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Red Cross**



American Red Cross:

The auxiliary role of the Red Cross and Red Crescent at municipal level

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In 2010, the IFRC's 'World Disaster Report' was focused on urban risk, as National Societies (NS) increasingly shifted attention to urban areas – a trend accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022, the Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement Council of Delegates adopted Resolution CD22-R11 on 'Strengthening the Resilience of Urban Communities: Our Way Forward'ⁱ supporting broader localisation goals in Resolutions 34IC/24/R3 and 34IC/24/R4.ⁱⁱ In order to mitigate worst case disaster scenarios from unfolding, Resolution CD22-R11 calls for more investment into building the resilience of urban communities in addition to scaling up the service delivery and preparedness of NSs in urban areas. To execute this well, effective engagement with municipal authorities is vital.

To advance the commitment on the Resolution, the Movement Urban Resilience Working Group (MURWG) on 'Public Advocacy and Strengthening the Auxiliary Role at the Municipal Level' was established. Case studies of a number of National Societies' activities in this field were undertaken as part of this working group.

This case study examines American Red Cross' auxiliary role at the municipal level, focusing on its legal and policy foundations and operational arrangements. It identifies examples of good practice, factors for effective engagement, challenges, and key enablers which strengthen impact at a local level. These findings will inform MURWG's drafting of 'Principles of Action' – actionable strategies for National Societies' urban resilience efforts – to be presented for adoption at the 2026 Council of Delegates.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews with six staff within the American Red Cross. The author used a snowballing approach to interviewing. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were supplemented with materials provided often by interviewees.

MUNICIPAL LEVELS IN AMERICA

The United States has a federal system of governance, with authority divided between federal, state, and local levels. The federal government sets national policy and provides funding and regulatory frameworks, while the fifty states exercise substantial autonomy in areas such as health, education, and emergency management. Beneath the state level, governance is further decentralised into counties, municipalities and special-purpose districts.

There are over 19,000 incorporated municipalities across the United States, ranging in scale from large metropolitan cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago to small towns with only a few hundred residents.

In the US, the minimum population sizes for an area to be considered "urban," or a city is 2500. According to the US Census Bureau, about 80% of the United States population lives in urban areas.ⁱⁱⁱ

Municipal governments are typically led by a mayor–council or council–manager system, with elected representatives responsible for local policymaking and administration. Their functions vary by state law but usually include responsibility for public safety (police, fire services, and emergency medical services), local infrastructure (roads, water, and sanitation), public health initiatives, and aspects of social services.

Municipal governments are legal entities accountable to their residents but operate within a complex web of intergovernmental relations involving both state and federal authorities. While some metropolitan municipalities have significant institutional capacity, including dedicated emergency management offices and public health departments, smaller towns often face challenges related to limited staffing, financial resources, and technical expertise. This uneven capacity contributes to disparities in preparedness and service delivery across different communities.

In the context of disaster risk management and emergency response, municipalities play a critical frontline role and have the ability to make their own disaster management and partnership decisions independent from working together at state or federal level. Local governments are usually the first to respond to emergencies, activating local emergency operations plans and coordinating with community-based organisations, state emergency management agencies, and federal actors such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The American Red Cross (ARC) is structured at the national level, with further subdivisions into divisions, regions, and chapters. While these units generally correspond to the 50 U.S. states and six overseas territories, the organisation's operational structure is not strictly aligned with political boundaries. Rather, it is primarily organised around major metropolitan areas, which frequently extend across multiple states, enabling ARC to better target resources and services to population centres.

INTRODUCTION

The American Red Cross (ARC) is widely recognised as a trusted and capable humanitarian actor across the United States. Its auxiliary role is well established in law and practice at the federal level, and ARC is respected for its operational expertise, community presence, and ability to convene municipal authorities and civil society. However, as one senior leader noted:



"We have close relationships at state and federal level but often struggle at county and city level." Region CEO, ARC

Key challenges identified in interviews in implementing the auxiliary role at the municipal level include:

1

Variable understanding of the auxiliary role among municipal officials, the public, and ARC staff and volunteers.

2

Disparities in municipal capacity and resources, requiring ARC to adapt engagement strategies and operational support to local realities.

3

A polarised political context, meaning that misunderstandings of the auxiliary role can create barriers to both activities and relationships.

This case study will explore these challenges in more detail. However, they are often outweighed by ARC's consistent local engagement -- particularly in divisions with dedicated staff and comprehensive engagement plans. ARC's operational credibility, coupled with the scale and depth of its volunteer networks, further strengthens its ability to maintain strong, trusted relationships with municipal authorities.

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

In 2007, the American Red Cross (ARC) developed an updated Congressional Charter setting out its relationship with the federal government. Whilst the charter does not explicitly mention the auxiliary role, it does refer to ARC as “a federal instrumentality” and, as a federal instrumentality, sets out the duty for ARC to carry out activities mandated under the National Response Framework coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).^{iv} FEMA is an agency who coordinates the US’ disaster governance. Under FEMA, it states that ARC is mandated as the co-lead of Emergency Support Function #6, that is, to coordinate “the delivery of mass care and emergency assistance”.^v

There is also the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act which determines that ARC should sit on the membership of a federal interagency task force for coordinating implementation of disaster preparedness and mitigation programs.^{vi}

At local level there are often Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that set out ahead of time the parameters of ARC’s provision in regards to facilities and staff to support efforts at the local government level. Much of this is related primarily around shelter agreements.

WHAT DRIVES EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES?

Soft diplomacy and continuous, proactive relationship building

Engagement between the American Red Cross and municipal authorities is sustained through deliberate, long-term relationship management grounded in trust and soft diplomacy. A phrase emerging frequently in interviews was “during blue skies not just grey”. ARC staff repeatedly underlined that partnerships must be built and maintained before disasters strike. Continuous, proactive engagement during “blue-sky” periods allows municipal authorities to understand ARC’s auxiliary role and capabilities, laying the groundwork for effective coordination during crises.



If you wait for the grey skies, you're too late. You're scrambling to build relations. You're not getting a seat at the table because you didn't do the relationship-building during blue skies.

-Government and Community Relations Professional, ARC

Chapters employ a variety of approaches to sustain this engagement. Some share weekly situation updates or invite city officials to local volunteer events; others run joint exercises or resilience workshops. In New York City, ARC conducts a structured outreach programme after every election cycle, meeting each new councilor to outline services, review MOUs, and identify collaboration opportunities.

The “Elected Official Liaison” officers (EOL) system institutionalises this blue-sky diplomacy. EOLs serve as the formal bridge between ARC and municipal leaders, maintaining day-to-day contact, providing briefings during small-scale incidents, and ensuring that communication channels remain active even when no major disaster is occurring. This approach turns relationship building itself into a preparedness measure.

This builds on successful cooperation depending on personal familiarity and continuity. In some divisions in ARC there are designated senior roles for government relations, whose roles are specifically to manage relationships with elected officials.

These roles are predominantly in states with large municipalities such as California and New York State. Interviewees in these roles highlighted that if building government and elected officials relations teams from scratch, then ensuring that individuals in these positions have a background in local politics is useful for ensuring continuity and personal recognition.

The impact of personnel recognition continues when people move on from ARC. Interviewees highlighted the relational dividends that accrue over time. One interviewee noted that staff who move into government or UN roles often become valuable allies, having experienced ARC's partnership model first-hand. The revolving door of humanitarian and government personnel thus sustains a form of institutional memory that continues to benefit future engagement.

Interviewees also flagged that the brand recognition of the Red Cross is helpful for cold outreach with new officials. This is particularly true in municipalities with high propensities for natural disasters. In one municipality, brand recognition was supported through developing shareable assets: they have a videographer to tell the story of ARC in the municipality, and capacity to gather relevant data and present it in engaging ways to the municipality.

Demonstrating value and relevance through tailored operations

Operational delivery remains ARC's strongest source of legitimacy. Routine, community-level activities are critical for a steady stream of operational activity and maintaining awareness.

Blood collection and home fire programmes were key examples of this work. The role of the home fires programme to respond to every home fire, and carry out preventative activities such as installing fire detectors, ensures relevance in every city fire department.

These bring constant visibility for the organisation and tangible benefits for communities. Municipal leaders who participate in such initiatives often become champions of ARC's work, recognising the direct link between everyday prevention activities and public safety outcomes.

Beyond these steady-state programmes, ARC's reputation is reinforced during large-scale emergencies through its nationally mandated roles in sheltering and food provision programmes, in partnership with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Joint operational experience during disasters typically leads to deeper collaboration on planning and preparedness.

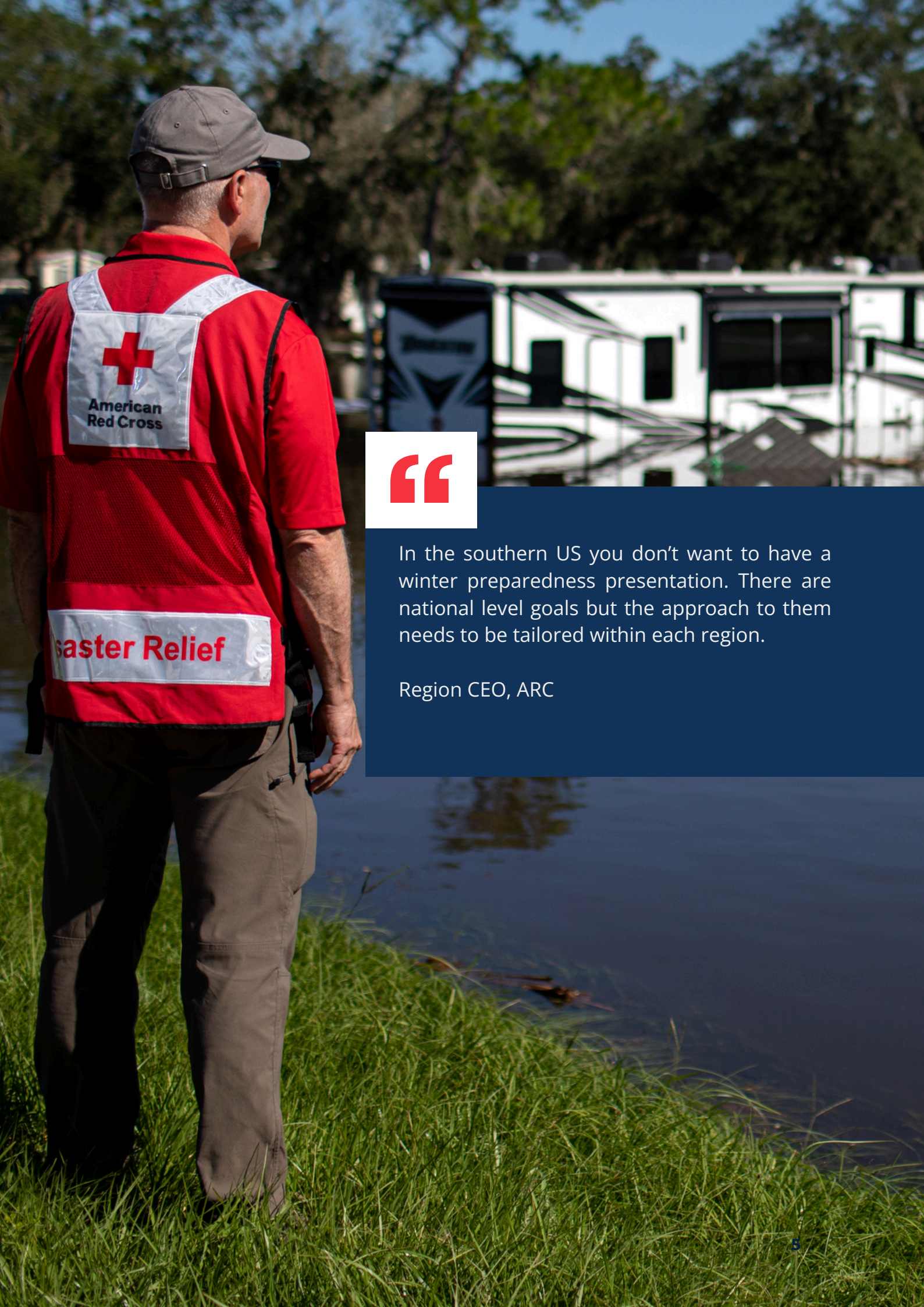


Our best relationships are the ones where we've worked through a disaster together."

-Region CEO, ARC

Flexibility in operational delivery is key. In discussions with municipal authorities and in implementation, programmes are effectively adapted to municipal realities. For example, adjusting tools like the Urban Heat Toolkit or resilience planning frameworks to reflect each community's disaster profile, governance structure, and resource levels.

This contextual flexibility allows ARC to remain relevant across highly diverse settings -- from small, under-resourced towns to major metropolitan areas -- ensuring that its auxiliary role is seen not as a one-size-fits-all model but as a locally grounded partnership.



In the southern US you don't want to have a winter preparedness presentation. There are national level goals but the approach to them needs to be tailored within each region.

Region CEO, ARC

Financial independence as enablers of credibility

ARC's clear articulation of its independence is a cornerstone of its municipal diplomacy. Interviewees highlighted the financial independence as critical to maintaining trust across political divides and amongst the public- particularly, they stressed, in a polarised political climate.

ARC has five lines of service,¹ only one of which has a federal charter and line item with federal government. The remainder of its lines of service are entirely donor-led. Similarly, where there are MOUs between ARC and the municipality on, for example, shelter agreements, there is no funding attached. In the US' context, this has been helpful for clarity with the public and partners who are not affiliated with government, as it can serve to demonstrate independence. However, funding is only one way to do this: in many contexts, clear explanation, advocacy and respect of the principle of independence of the RCRC Movement enables this instead.



Ensuring our independence is recognised is vital – it allows us to have a seat at table in conversations where government might not be allowed.

- Region CEO, ARC

Funding independence is largely enabled by public donations. This is supported through ARC's strong community presence and brand recognition of the Red Cross in the United States.

Leveraging partnerships and convening power

Beyond bilateral relationships with municipal governments, ARC functions as a trusted intermediary and convener.

¹ These are: disaster relief, blood services, training and certification, service to the armed forces, and international services.

One key approach is leveraging partnerships with formal networks. For example, ARC participates in International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), a global network of local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development, which supports peer learning between municipal authorities on topics such as heat resilience, urban flooding, and inclusive disaster planning.

At the local level, ARC also positions itself as a convener through the Community Adaptation Program (CAP),^{vii} which strengthens networks of local partner organisations in communities facing chronic disaster risks and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Operating across 14 counties, CAP enhances the capacity, capability, and continuity of local actors, providing what ARC describes as “humble leadership” -- offering its resources and expertise to support organisations that are better suited to lead specific interventions.



No one is telling everyone what to do: we all do the things we're best at, in a coordinated way.

Director of Programmes, climate focus

Convening can also demonstrate potential efficiencies at the municipal level. By bringing together offices or departments that might otherwise duplicate work, ARC helps streamline priorities and resources while linking municipal operations to community-level responses.



We open doors to communities for elected officials in a way no other organisation can
Region CEO, ARC

The “door-opening” function that ARC plays also benefits partner organisations. Where there are lots of smaller, independent humanitarian and civic actors, ARC's reputation and access allows them to engage in municipal planning processes where they might otherwise lack entry.

For instance, in the case of World Central Kitchen, ARC provides emergency food programmes under FEMA agreements. World Central Kitchen participates on-site, with ARC often acting as a subcontractor, facilitating government engagement while allowing the partner to retain its branding.



We are in the emergency operations centre where a lot of NGOs are not.”
Region CEO, ARC

Through these convening and coordinating roles, ARC embodies the auxiliary role at the municipal level: not replacing public authorities, but bridging government, civil society, and community actors to enhance disaster preparedness, response, and resilience. By providing leadership, expertise, and a neutral platform for collaboration, ARC strengthens local governance capacity while maintaining its independence and credibility as a humanitarian actor.

Community presence

ARC's extensive volunteer base -- nearly 300,000 nationwide -- ensures a constant presence within communities. Volunteers often live in the same neighbourhoods they serve, acting as informal ambassadors who keep ARC visible between crises. Their participation in local committees, schools, and faith groups embeds the organisation in everyday civic life.

There are also official community relations ambassadors, who are volunteers trained by ARC. This sustained community presence strengthens municipal relationships. When disasters occur, officials already know the ARC through its volunteers, not just through emergency coordination rooms. The grassroots nature of ARC's network thus converts the abstract idea of an auxiliary relationship into lived reality at the community level.

CHALLENGES IN ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES

Misunderstanding of auxiliary role

Persistent confusion about ARC's auxiliary role and independence continues to pose challenges. Some officials still assume ARC is a government agency. These misperceptions about ARC's mandate can distort expectations -- for instance, assuming the organisation has higher resources or can deliver services on government instruction. This can create tension when the organisation must decline requests or scale down operations once emergency funding ends.

Misunderstandings among municipal officials about ARC's role can have direct consequences for service delivery. One example involved the use of residual disaster fundraising funds, which ARC distributed to people impacted by a disaster. In this case, eligibility was simply based on having a home address in the affected area. Because ARC is an auxiliary to their public authorities in the humanitarian field, recipients were still able to access federal or state support without restriction. However, the interviewee reported that more than half of the government officials involved did not initially understand this distinction, creating complications that required ARC staff to educate officials on the separation of funding streams. This illustrates how gaps in understanding of ARC's auxiliary status can complicate operational delivery, underscoring the importance of continuous communication and clarification with municipal partners.

Misunderstandings can also erode trust among vulnerable communities. In one area, people initially avoided ARC shelters due to fears of immigration enforcement, with a perception that ARC were part of government. Correcting such misperceptions requires sustained communication with both officials and communities.

Thus, while independence is a major strength, lack of understanding about it remains a recurring obstacle.

These challenges are compounded by gaps in understanding -- not only among municipal officials but also within ARC itself. Staff who are less familiar with the auxiliary role may struggle to clearly communicate ARC's mandate to municipal partners. To address this, ARC actively engages with local and state officials to clarify what the organisation can and cannot provide, emphasising that ARC is an independent auxiliary rather than a government agency.

“*Ensuring that elected officials understand where our work sits and respond to questions in real-time so that they are not going and complaining to mayor or sheriff.*
Region CEO, ARC

Clear communication, early engagement, and formalised agreements such as MOUs help mitigate confusion. However, balancing transparency with goodwill requires ongoing diplomatic effort. This dynamic illustrates a core feature of the auxiliary relationship: ARC must be sufficiently close to government to coordinate effectively, yet maintain independence to set realistic boundaries on capacity and mandate.

Maintaining relevance in well-resourced municipalities

In large cities with extensive emergency infrastructure, ARC traditional operational function may appear less essential. For example, New York, Washington DC, and San Francisco can fund hotel accommodation or contract private providers, reducing reliance on communal shelters which ARC would usually run in other municipalities. ARC's challenge in these contexts is to demonstrate continuing relevance.

“*At the megacity level they just have so many more people and more money that it almost discounts need for Red Cross so we have to keep redefining our necessity ahead of disasters.”*
Region CEO, ARC

However, staff noted that even in such contexts, municipal authorities often turn to ARC when crises exceed local capacity. This means that maintaining consistent visibility between crises requires ongoing effort and strategic communication, to ensure partnerships and plans are in place ahead of time. Further, the relevance of ARC -- particularly in well-resourced municipalities -- is not just in responding to emergencies but also in routine activity such as blood donation, and first aid training. This requires ongoing collaboration with relevant partners to ensure that ARC remains a relevant and trusted actor with municipal authorities, thereby safeguarding the continuity of day-to-day operations.





ENABLERS



Dedicated municipal officials liaison roles

This can take different forms depending on capacity, budget, and context. It may be achieved through volunteers well connected within their communities, providing a bridge between residents, local ARC chapters, and municipal leaders. In other contexts, relationship-building with municipal authorities may form part of a senior staff member's portfolio, provided it is reflected in their job description and supported with adequate capacity, particularly during disasters when rapid coordination is required. In large or disaster-prone municipalities, or where resources allow, establishing dedicated government relations positions may be most appropriate. These roles should be strategically connected across divisions and departments to avoid siloed engagement. While local needs will differ, common frameworks and shared learning through national strategic plans can ensure coherence and prevent duplication.



Standardise structured engagement plans with municipal authorities

Standardising proactive engagement practices such as routine check-ins, annual MOUs, and systematic invitations for community participation would help ensure relationships are built and maintained across all municipalities before crises arise.



Proactive communication regarding the auxiliary role

More regular advocacy with municipal partners regarding the auxiliary role would clarify the parameters of the ARC's mandate. Enhancing understanding of the relationship supports effective service delivery and smoother collaboration. Staff and volunteers could be equipped with advocacy materials provided by the federal branch or IFRC, which can then be tailored to local contexts.



Increasing internal clarity regarding the auxiliary role

Structured guidance and training for the ARC's staff and volunteers on the meaning and practical use of the auxiliary role would improve its articulation and application in municipal engagement and community interactions.



Strengthening volunteer and community ambassador networks

Volunteers play a crucial role in sustaining municipal relationships and community presence. Expanding recruitment, training, and retention of community ambassadors would enhance the ARC's visibility, support relationship continuity, and reinforce the auxiliary role at the local level. Volunteers should be integrated into structured engagement strategies for contributions to strengthen operational and relational capacity.

References

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^{iv} American Red Cross (2007) Congressional Charter of the American National Red Cross

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Please note: This document was authored by Emma Cookson (policy and advocacy consultant) on behalf of the International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent (IFRC). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policies of the IFRC or its member National Societies.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 15 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.