

# Protecting Older Veterans During Emergencies: Extending Veterans Health Administration Preparedness Resources



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## BACKGROUND

Healthcare coalitions have demonstrated a variety of ways to effectively share critical resources during disasters. Home health agencies (HHA) provide a vital lifeline to older adults; however, research shows HHAs are often under-resourced and disconnected from community-wide emergency planning efforts, threatening the continuity of services.

The Veterans Health Administration is the nation's largest integrated health system and has a robust emergency management program. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) purchases home health aide services for 150,000 Veterans each year. In Fall 2022, our team conducted a qualitative study among six geographically diverse VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) in the northeast region (VISN 2) to understand the communication patterns between VA administrators and HHAs in normal times and during disasters. Through interviews with VA emergency managers and staff and contracted HHAs, we found that VA and agencies knew little about each others' emergency protocols. Participants suggested resource fairs could be an effective way to extend VA resources into the community.

We identified the Hudson Valley VA as the ideal site to pilot a community partner resource fair in July 2024, based on the site's existing medical foster home, training. To gauge interest and best tailor the resource fair to suit the needs of agencies, we administered an online survey.

The study aimed to identify opportunities for healthcare systems to extend emergency resources to HHAs so that the latter can maintain care during disasters.

## METHODS

**Study design:** Semi-structured Interviews and Survey

**Sample:** Interviews, n=19 stakeholders from six VAMC in VISN 2; Survey, n=40 agency contacts that provide care to Veterans served by the Hudson Valley VA.

## RESULTS

- Home Health Agency participants were open to new avenues of support

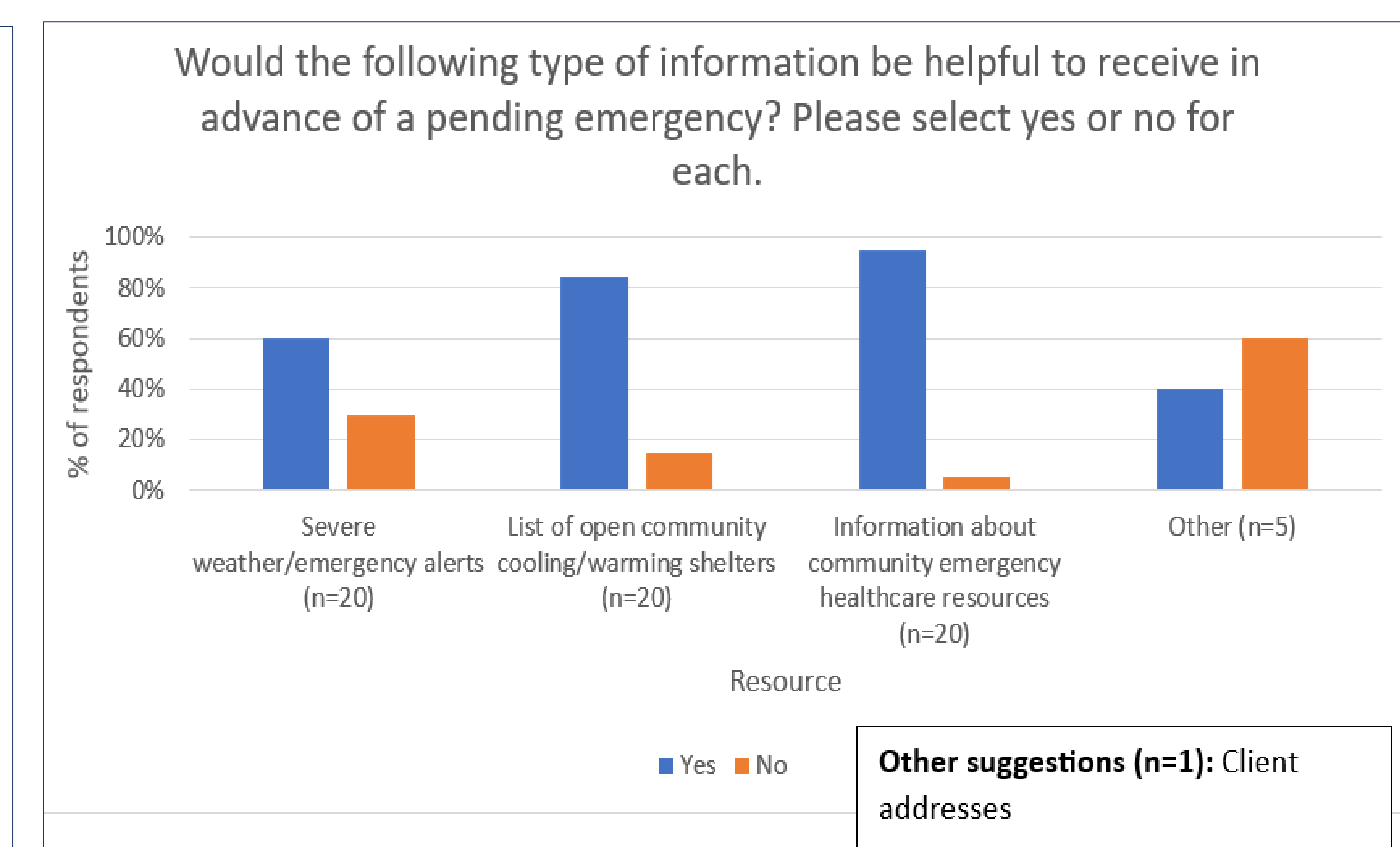
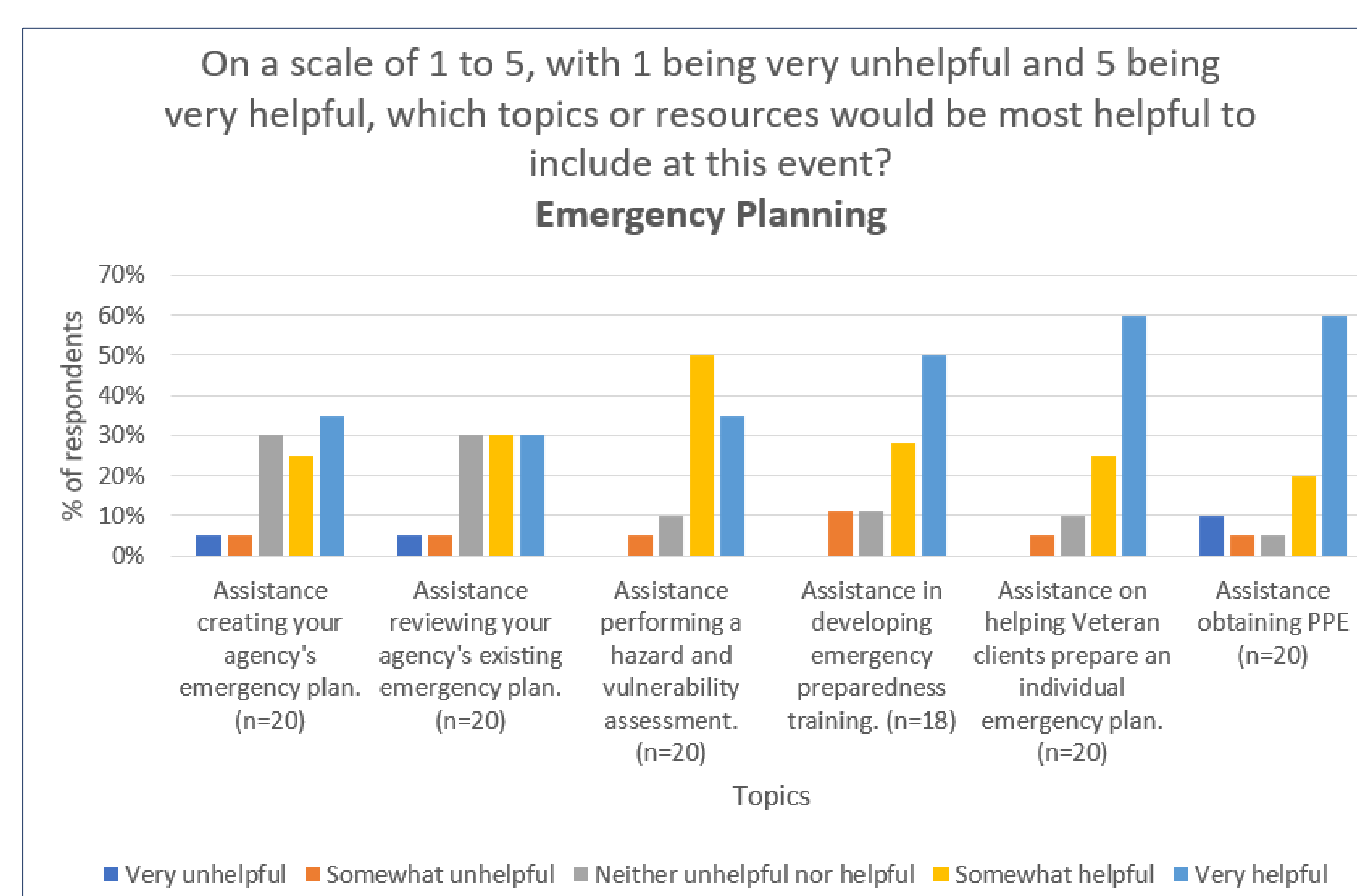
**“ Anytime we can get information, you know, it's good to have it come to you and not always have to go out searching for it. ”** - HHA Administrator

- Many VA participants simply hadn't considered extending support to home health agencies before – but once they did, were generally enthusiastic.

**“ We should be making our best effort to make sure we're also providing that same level [of protection] to the people taking care of the veteran [as our VA staff]....it's our responsibility to provide the best for the staff that are going into those homes to take care of that patient. ”**

- VA Emergency Manager

Our survey achieved a 50% response rate (n=20). Respondents were enthusiastic about attending an emergency resource fair and expressed particular interest in assistance developing emergency preparedness training and plans, learning more about VA resources, and creating staff training to meet Veteran-specific needs. Over 90% of respondents would be likely to attend a resource fair.



## CONCLUSION

Creating a pipeline of support through existing relationships can provide a model for health systems to collaborate with community-based providers, extending available emergency resources and making clinical care teams, patients, and communities more resilient to disasters.

We are planning two Resource Fairs that will be held in mid-July 2024

Topics will include: Overview of VA benefits and resources, Guidance creating an emergency plan, with one-on-one consultations, Home safety for veterans and home health agency staff, Guidance on providing Veteran-centered care

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