

NTED's Course Review Process

Building More Effective Training for Our Nation's First Responders

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Preparedness Directorate (NPD) National Training and Education Division's (NTED) mission is to provide first responders with high-quality training that enhances their skills to prevent, protect, respond to, and recover from human-made and natural catastrophic events. NTED's course review process is a cost-effective and efficient method of ensuring the quality of federally funded training throughout the development lifecycle through a series of comprehensive, objective reviews, ensuring compliance with relevant federal laws, regulations, policies, doctrine, and NTED quality standards. NTED certified training courses directly support FEMA's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, *"Helping People. Together."* and through the following strategic goals 1) Build a Culture of Preparedness; 2) Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters; and 3) Reduce the Complexity of FEMA.

The first strategic goal, "Build a Culture of Preparedness," is supported by four objectives, of which Objective 1.3 "Help People Prepare for Disasters" is particularly relevant to training. Its supporting performance measure looks to ensure that "a total of 22,000 organizations will receive training from FEMA and its partners, with 65% reporting they have taken action with disaster continuity planning." The NTED course review process advances this strategic goal, objective, and measure by ensuring that trainings offered by FEMA are accurate, reliable, comprehensive, and actionable.

The NTED course review process advances FEMA's vision of a prepared and resilient nation.

NTED's course review process provides review and guidance throughout the course design, development, and delivery lifecycle, from initial design and certification

through triennial recertification. The framework provides for the objective assessment of courses at key points in their lifecycle. Reviews are aligned with the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model of instructional systems design. Reviews ensure that courses are accurate, complete, appropriately formatted and branded, instructionally effective, remain accurate and current as doctrine changes, and new best practices and lessons learned are identified. The result is continual improvement, increased efficiency, and cost effectiveness throughout development by providing early feedback, facilitating early corrections, and reducing costly rework and revision. Evaluation standards include elements such as the alignment of the course's purpose to the learning objectives and content, the effective use of exercises and activities, and the objectivity, clarity, and accuracy of the content. Standards are tailored to the mode of the course delivery to ensure the validity and

relevance of the evaluation. This iterative process allows for critical analysis of each course throughout its lifecycle.

NTED collaborates with numerous training partners to develop and deliver a wide range of emergency preparedness courses. NTED uses the course evaluation process described here to maximize coordination and cooperation between NTED and all training partners, and to realize increased efficiencies and efficacy in the course design, development, delivery, and evaluation process. An NTED Program Manager (PM) is assigned to each training partner and has oversight for the specific courses developed by that training partner. The NTED PM guides the course through the review process, tailoring the timing, type, and scope of the various reviews to be conducted. Full participation by the training partner is required and is critical to the success of the review process. Reviews are based on existing course review standards and requirements, the development stage of the course, any unique course characteristics, and in consideration of the requests and recommendations of the training partner. Some elements of the process are required for all courses, others are conducted as deemed necessary by the NTED PM. The course review methodology utilized is determined by the stage of course development. For example, the initial review is the Course Design Document (CDD) Review, as the name implies, only the CDD is evaluated. As the development of the course continues, subsequent reviews require evaluation of the draft course content. At times, up to three pilots are conducted. As the course development nears completion, a FEMA pilot is conducted with participation from the NTED PM, independent SMEs, FEMA SMEs, if required, and the training partner's development team. Finally, the course must pass the NTED ISD review and 508 review prior to official NTED certification.

The process utilizes a documented, repeatable framework that incorporates quality management elements throughout the multiple reviews required, including:

- Course Design Document (CDD) Review – an initial evaluation of the CDD to ensure that initial analysis and design has been conducted in accordance with NTED standards.
- Subject Matter Expert (SME) Review – an evaluation of curricula conducted by independent SMEs to ensure that course content is accurate, appropriate, relevant, and meets current standards.
 - Course Review Board (CRB) – as requested by NTED PMs, a facilitated discussion of open questions identified during the SME Review and/or National Incident Management System (NIMS) review to build consensus regarding a resolution to identified issues.
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) Review – a review to ensure that course content is accurate, appropriate, current, relevant, and consistent with NIMS, as applicable.
- NTED Instructional Systems Design (ISD) Review – an assessment of course materials to ensure principles of instructional design and adult learning theory have been

incorporated into the course and that learning objectives are measurable, achievable, and developed in accordance with current standards.

- Section 508 Review – a review to verify that all course content meets current accessibility standards.
- Triennial Review and Recertification – Review conducted every three years by independent SMEs to verify that course content remains accurate, current, and relevant.

Courses are reviewed by NTED staff, federal SMEs, and a cadre of independent external SMEs selected specifically for each course. Where necessary, NTED partners with a variety of federal agencies to access federal SMEs with the specialized expertise to evaluate specific courses. Many reviews involve evaluation of course materials only, and are referred to as Desk Reviews, as they can be completed at the reviewer's desk. Other reviews are conducted as the course is being delivered. Reviewers are selected based on the type of review and the course content. NTED utilizes an extensive cadre of over 400 SMEs with a broad range of experience and expertise across the continuum of homeland security disciplines, allowing for the meaningful evaluation of each course by reviewers with the knowledge, skills, and experience directly aligned to the course training scope and objectives. The number of reviewers assigned to review each course is determined by NTED policy, the stage of course development, and any unique characteristics of the individual course. This method of reviewer selection allows for a tailored approach for the course review.

The following principles guide the NTED course review process:

- The use of objective standards, aligned with rigorous design, development, and delivery requirements ensures courses are accurate, complete, unbiased, and instructionally effective.
- Close coordination with internal and external partners and stakeholders, catalyzes cooperation, facilitates understanding, and encourages collaboration throughout course development and delivery. Timely feedback during analysis, design, development, and evaluation ensures that feedback can be fully integrated.
- Utilization of internal and external SMEs to evaluate courses, using clear and transparent guidelines, contribute to meaningful reviews and actionable feedback. Standards are shared in advance of the review.
- Compliance with appropriate legal doctrine and grant award terms and conditions ensure that training is consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and is accessible to all.
- The evaluation standards provide a shared understanding of what the course evaluation consists of but also serves as a roadmap for internal evaluation as courses are being developed.

Training partner agreements require that curricula developed is consistent with all national policy and doctrine. As these policies and doctrine are updated, training partners must plan for and make any needed course modifications. NTED's course review process ensures that each course meets these requirements. Courses are specifically reviewed for their consistency with the concepts, terms, and requirements of the NIMS. Other doctrine specified in the training partner agreements include: National Preparedness Goal, National Preparedness System, National Planning Frameworks, and where possible, the National Preparedness Reports. Training partners must develop and implement standards and processes to ensure that their instructors have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to ensure quality delivery and that their skills are continually monitored and maintained. The NTED process provides for certified Trusted Tester review of all electronic course content to ensure that it is accessible for all users in compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. NTED collaborates with the DHS Office of Accessible Systems & Technology (OAST) to ensure that the NTED process for 508 reviews is aligned with DHS processes and procedures. A Compliance Determination Form (CDF) is provided when the Trusted Tester review determines that the course content has been made accessible. Training partners submit a CDF and a letter documenting compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 with the final course materials. These comprehensive reviews provide NTED with the assurance that courses are accurate, complete, and instructionally effective at release, remain accurate and current, and lessons learned are incorporated in a timely manner.

This process conforms with the Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS) prescribed by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and Comptroller General of the United States. Known as the "Yellow Book," these standards expressly apply to performance audits of government programs. Rigorous adherence to these standards ensures that NTED course reviews are conducted with the required competence, integrity, objectivity, and independence to strengthen accountability and help improve FEMA training operations and services. Consistent, systematic application of this evaluation framework also supports compliance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010 by helping to measure progress toward FEMA's strategic and training goals providing a competent, reliable, and independent basis for comparing program results with established performance goals. To allow for the necessary degree of rigor and objectivity, reviews are conducted by NTED personnel responsible for oversight as well as independent SMEs.

The NTED Course Review Process Meets Accepted Auditing Standards

Objectivity	SME course reviews are conducted by evaluators who are neutral, detached, fair, and impartial; their findings and conclusions are based on established standards, hard facts, concrete evidence, and credible authority. Standardized evaluation forms are utilized further support objectivity in the review process.
Independence	NTED course evaluators are independent, and safeguards ensure they are free from relationships and associations that could create an appearance of susceptibility to influences that compromise professional judgment or impair objectivity.
Competence	NTED maintains access to a cadre of over 400 course evaluators ensuring that each course is reviewed by SMEs possessing specialized knowledge, skills, and experience directly aligned with the course content.
Transparency	Course evaluation standards and evaluation criteria are published and disseminated to training partners in advance of course reviews.
Integrity	NTED course evaluators have a demonstrated record of serving the public interest, honoring the public trust, and delivering reviews that are fact-based, constructive, nonpartisan, and nonideological.

Completed evaluation forms include actionable, value-added recommendations from the reviewing SME(s) regarding options to effectively address any identified issues and better meet the course evaluation standard. These forms are submitted to the cognizant NTED PM and training partner for review and remediation. The NTED PM and the training partner collaborate to determine how to best incorporate any feedback and recommendations. Issues that are disputed and cannot be readily resolved through discussions may be addressed through a CRB. As previously detailed, a CRB is convened when deemed necessary by the NTED PM, to build consensus and settle challenged review findings Training partner participation is mandatory.

As FEMA actively works toward improving grant management and the outcomes attained, this course review process ensures the effective use of federal resources, and is also endorsed by State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial (SLTT) partners for its effectiveness in meeting the training needs of their first responder communities. NTED's course review process advances FEMA's vision of a prepared and resilient nation through its programs and partnerships by ensuring world class training for the nation's SLTT first responders, emergency managers, and the whole community.