

## How tribes navigate emergency response aid to citizens and what you can do to prepare

A guide for Native communities and tribal leaders to stay informed, updated, and prepared for disasters.

By Shaun Griswold

Native Americans are increasingly responsible for emergency management systems when a natural disaster hits a tribal community.

Tribes can [issue](#) emergency declarations requests to open up help from regional and federal partners, typically 24 hours after the event. When help is authorized to arrive, emergency management systems tend to move slowly and may be staffed with volunteers juggling multiple roles in a new command to get aid directly to people. To help you prepare and stay safe, Grist has put together a toolkit to outline what Native people and their tribal governments should do to receive aid when natural disasters hit.

### How to find accurate information

Many people find out about disasters in their area via social media. But it's important to make sure the information you're receiving is correct. Below is a list of reliable sources to check for emergency alerts, updates, and more.

**Your local emergency manager:** This year, New Mexico and Arizona joined three other states (California, Colorado, and Washington) to create laws that establish “Feather Alerts” — public safety operations that many consider Native versions of AMBER alerts. This requires multiple jurisdictions to work together with preparedness in mind for when large-scale emergencies need to alert every cell phone in a region. Call a local nonemergency line and ask if your tribe has an emergency management department that operates police, fire, or hospital services. A simple call or visit to any tribal administration office can also help confirm if this is the case. Many tribal nations [apply for federal or state grants](#) in collaboration with other local governments.

From there, ask if you can sign up for any text alerts, emails, or an automated phone call service. For example, [Navajo Nation](#) has a text service: Text “NavajoNation” to 888-777. (These alerts can also be useful to learn about road closures, ceremonial events, and weather outside of a disaster.)

Some alerts go to specific ZIP codes, or to people who receive tribal benefits like housing or senior services. Schools opt-in parents for campus alerts at both tribally run schools and campuses run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (which can be another resource to get alerts). Emergency managers are responsible for communicating with the public about disasters, managing rescue and response efforts, and coordinating among different agencies. They usually have an SMS-based emergency alert system, so sign up for those texts now. Many emergency management agencies are active on Facebook, so check there for updates, like livestreamed press conferences that give operational status updates and share resources for shelter and other aid.

If you're having trouble finding your local department, [you can search](#) for your state or territory. We also suggest typing your city or county name followed by "emergency management" into Google. In larger cities, it's often a separate agency; in smaller communities, fire chiefs or sheriff's offices may manage emergency response and alerts.

**National Weather Service:** This agency, also called NWS, is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, and offers information and updates on everything from wildfires to hurricanes to air quality. You can enter your ZIP code on [weather.gov](https://www.weather.gov) and customize your homepage to get the most updated weather information and [receive alerts](#) for a variety of weather conditions. The NWS also has regional and local branches where you can [sign up for SMS alerts](#). [Local alerts in multiple languages](#) are available in some areas.

If you're in a rural area or somewhere that isn't highlighted on the agency's maps, keep an eye out for local alerts and evacuation orders. NWS may not have as much information ahead of time in these areas because there often aren't as many weather-monitoring stations.

**READ MORE:** [How to get reliable information before and during a disaster](#)

**Local news:** The local television news and social media accounts from verified news sources will have live updates during and after a disaster. Meteorologists on your local news station use NWS weather data. Follow your local newspaper and television station on Facebook or other social media, or check their websites regularly. If you don't have cable, these stations often livestream online for free during severe weather.

**Weather stations and apps:** The Weather Channel, Accuweather, Apple Weather, and Google, which all rely on NWS weather data, will have information on major storms and other extreme weather events. That may not be the case for smaller-scale weather events, and you shouldn't rely on these apps to tell you if you need to evacuate or move to higher ground. Instead, check your local news broadcast on television or radio.

READ MORE: [What disasters are and how they're officially declared](#)

Tribes with police or fire agencies must have emergency management plans in place and are another resource for information on a tribe's response plan. Disasters often bring first responders from elsewhere; checking in with the ones who serve the community are going to be the most useful on-the-ground resource for families with limited access to transportation or technology like the internet or cell phones.

## Preparing for a disaster

As you prepare for a disaster, it's important to have an emergency kit ready in case you lose power or need to leave your home. These can often be expensive to create, so contact your local disaster aid organizations, houses of worship, tribal leaders, or charities to see if there are free or affordable kits available — or buy one or two items every time you're at the grocery store.

Here are some of the most important things to have in your kit. You can read more details about how to prepare safely [here](#).

- Water (1 gallon per person per day for several days)
- Food (at least a several-day supply of nonperishable food) and a can opener
- Medicines and documentation of your medical needs
- Identification and proof of residency documents (see a more detailed list [here](#))
- A flashlight
- A battery-powered or hand-crank radio
- Backup batteries
- Blanket and sleeping bag
- Change of clothes and closed-toed shoes
- First-aid kit (the [Red Cross has a list](#) of what to include)
- N95 masks, hand sanitizer, and trash bags
- If you have babies or children: diapers, wipes, and food or formula
- If you have pets: food, collar, leash, and any medicines needed

READ MORE: [How to stay safe if you're feeling exhausted or ill](#)

## How disaster response works for tribes

When a major disaster hits, your tribal government will communicate with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to apply for immediate aid as well as support for services that seek to mitigate future disasters. Here's how that works:

There is a [specific process](#) cities, states, and tribal governments must navigate in order for residents to receive FEMA aid. FEMA has 10 regions that support tribes during disaster response. If your tribal nation's lands cross multiple FEMA regions, identify which FEMA region the headquarters is located to determine whom to contact. [Here is a map with a list of contacts.](#)

FEMA [updated its tribal policy in 2020](#), with the following guidance for its employees and contractors: Maintain tribal government relationships, consider unique community circumstances, and build tribal capacity through educational and technical assistance programs. It was updated again in December 2024 after FEMA held nine listening and consultation sessions with 118 tribal nations in all 10 regions the agency oversees.

In 2025, FEMA changed that policy to empower “tribal nations’ sovereignty and access to federal assistance, thereby enhancing their response and recovery efforts and improving community and tribal community members’ outcomes.”

Here are other recent changes to the [FEMA Tribal Policy](#):

- The policy gives power to tribes to define “tribal community member” when offering individual assistance to ensure “their full community is served.” This could reduce barriers for help to people not enrolled in the tribe to receive federal emergency funds for food, shelter, and reimbursements.
- Rebuilding tribal homes after a disaster also changed: When public assistance is approved, the federal government will automatically recommend that it takes on 98 percent of the cost when the total reaches \$200,000. This means tribes could pay less for approved recovery and, as FEMA summarized from its tribal listening sessions, “provide more certainty for non-federal cost shares to tribal nations.”

READ MORE: [How to navigate the FEMA aid process](#)

## **State-recognized tribes**

Tribes that are not federally recognized may encounter more red tape when trying to access government aid because they don't have a direct relationship with FEMA. For example, the Grand Caillou/Dulac Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw struggled to get aid after Hurricane Ida in 2021.

According to a June 2020 FEMA policy, state-recognized tribes should be treated as local governments, rather than tribal governments with a nation-to-nation relationship with the federal government. This way, they can access both individual assistance if there is a major disaster declaration in their state, as well as public assistance for infrastructure repair.

## **Tribal and state collaboration**

Partnerships between local tribes and states or cities they border are essential for how Native nations and people move disaster aid and recovery. For example, a [deadly Oklahoma wildfire](#) in

March gave some insight into how FEMA's local partnerships work in a state with prominent tribal jurisdictional maps and people who live both in and outside the communities.

Last year, Oklahoma [created rules](#) for its State Assistance Dedicated for Disaster-Impacted Local Economies Revolving Fund, which takes federal disaster money, approves requests for aid, and pays Oklahomans directly with loans for long-term recovery projects.

There is a growing number of coalitions focused on relationships among tribes to promote a more collaborative approach. For example, Oklahoma has had the [Inter-Tribal Emergency Management Coalition](#) since 2004 and meets regularly to discuss emergency preparedness.

READ MORE: [How to find housing and rebuild your home after a disaster](#)

## **Finding shelter and staying safe**

Emergency shelters can be set up in established tribal spaces, like school gymnasiums, powwow grounds, and hospitals. Tribal senior services and schools have the most up-to-date records of people and organizations in the community and are tapped by emergency management teams for welfare checks and transportation needs. Hospital services can also be key to prescriptions and other medical needs.

In the same way that cousins and relatives are expected to offer a home to rest, tribal citizens now have the expectation for their tribal government to give full immediate aid and help in recovery.

### **FEMA recovery centers**

FEMA [disaster recovery centers](#) provide information about the agency's programs as well as other state and local resources, and are opened in impacted areas in the days and weeks following a federally declared disaster. FEMA representatives can help navigate the aid application process or direct you to nonprofits, shelters, or state and local resources. [Go to this website](#) to locate one in your area, or text DRC and a ZIP code to 43362.

### **Community organizations and nonprofits**

Here are some organizations focused on emergency management for Indigenous communities:

- [Partnership with Native Americans](#) has a disaster relief service and fund that helps displaced people, sets up supplies for shelters, and more. They coordinate with local groups as well as the Red Cross.
- Northern Plains Reservation Aid, Southwest Reservation Aid, Native American Aid, Navajo Relief Fund, Sioux Nation Relief Fund, and Southwest Indian Relief Council are

[groups that offer direct aid to the regions they can serve](#). They can also be a direct resource for state-recognized tribes.

READ MORE: [How to access food before, during, and after a disaster](#)

## More resources

Here are a few organizations that have newsletters, workshops, and other resources for tribal communities across the country.

- The [Tribal Emergency Management Association](#), or iTEMA, is a “national association created for Indian Country, by Indian Country” that promotes a collaborative approach to disasters that impact tribal communities. They offer workshops and resources for tribal leaders, emergency managers, and other interested people.
- [Hazard Mitigation Planning](#) through FEMA is essential. How to keep up with federal grant deadlines and policy directives can be navigated by the Pacific Northwest Tribal Climate Change Project: The [online resource](#) hosted by the University of Oregon is an example of tribal regional planning, with foundational support from the Nespelem Tribe in northern Washington.
- The [Regional Tribal Emergency Management Summit](#) in May brought direct sources to South Dakota on what to expect in the next year. Access to presentations, other resources, and a list of other events is available on their site.
- [The Red Guide to Recovery](#) is another example of tribes networking with outside community groups in California. The National Tribal Emergency Management Council is listed as a partner.

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This is part of the [Disaster 101 toolkit](#), Grist’s comprehensive guide to extreme weather preparation, response, and recovery.

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