



CANADIAN RED CROSS

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# INFORMATION IN DISASTERS

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MAY 2018

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## INTRODUCTION

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In 2012, the Canadian Red Cross conducted a ground-breaking study of [“Social Media in Emergencies.”](#) It demonstrated clearly that emerging trends in social and digital spaces were shaping the ways that Canadians were responding to disaster and interacting with the organizations that could help them.

Now, more than five years later, the digital landscape has shifted in ways that few could have predicted – and along with it, the ways that Canadians are accessing information during disasters is evolving. This current report revisits the 2012 survey and expands on the trends that will impact disaster response for years to come.

- Based on recent results, **two thirds** of Canadians would be likely to sign up for emails, text or apps providing information in an emergency.
- Emergency situations led nearly a third of respondents to sign up to receive information during or after an incident. For these respondents, Facebook is the preferred platform for such updates, followed by email and text alerts.
- With the number of disasters increasing every year, Canadians are looking for trusted sources of information, and they list Canadian Red Cross as one of the top trusted sources of information in an emergency. Red Cross is continually innovating and sharing new ways to support Canadians with accurate information, financial support and more, through digital channels.

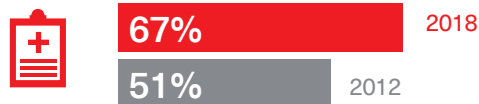
This report includes key findings from the 2018 survey, conducted by Forum Research Inc., as well as case studies to illustrate some innovative ways Red Cross is using digital and other approaches to reach communities impacted by disaster across Canada.

## DISASTERS ARE INCREASING – DIGITAL SOLUTIONS ARE EVOLVING

As emergencies are increasing in frequency across the country, more Canadians are interested in receiving electronic information to help them prepare for disasters.

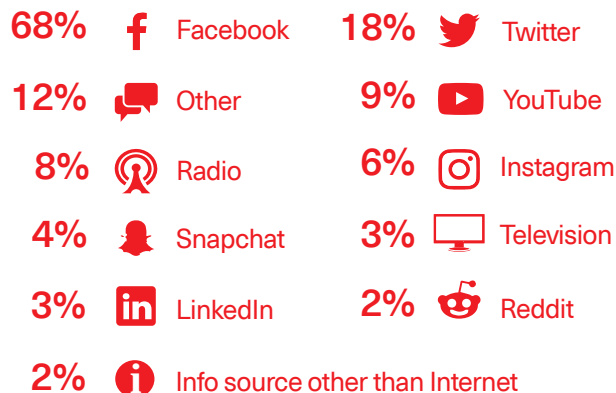
- From 2012 to 2018, **16% more** of the Canadians surveyed said they would sign up for emails, text or apps providing information in an emergency about preparedness.

Canadians that would sign up for preparedness information alerts:

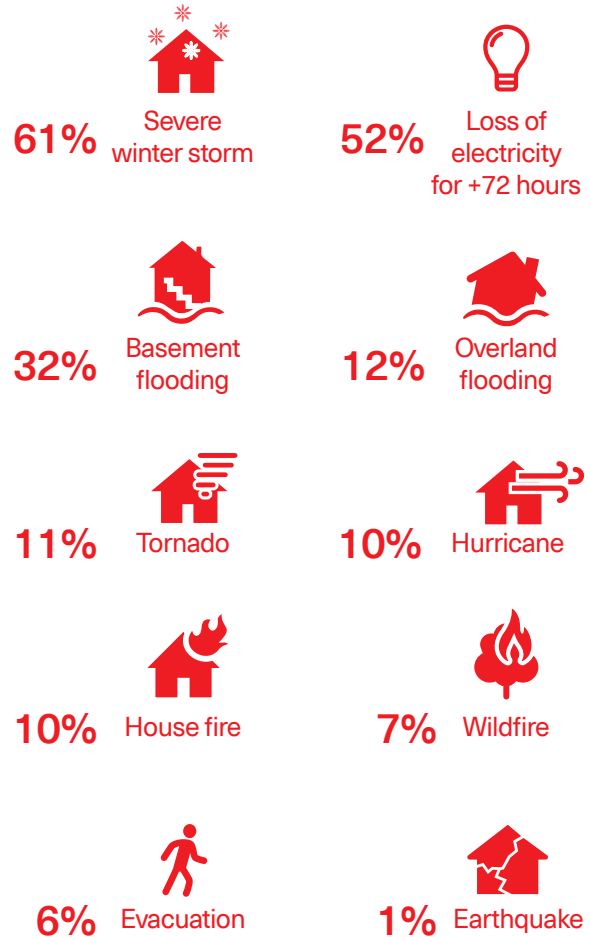


- The data shows Canadians are interested in receiving reliable, official information related to preparing for and recovering from disasters and emergencies.
- The Canadian Red Cross views this as an opportunity and a challenge to encourage Canadians, as well as local, provincial and federal governments to actively increase their own level of preparedness for disasters and emergencies.

Those using social media to access information in emergencies or disasters used one or more of the following methods:



**63%** of Canadians have experienced an emergency on at least one or more occasion:



It is estimated that **the average number of disasters per year in Canada has doubled over the past three decades**. In the decade between 1965 and 1974, on average 72 emergencies were recorded annually. Forty years later, from 2005 to 2014, the average had leapt to 405 emergencies per year. The Canadian Red Cross believes that increased capacity and investments in preparedness and readiness are required to ensure a swift response to natural disasters.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Calculated using raw EM-DAT data. Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, [no date], [http://www.emdat.be/advanced\\_search/index.html](http://www.emdat.be/advanced_search/index.html). Accessed 6 Oct. 2016. Calculated using Canadian Disaster Database data. Public Safety Canada, [no date], <http://cdd.publicsafety.gc.ca/srchpg-eng.aspx?dynamic=false>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2016.

## EXPECTATION OF ONLINE INFORMATION AND SERVICES

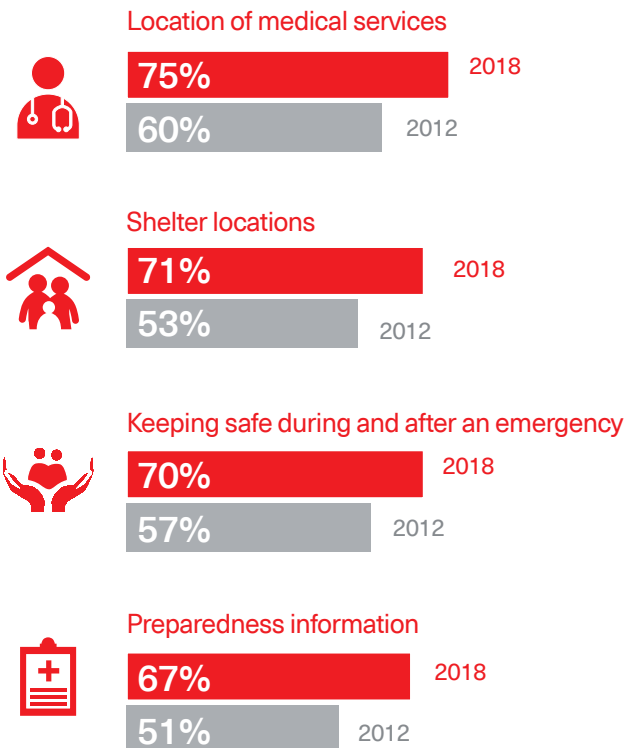
Canadians are clearly interested in online communication and service provision methods, with more Canadians than ever expecting to have access to timely, accurate information and services online immediately following a disaster or emergency.

**2/3** of Canadians would be likely to sign up for emails, text or apps providing information in an emergency.

These numbers have increased since 2012, when only **1/2** were likely to sign up.




As compared to 2012, more Canadians surveyed would sign-up for emails, text or apps providing information in an emergency about:



Following a disaster or emergency, Canadians now expect online assistance in ways that were not previously possible, including:

 **62%**  
Family reunification

 **50%**  
Financial assistance

 **49%**  
Information on the state of their property and potential damage\*

**!** \* this increases to **55%** for those who **have** experienced a past emergency

Following a disaster or emergency, two-thirds or more of Canadians are likely to sign up for information about:

-  The location of food/water
-  The location of medical services
-  Evacuation routes
-  Road closures
-  Shelter locations
-  How to keep themselves safe during and after an emergency
-  Preparedness information
-  Where to get gas

While only 3 in 10 Canadians have signed up to receive information during or after a disaster in the past, 6 in 10 Canadians say they would sign up to receive information during or after an emergency.

**3 in 10**  
have signed up



**6 in 10**  
say they  
would sign up



Canadians that would sign up for information during and after an emergency:



More Canadians who have experienced a disaster or emergency would sign up to receive information (66%), compared to those who have not (55%). This indicates that those who have experienced disasters, such as wildfires in Alberta and British Columbia, know the value of these services first-hand. The Red Cross sees an opportunity to educate Canadians on the value of signing up in advance.

Canadian Red Cross providing services online:

- Over 140,000 people assisted in 2017
- Over 56,000 people self-registered online in 2017
- 58% electronic fund transfers (EFTs) in Spring Floods and B.C. Wildfires

Registrations in the Red Cross response to the 2017 B.C. Wildfires included:

- 67% online
- 29% by phone
- 3% in person

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## GOING THE LAST MILE

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Although Canadians are increasingly relying on digital communications, it's not the only method that should be used to reach them in emergencies.

- Those who are most vulnerable are less likely to have access to smartphones and computers, and may have challenges navigating online resources.
- The Canadian Red Cross reaches people through any means needed including radio, phone, in person at shelters and reception centres, and by sending field teams to remote or vulnerable communities.

### CASE STUDY: Reaching People Where They Are - From Electronic Funds Transfers to Community Visits

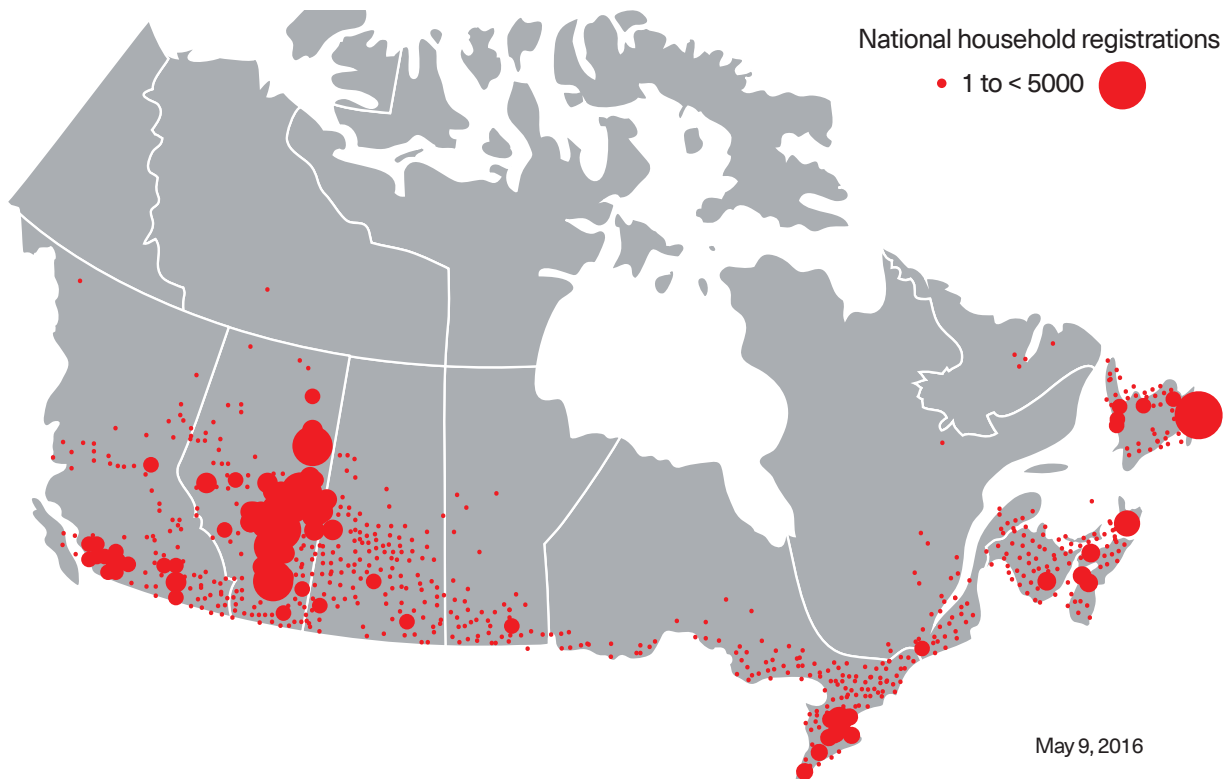
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When a massive wildfire forced the evacuation of Fort McMurray and surrounding communities in 2016, people who were impacted ended up in locations across Canada. This movement of evacuees was unlike previous disasters, and meant that it would be a challenge to reach everyone with aid. That's why online registration and electronic fund transfers (EFTs) would play such an important part in the emergency response.

When the Canadian Red Cross registered many Fort McMurray residents online following the evacuation, the data that was collected was crucial not only to Red Cross efforts, but to municipal and provincial support for people who had been impacted. The Red Cross evacuee database was critical to the success of telephone Town Halls, which allowed thousands of residents get immediate answers to their questions.

Approximate representation of 2016 Alberta Fires national registrations:

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This online registration system also allowed the Red Cross to reach evacuees with funds in a more immediate way than ever before possible. An EFT is a simple way to send money through email, allowing people to deposit funds into their bank accounts within moments. This kind of aid works, because individuals and families know what they need most – some might need that money for food, others for gas clothing or medication.

In recent responses, like the wildfires in Alberta and B.C., or springtime flooding in eastern Canada, all eligible households receive a specified amount through an EFT. Additional help is determined through one-on-one meetings with caseworkers to make sure the most vulnerable get help they needed.

Arianna Johnson, executive director of the Wood Buffalo Food Bank Association, lost her Abasands-area home during the massive wildfire near Fort McMurray in 2016. “I’m not sure that we would even still be in Fort McMurray,” she said. “On a personal level, we would be bankrupt by now if the Red Cross hadn’t been there.”

For many families and individuals, an EFT is an extremely convenient way to receive financial aid, but this is not the case for everyone. While advancing innovative technologies, the Canadian Red Cross is committed to helping the most vulnerable, and this includes finding alternate ways to get funds to those who might not have access to online banking.

In 2017, 67% of registrations were completed online during the Red Cross response to the B.C. wildfires. For this same response, 27 per cent of the registrations were completed by phone and 3 per cent were completed in person. Over 7,000 households relied on non-digital means of financial assistance.

In Esk’etemc First Nation, the 2017 B.C. wildfires impacted the community, but with limited cell and internet service available in the rural area, EFTs were not a practical solution. Red Cross teams visited the local Band office, where they were able to meet with residents, and issue aid through payment cards. By reaching the majority of those impacted by these disasters through EFTs, the Red Cross has additional resources to make sure responders can visit areas that need extra help accessing funds.



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## TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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Canadians view the local or provincial government, Red Cross and the media as the **three top trusted sources of information** for following a disaster or emergency.

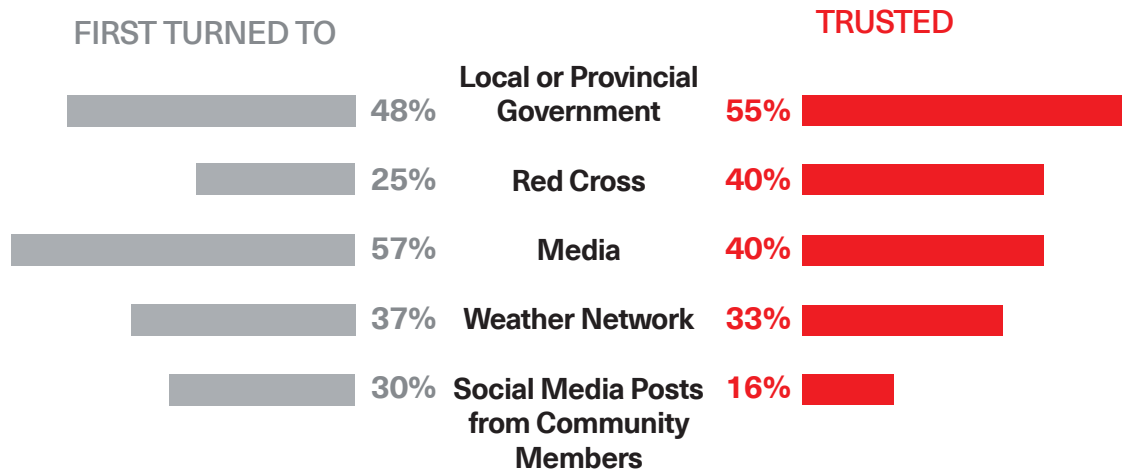
- **The Canadian Red Cross is a trusted source for information after a disaster**, with 40% of Canadians viewing the Canadian Red Cross as a trusted source for information after a disaster.
- 25% of Canadians would turn to the Red Cross as their first source of information following a disaster or emergency.

“ In 2017, obtaining reliable information in real time proved extraordinarily challenging for some evacuees. In the absence of timely and accurate information, some turned to social media for updates — only to be confronted by misinformation.”<sup>2</sup>

Survey of 2017 B.C. wildfires evacuees

Information sources following a disaster:

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<sup>2</sup> British Columbia Government, Addressing the New Normal: 21st Century Disaster Management in British Columbia. (2018)



## CASE STUDY: Trusted Sources of Information

Following a disaster or emergency, the Canadian Red Cross is a trusted source for information. Digital platforms make it easier than ever to reach a wide audience, but they also allow misinformation to spread quickly. It is vitally important to have accurate and up-to-date information available to share with the public as quickly as possible. We work alongside government and other agencies responding to a disaster to make sure the messages we're delivering are clear, accurate, and unified.

Members of the Canadian Red Cross communications team were embedded in the Regional Emergency Operations Centre in Fort McMurray, with representatives from the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, the Government of Alberta, Agriculture and Forestry, Insurance Bureau of Canada, and the RCMP. Together, we helped share information throughout the evacuation and as residents were able to re-enter the community. This group of partners went on to receive the Canadian Public Relations Society gold award for the Crisis or Issue Management Campaign of the year.

Jordan Redshaw, communications strategist for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, says that not only did information shared via social media help save lives during the 2016 wildfire evacuation of Fort McMurray, but it was essential to communicating with displaced residents across the country.



“ We worked closely with Canadian Red Cross and other partners to make sure that we were sharing the most accurate and up-to-date information with our community members, wherever they had evacuated to. Red Cross played a key role in helping to ensure that those messages reached the widest audience possible through their social channels.”



## CASE STUDY: 24/7 Online Support

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Social media mentions of Canadian Red Cross in Alberta went up by 6,000% during the Fort McMurray evacuation. Many of these queries were from people who were seeking immediate assistance through Facebook and Twitter. It quickly became clear that social media was going to play an important role in this – and future – disaster responses. Our digital team sprung into action, monitoring platforms 24 hours a day, and responding to thousands of comments, posts, and direct messages.

As social media and smartphones continue to change how we communicate, many people are more comfortable sending a text or a direct message instead of making a phone call when they need urgent information, or even emotional support. Our social media team works closely with caseworkers and disaster management staff to help connect people to the support they need.

Close monitoring of social media channels also helps us track common issues and concerns, which informs the content we are sharing and allows us to address misinformation. Facebook Live Q&As were one of the tools we used to help share information and answer questions in real time.

The Canadian Red Cross actively participated in Facebook groups that were created to support evacuees and others who had been impacted by the 2016 and 2017 wildfires. These groups were run by volunteer administrators, and our social team worked closely with them to share information and support evacuees.

With the support of digital volunteers across Canada, our social media team is prepared for future disasters, and continues to look for ways to use our platforms effectively to reach those who need assistance, including Facebook Crisis pages that will help us connect in the earliest moments of an event.



“When a disaster strikes, people who are impacted have a need for information, much like they need shelter, food and water,” said Janice Babineau, Senior Social Media Manager for the Canadian Red Cross. “We’ve found that people seek that information from social media because of the immediacy of that medium. Our job as the social media team at Red Cross is to ensure we’re providing as much up-to-date and reliable information as we can to people impacted by disasters, and to be as responsive as possible to their questions and concerns. This ongoing communication through social media continues in the weeks and months after a disaster strikes.”