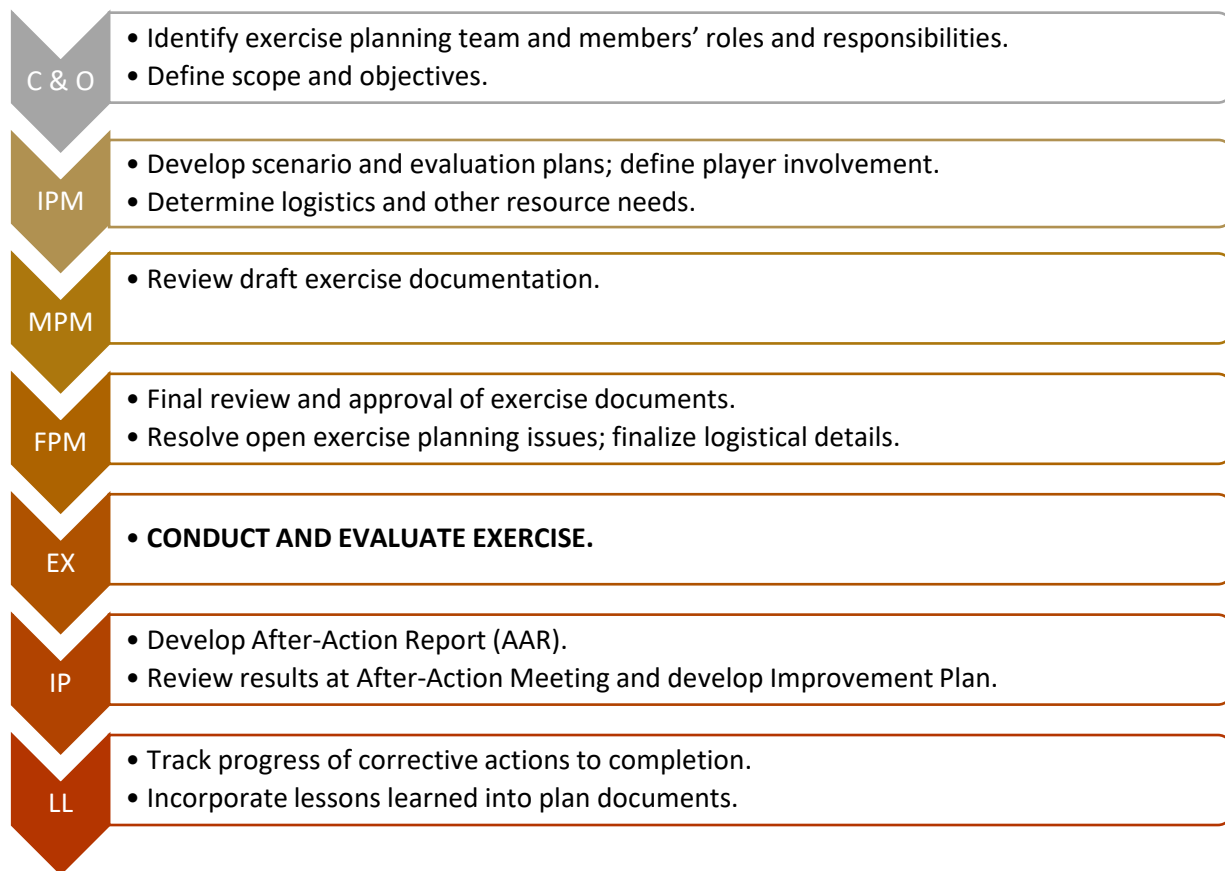


Figure 3. HSEEP order of exercise planning meetings for discussion-based exercises and primary objectives for each (adapted from [HSEEP Policy and Guidance 2020](#))

Step 3: Develop an Exercise Evaluation Plan

Exercise evaluation planning occurs in coordination with exercise design and development.

- ☐ Design an Exercise Evaluation Plan that consists of the observations compiled by evaluators in Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs), as well as the feedback provided by participants during the post-exercise “Hotwash” and through their Participant Feedback Forms.
 - All evaluation should occur in real time while an exercise is in progress.
- ☐ Adapt the sample HSEEP Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs) or create your own using the HSEEP documents as a resource. EEGs must be based on the specific exercise objectives and capabilities being tested in your organization’s exercise. This toolkit includes sample EEGs for each of the three scenarios and their objectives.
- ☐ Design data collection tools to meet exercise goals.
 - Craft questions to be as objective (i.e., closed-ended) as possible. Objective data is easier and faster to analyze and develop conclusions from.

- Subjective (i.e., open-ended) questions are better for evaluating a newer plan or capability because responses may offer more nuanced information than objective data. It takes longer to analyze subjective data.
- If feasible, collect data electronically for efficiency (e.g., via online survey tools/forms).
- Account for data analysis when determining after-action review timelines.

Step 4: Conduct the Exercise

Pre-exercise Preparation

- Identify exercise evaluators no later than 1-2 weeks before the exercise.
 - Evaluators should have little to no involvement in exercise planning but should understand enough about the plans being tested to assess the exercise using the Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs).
 - Consider staff that regularly perform evaluation or quality improvement functions.
- Finalize outstanding logistics issues (e.g., space, photocopies/printing, collation of materials, etc.) with internal teams and/or vendors, as needed, no later than 1-2 weeks before the exercise.
- Incorporate final changes to the Exercise Plan, as needed, no later than 1 week before the exercise.
- Train evaluators 1-2 days before the exercise.
 - Review the Exercise Plan and Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs).
 - Review and confirm communication-related plans, and test equipment, as applicable.
 - Review information and documentation that evaluators must submit for after-action reporting and improvement planning, including when, how, and to whom they must submit.
 - Depending on their knowledge of your health center's EM-related plans, evaluators may need to be provided with additional, targeted training on emergency plan content to ensure they understand the response expectations for the exercise.
- During the week of the exercise, place signs in the facility to let staff, patients, and visitors know that an exercise will be conducted sometime that week.

Day of Exercise Tasks*

- Ensure that all exercise materials are ready and where they need to be, e.g., make sure that players have briefing materials, and evaluators have access to the EEGs.
- Conduct a Player Briefing prior to the start of the exercise.
 - A single briefing may be offered virtually by the Exercise Director, Lead Evaluator, or member of the EPT if multiple sites are participating, or each respective Site Evaluation Lead may conduct their own briefing using the materials provided by the EPT.

- Alternatively, share Player Briefing document(s) 1-2 days before the exercise for players to review independently.
- ☐ Ensure that technology/equipment and Internet service are working in the room where the exercise will be held, and materials can be shared with participants, as intended.
 - As applicable, discuss coordination of activities and communication protocols across sites.
- ☐ Ensure that the facilitator(s), players, evaluators, and any observers are in place and ready before officially starting the exercise.
- ☐ Evaluate exercise activities in real time.
- ☐ Conduct a 15–30-minute Hotwash (i.e., feedback session) at the end of the exercise.
 - Have the evaluator(s) take notes.
 - Ask participants to complete a Participant Feedback Form via hard copy, or electronically, by the end of the day.

**Note: If any portion of your exercise includes staff that are not physically on site, make sure that materials may be accessed electronically.*

Step 5: Perform an After-Action Review and Apply Lessons Learned Through Improvement Planning

Improvement planning is critical to “completing” the HSEEP Cycle, and a round of the Integrated Preparedness Cycle (IPC) (see Figure 1).

- ☐ Engage stakeholders from across the organization to provide input during the after-action process, and to apply their experience and expertise to improvement planning.
- ☐ Compile and analyze evaluation results against objectives to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- ☐ Document findings in an After-Action Report (AAR) and suggested corrective actions in the Improvement Plan (IP).
- ☐ Present evaluation findings and share the draft AAR/IP for comment during an After-Action Meeting (AAM).
- ☐ Stakeholders should come to agreement about the corrective actions listed in the final Improvement Plan (IP), ensuring that each task is clearly defined, and includes target timing for completion, an expected outcome, and a stakeholder assigned to complete it.
- ☐ Disseminate the final version of the AAR and IP to stakeholders.
- ☐ Add the corrective actions from the exercise to the larger list of corrective actions from other exercises and real emergencies being tracked by your health center until they are completed.
- ☐ “Begin” the next round of the Integrated Preparedness Cycle (IPC) by updating emergency plans, policies, procedures, tools, etc. to reflect lessons learned and corrective actions for your health center.

Tabletop Exercise Templates

The draft templates in this toolkit should be modified and customized by health centers to meet their individual exercise goals and preparedness priorities. These materials are [attached](#) and include:

- ☐ Agenda for conducting a combined Concept & Objectives (C&O) and Initial Planning Meeting (IPM)
- ☐ Agenda for conducting a Midterm Planning Meeting (MPM)
- ☐ Agenda for conducting a Final Planning Meeting (FPM)
- ☐ Situation Manual
- ☐ Optional Scenario and Scope-#1 (Cyber Incident)
- ☐ Optional Scenario and Scope-#2 (Coastal Storm)
- ☐ Optional Scenario and Scope-#3 (Integrated Response)
- ☐ [Participant Feedback Form](#)
- ☐ Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs) (one for each sample objective in the toolkit)
- ☐ [Evaluator Information and Guidance Document](#)
- ☐ [Player Briefing](#)
- ☐ [After Action Report \(AAR\)](#)

References and Resources

ASPR TRACIE. (2021). [Rural Health Clinic / Federally Qualified Health Center Requirements: CMS Emergency Preparedness Final Rule \(Updated\)](#).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). [Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Capabilities: National Standards for State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial Public Health](#).

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. (2016). [Emergency Preparedness Final Rule](#).

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. (2019). [Omnibus Burden Reduction Final Rule](#). (Including revisions to *CMS EP Final Rule of 2016*).

Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2020). [HSEEP Policy and Guidance](#). (Including Preparedness Toolkit)

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). (2018). [IS-120.C: An Introduction to Exercises](#).

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response. (2024). [Health Care Preparedness and Response Capabilities for Health Care Coalitions](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Acronyms

AAM	After-Action Meeting
AAR	After-Action Report
BCP	Business Continuity Plan/Planning
CEMP	Comprehensive Emergency Management Program
CMS	Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
C&O	Concept & Objectives (Meeting)
EEG	Exercise Evaluation Guide
EM	Emergency Management
EOP	Emergency Operations Plan
FPM	Final Planning Meeting
FQHC	Federally Qualified Health Center
HRSA	Health Resources & Services Administration
HSEEP	Homeland Security and Evaluation Program
IP	Improvement Plan
IPM	Initial Planning Meeting
MPM	Midterm Planning Meeting
NYC	New York City
NYC EM	New York City Emergency Management
NYS	New York State

Glossary

TERM	DEFINITION
After-Action Review	A structured review process for analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how things can be done better in future.
After-Action Report (AAR)	A detailed summary and analysis of a past event (such as an exercise or actual emergency response) completed for the purposes of identifying strengths and areas for improvement for future reference.
After-Action Meeting (AAM)	A meeting that serves as a forum to review an AAR and the draft IP. Participants should seek to reach final consensus on strengths, areas for improvement, draft corrective actions, concrete deadlines, and owners/assignees for implementation of corrective actions.
Capability	Means to accomplish a mission, function, or objective.
Controller	Controllers plan and manage exercise play, set up and operate the exercise site, and act in the roles of organizations or individuals that are not playing in the exercise. Controllers direct the pace of the exercise, provide key data to players, and may prompt or initiate certain player actions to ensure exercise continuity. In addition, they issue exercise material to players as required, monitor the exercise timeline, and supervise the safety of all exercise participants.
Disaster	Escalated emergency that is typically large-scale and crosses geographic, political, and academic boundaries. Disasters require a level of response and recovery greater than local communities can provide.
Discussion-based (exercise)	A type of exercise that can be used to familiarize players with, or develop new plans, policies, agreements, and procedures. It focuses on strategic, policy-oriented issues. Facilitators and/or presenters usually lead the discussion, keeping participants on track towards meeting exercise objectives.
Drill	An operations-based exercise that is usually conducted to test a single, specific operation or function within a single organization.
Emergency	A small-scale, localized incident which is usually resolved quickly using local resources.

TERM	DEFINITION
Evaluation	Process of examining, measuring and/or judging how well an entity, procedure, or action has met or is meeting stated objectives.
Evaluator	Individual who evaluates and provides feedback on an exercise. Evaluators observe and document performance against capability targets and critical tasks, in accordance with the Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs).
Exercise Evaluation Guide (EEG)	A document that captures information specifically related to the evaluation requirements developed by an exercise planning team. The EEG provides evaluators with a standardized tool to guide data collection and capture performance results.
Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP)	A doctrine that provides a set of guiding principles and templates for exercise programs, as well as a common approach to exercise program management, design and development, conduct, evaluation, and improvement planning.
Hotwash	A meeting that provides an opportunity to discuss exercise strengths and areas for improvement immediately following the conduct of an exercise.
HSEEP (Exercise) Cycle	The HSEEP (Exercise) Cycle describes the four (4) key steps for testing and improving plans: Design and Development; Conduct; Evaluation; and Improvement Planning. These steps are performed in coordination with Program Management activities.
Improvement Plan/Planning	An element of the After-Action Report process, the Improvement Plan lists the corrective actions that will be taken, the responsible individual or organization, and expected completion date for each.
Integrated Preparedness Cycle (IPC)	The IPC of planning, organizing/equipping, training, exercising, and evaluating/improving is a continuous process that ensures the regular examination of ever-changing threats, hazards, and risks, and the development of plans to address them.
Operations-based (exercise)	A type of exercise that can be used to validate plans, policies, agreements, and procedures; clarify roles and responsibilities; and identify resource gaps. Operations-based exercises are characterized by actual reaction to an exercise scenario, such as initiating communications or mobilizing personnel and resources.

TERM	DEFINITION
Preparedness	One of the phases of emergency management. It includes planning, training, and educational activities for events that cannot be mitigated.
Public Health Emergency	An occurrence or imminent threat of an illness or health condition that (1) is believed to be caused by any of the following: bioterrorism; appearance of a novel or previously controlled or eradicated infectious agent or biological toxin; natural disaster; chemical attack or accidental release; nuclear attack or accident; and (2) poses a high probability of any of the following harms occurring in a large number of the affected population: death; serious or long-term disability; widespread exposure to infectious or toxic agent posing significant risk of substantial future harm.
Redundancy	Additional or alternative systems, sub-systems, assets, or processes that maintain a degree of overall functionality in case of loss or failure of another system, sub-system, asset, or process.
Response	One of the phases of emergency management. Response includes the immediate actions taken to save and sustain lives, protect property and the environment, and meet basic human needs. Response also includes the execution of plans and actions to support short-term recovery.
Risk Communication	The process of providing concise, comprehensible, credible information needed to make effective decisions regarding risks.
Scenario	Hypothetical situation comprised of a hazard, an entity impacted by that hazard, and associated conditions including consequences when appropriate.
Situational awareness	A person's state of knowledge or mental model of the situation around the individual and/or his/her operating unit, including an understanding of the evolving state of the environment.
Tabletop Exercise	Structured discussion focused on simulated emergency response scenarios, allowing participants to analyze their roles and actions in a relaxed environment.

Template Attachments

[Agenda for conducting a combined Concept & Objectives \(C&O\) and Initial Planning Meeting \(IPM\)](#)

[Agenda for conducting a Midterm Planning Meeting \(MPM\)](#)

[Agenda for conducting a Final Planning Meeting \(FPM\)](#)

[Situation Manual](#)

[Optional Scenario and Scope-#1 \(Cyber Incident\)](#)

[Optional Scenario and Scope-#2 \(Coastal Storm\)](#)

[Optional Scenario and Scope-#3 \(Integrated Response\)](#)

[Participant Feedback Form](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj1_Template_CyberIncident_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj2_Template_CyberIncident_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj3_Template_CyberIncident_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj1_Template_CoastalStorm_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj2_Template_CoastalStorm_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj3_Template_CoastalStorm_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj1_Template_IntegratedResponse_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj2_Template_IntegratedResponse_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Exercise Evaluation Guide EEG_Obj3_Template_IntegratedResponse_TTX_Toolkit](#)

[Evaluator Information and Guidance Document](#)

[Player Briefing Handout](#)

[After Action Report \(AAR\)](#)