CHAPTER 1

Community

New here? Ready, Set, Ready is a 10-minute starting point: an honest assessment, one gap closed for real, then a map for using the rest of this site. Once something's actually happened, Surviving picks up where this chapter leaves off, organized by chronology instead of category. Curious how Tier, Stage, and Phase relate? See the Glossary.

Why This Category Comes First

Every other chapter in this manual is organized around a household: its water, its food, its medical kit, its own four walls. This chapter comes first because that framing, while useful, hides something the research on real disasters says plainly: the people around you are not a nice-to-have layered on top of individual preparedness. In most disasters, at every phase from the first minutes to the final years of recovery, they're the single biggest factor in whether you make it through, and how well.

That's not a sentiment. It's a finding, repeated across six decades of disaster research. Daniel Aldrich's studies of four major disasters, the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, the 1995 Kobe earthquake, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina, found that real, functioning ties between neighbors predicted how fast a neighborhood recovered better than wealth, damage severity, or aid received. Eric Klinenberg's study of Chicago's 1995 heat wave found the same pattern in survival itself: comparing neighborhoods with nearly identical poverty and demographics, social isolation, not income, explained who lived and who died. And before professional responders can mobilize, ordinary people already have: after the 1979 Wichita Falls tornado, the vast majority of the more than 5,000 people rescued were pulled out by someone they didn't already know, not official responders. FEMA's own doctrine states plainly that individuals, families, and communities are the nation's most important first responders.

The Panic Myth

Popular culture assumes disasters bring out looting and panic. Six decades of disaster sociology research, starting with foundational work by Quarantelli and Dynes in the 1970s, says the opposite is the normal pattern: people cooperate, share, and rescue each other, and an elevated sense of mutual care after a disaster is real and repeatedly observed, not an exception. Plan for cooperation, because that's what actually happens, while still building the judgment the Security & Self-Defense chapter covers for the real, smaller minority of situations where it doesn't.

That cooperative baseline is also not permanent. It's strongest in the first days and weeks, the Heroic and Honeymoon phases the Security & Self-Defense chapter describes in detail, and research on extended emergencies finds it genuinely erodes as unmet need accumulates and outside aid and attention withdraw. That's not a reason to distrust your neighbors going in, the evidence above is still the right starting assumption, it's a reason to use the cooperative window while it's open rather than assuming it just continues indefinitely.

Every other chapter in this manual treats community as the advanced move you make once your own household has real capability. That ordering makes sense for skills, you can't teach water treatment before you've learned it yourself, but it's the wrong ordering for relationships. Aldrich's and Klinenberg's findings weren't about advanced, later-stage communities; they were about whether ordinary neighbors already knew each other before the disaster hit. That work has to happen early, because relationships take time to build and can't be assembled during the emergency itself the way a stockpile can be bought in an afternoon. Formalizing what you build here, charters, governance, real conflict process, is genuinely advanced work and isn't this manual's focus; the relationships themselves start now.

Tier 1: Short-to-Medium Term (Hours – 14 Days)

Goal: *Immediate: map who's around you and make first contact. Costs nothing and takes less time than a single supply run.*

Tier 1 here isn't really about a disruption's length the way it is in every other chapter; it's about how soon this work should start. The answer is now, alongside the two-week water and food floor, not after.

Skills to Build

- **Mapping Your Own Radius:** List the households within a five-minute walk, not everyone you'd consider a friend, everyone physically close enough to reach you or be reached by you fast. Note what you actually know about each one: skills, equipment, vulnerabilities, whether they're home during the day, whether anyone there has a medical dependency or a mobility limitation. Most people can fill in almost none of this for their own street, which is itself the finding worth sitting with.

- **First Contact:** Introduce yourself to your immediate neighbors this week if you haven't. Ask a real question: do they have a plan, do they know anyone else on the street, is there anything they'd need help with in an emergency. Exchange real contact information, not just a friendly wave; a phone number that still works if cell towers are down is worth more than a name you vaguely recognize.

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Finding Your Local Prep Community

Tech & Equipment

- **Household Contact Card:** A simple printed card with your household's name, phone number, and one line about what you could offer or might need. Costs a few cents to print, and works when a phone doesn't.

Materials & Supplies

Item	Quantity / Spec	Notes
Printed neighbor-contact list	One page, updated as you learn more	No app or account required; a paper list still works when the network doesn't.

Quick Checklist

- [ ] Households within a five-minute walk mapped, with at least one real fact known about each
- [ ] Existing informal community hubs, the person who already organizes things, identified
- [ ] Real contact information exchanged with immediate neighbors, not just a friendly wave

- [ ] Practiced: introduced yourself to at least one neighbor you didn't already know this week

Tier 2: Extended (2 Weeks – 3 Months)

Goal: *Build real ties, bonding, bridging, and linking, before you need them.*

Knowing who's around you isn't the same as having a real relationship with them. Social capital researchers distinguish three kinds, and a resilient household needs some of each.

Skills to Build

- **Bonding Ties:** Close ties to people similar to you: immediate neighbors, family. Built with a genuine conversation, not just a wave; ask what they'd need help with, and say what you'd need help with. Bonding ties are what gets you physically rescued in the first hour.
- **Bridging Ties:** Ties across difference: other parts of the neighborhood, other demographics, other institutions. Built by showing up to something outside your usual circle, a different church, a different civic group, a different part of the neighborhood. Bridging ties are what keeps a recovery from splitting along existing social fault lines.
- **Linking Ties:** Ties to institutions and authority: local government, emergency management, utilities. Built by attending one city council or county emergency management meeting, and knowing your ward or precinct's actual representative by name. Linking ties are what gets your neighborhood's actual needs heard by the people allocating aid.
- **The Mutual-Expectations Conversation:** Have one honest conversation with a neighbor about mutual expectations: would you check on each other, would you share water if one household ran out and the other hadn't. This costs nothing and surfaces most misunderstandings before they matter.

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Quick Checklist

- [ ] At least one bonding conversation had with an immediate neighbor
- [ ] At least one bridging tie built outside your usual social circle
- [ ] At least one linking tie built to local government or emergency management
- [ ] At least one honest conversation had about mutual expectations during an emergency
- [ ] Practiced: attended one event outside your usual circle, a different group, a different part of the neighborhood

Tier 3: Permanent (Indefinite)

Goal: *Maintain ties as an ongoing practice, and become a known, trusted contact within the neighborhood's existing structure.*

Relationships need real maintenance, not a one-time initial contact. People move, circumstances change, and a contact list from a year ago stops meaning much, the same way a stored-food fill date does.

Skills to Build

- **Ongoing Maintenance:** Revisit your neighbor map and contact list every few months, not once. Treat relationship-building as a standing practice the same way you'd treat a water-rotation schedule, not a task you finish and check off. This matters more than it sounds: in an extended emergency, cooperation genuinely declines once the Honeymoon phase ends, not because people change but because unmet need accumulates and outside support withdraws. A neighborhood watch or mutual-aid arrangement that worked once doesn't hold its shape automatically; check it rather than assume it.
- **Joining Existing Structure:** Join one thing you haven't yet: a neighborhood association, a local emergency-preparedness class, or a place of worship's existing mutual-aid network if one exists. Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training, covered in the Medical Care chapter, is free in most cities and is itself a real way to meet other prepared neighbors.
- **Becoming a Known Contact:** Find out who already has relevant skills or equipment on your street or block, a nurse, a contractor, someone with a generator, someone with a truck. You are not trying to build a formal roster yet, just to know it exists, and to be someone others would think to ask in turn.

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Quick Checklist

- [ ] Relationship-building treated as an ongoing practice, revisited every few months, not a one-time task
- [ ] Joined at least one existing group or class: CERT or equivalent, a neighborhood association, or a mutual-aid network
- [ ] Skills and equipment known on your street or block, not just names
- [ ] Practiced: reconnected with at least one neighbor relationship that had gone quiet

Tier 4: Sustainable Community

Goal: *Community-scale connection: informal hubs, formal infrastructure links, and teaching the same practice to others.*

In Tier 3, community connection lives in whatever relationships one household has built. Tier 4 is about the neighborhood's own capability to connect: informal hubs, formal infrastructure, and enough people who know how to do this that it doesn't depend on any one person. Kept light here on purpose: formal governance, written charters, and real conflict process are genuinely advanced work beyond what this chapter covers.

Start with who's actually already doing this, not a vague sense that the neighborhood needs more structure: most blocks already have one or two informal hubs, and finding them is faster than building a role from nothing. Ask concretely how many households are realistically reachable from where you are, and whether nearby formal infrastructure, a congregation, a school, a civic group, already has a convening structure worth connecting to rather than duplicating.

Skills to Build

- **Identifying and Becoming Hubs:** Identify the two or three people most likely to already be a hub, the person who already organizes the block party, runs the HOA, or just knows everyone; real social capital already exists informally in almost every neighborhood, and finding who

already holds it is faster than building it from nothing. Over time, become one of those people yourself.

- **Connecting to Formal Infrastructure:** Note formal community infrastructure nearby: a place of worship, a community center, a school, a local chapter of a civic or fraternal organization. These reduce mortality in real disaster research, and they usually already have a convening structure you don't have to build yourself.
- **Teaching the Practice:** Teach this chapter's practice, mapping a radius, starting a real conversation, maintaining a tie, to someone else. A neighborhood where only one household knows how to do this is one household away from losing the capability entirely.

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Materials & Supplies

Item	Quantity / Spec	Notes
Neighborhood contact roster	Shared, kept current by more than one person	The Tier 1 household card, extended to cover a whole block or neighborhood; access rules agreed in advance with whoever helps maintain it.

Quick Checklist

- [ ] Existing informal community hubs identified, or you've become one yourself
- [ ] Nearby formal community infrastructure identified and at least one real connection made
- [ ] Taught this chapter's practice to at least one other person
- [ ] Practiced: helped organize or took part in one neighborhood-wide gathering or drill

At a Glance: Community Across All Tiers

A single-page reference for planning purposes. This does not replace the detailed guidance above; use it to see how the plan scales, not as a standalone checklist.

Tier	Mode	Duration	Community Plan
Tier 1	Mapping	Hours – 14 days	Immediate neighbors mapped, first contact made
Tier 2	Building	2 weeks – 3 months	Bonding, bridging, and linking ties actively built
Tier 3	Maintaining	Indefinite	Ties maintained as ongoing practice, joined existing structure
Tier 4	Teaching	Sustainable community	Hubs identified, formal infrastructure connected, practice taught to others