

Know your rights as an immigrant before, during, and after disasters

Here are trusted, reliable resources to use during extreme weather or natural disasters for non-English speakers and undocumented immigrants.

By Victoria Bouloubasis

Disasters can feel overwhelming if you're an immigrant, whether it's because of your citizenship status, language barriers, or confusion around your rights. It's important to remember that trusted community networks exist, along with other helpful resources. This guide offers up-to-date information on some of those resources, as well as examples of community organizing and policy work that have made it easier for immigrants to find help. It also includes best practices for navigating disaster relief and recovery at a time when there is a [heightened risk of deportation](#) for certain immigrants. This information is fact-checked and will be updated periodically as laws, practices, and resources change.

Finding reliable information

Vetted federal, state, and community resources can help you find accurate, trustworthy information in the event of a disaster.

Dial 211

When you [dial 211](#), you will be referred to the Federal Communications Commission's free community services directory. This can be a key step in accessing public services. It works similar to 911, where an operator will answer the call and assist you in finding what you need, including services for non-English speakers.

Independent news outlets

News publications that serve non-English speaking individuals often provide emergency resource guides that don't exist in traditional media. Look for an outlet published in your language in your area. Here are some examples:

- El Tímpano in California offers [an emergency resource guide in Spanish](#).
- To prepare for this year's hurricane season, Enlace Latino NC [published an article in Spanish](#) on how to obtain free National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, radios through the city of Raleigh, North Carolina. Radio is a primary means of

communicating emergency alerts and weather information in the U.S. and can be especially useful during power outages.

Grist published a guide in [Spanish](#) and [Haitian Creole](#) for Florida farmworkers during the 2024 hurricane season.

Immigrant rights organizations

Across the country, immigrant rights organizations offer an array of services and tips that can be helpful in disaster situations. These are trusted groups who offer support and advocate for change year-round, not just during disasters. Searching online for local organizations that focus specifically on immigrant and labor issues — by typing in the name of your state and the phrases “immigrant rights” or “worker rights” — is a great way to begin looking for support. The tools highlighted below can also inspire other search terms for your own state, like “disaster preparedness toolkit in Spanish,” for example.

- In North Carolina, the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry released a video series in Spanish to help immigrant communities and their families prepare for disasters and recuperate in the aftermath. This video [explaining](#) how emergency alerts work is applicable to any U.S. state.
- In Oregon, the farmworker union Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, or PCUN, made [a disaster preparedness toolkit](#) in Spanish available for free on Google Drive.
- You can get involved in spreading the word throughout your own community with the help of available, trusted resources. PCUN also offers [free social media graphics](#) about the dangers of heat stress and what to do to stay safe at home and on the job.

Many of these organizations also offer legal refreshers for immigrants to understand their rights, which can be impacted by the presence of federal agents at disaster sites. You can read more about that below, under “What to do if you encounter Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE” and “Best practices for staying safe.”

Government services in your language

Federal civil rights law requires [any entity receiving federal funding](#) — including virtually all state and local agencies — to provide language access to individuals with limited proficiency in English. And in recent years, an increasing number of local and state government agencies have amped up their language access policies as a result of organizing among community members and immigrant organizations.

In 2023, wildfires spread through the town of Lahaina on the island of Maui, Hawai‘i. In the immediate aftermath, the 30 percent of Lahaina residents with limited proficiency in English had trouble accessing emergency information. Liza Ryan-Gill, the executive director of the Hawai‘i Coalition for Immigrant Rights, spent two days organizing calls with at least 80 community advocates to figure out how to get information to immigrant communities who needed it — in languages they could understand. In 2024, after advocates organized for federal funds to be

allocated to local emergency management for language access, Hawai'i passed [HB 2107](#) and hired a limited English proficiency access coordinator for the state's emergency management department. Now all emergency resources in the state are translated into at least seven languages.

Other states have taken similar steps: In [Michigan](#), a 2023 law requires translation and interpretation services for languages spoken by individuals with limited English proficiency who comprise at least 3 percent of the population, or 500 individuals, in the region served by a given state agency. [New York](#) updated its language access policy in 2022 to cover the 12 most common non-English languages spoken by state residents with limited English proficiency.

While most cities and states do not require agencies to proactively translate documents and resources into specific languages, it is worth checking with your local government and emergency management agencies. If they don't already provide information in the language you speak, you can request it.

Emergency management agencies: Your city or county has an emergency management department, which is part of the local government. Emergency managers are responsible for communicating with the public about disasters, managing rescue and response efforts, and coordinating with other agencies. They usually have an SMS-based emergency alert system, so sign up for those texts now. Some cities have multiple languages available, but most emergency alerts are only in English. Many emergency management agencies are active on Facebook, so check there for updates as well.

If you're having trouble finding your local department, Grist suggests typing your city or county name followed by "emergency management" into Google. You can also [search for your state or territory's emergency management department](#), which serves a similar function for a larger jurisdiction. Every website looks different, but many of them include translation options at the top or bottom of every page. You can also use Google Translate, or another browser-based automatic language detection program, to automatically translate any webpage.

National Weather Service: This agency, often called NWS, offers information and updates on everything from wildfires to hurricanes to air quality. You can enter your zip code on [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 sends out localized emergency weather alerts to people's cell phones via wireless networks, to television and radio stations, and to NOAA Weather Radio, which can receive NWS broadcasts. (Make sure you've opted into receiving emergency alerts in your phone settings.) Some local NWS offices automatically translate [local alerts into multiple languages](#) — including Chinese, Vietnamese, French, Samoan, and Spanish — in real time.

READ MORE: [How to prepare for a disaster](#)

How federal disaster aid works

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, is the federal government's main disaster response agency. It is housed under the Department of Homeland Security, or DHS. Often, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, which is also under DHS, is enlisted to help after a disaster. In 2021, the Biden administration [issued guidance](#) designating places where disaster or emergency response and relief are provided as “protected areas” where immigration agents should not engage in enforcement actions. However, in January, the Trump administration [rescinded that policy](#).

Still, experts and immigrant advocates on a national level emphasize that FEMA offers non-financial aid to anyone regardless of immigration status. This includes shelter, emergency supplies, counseling, and other resources. In order to apply for financial aid, someone in your family must be a U.S. citizen; this could be a child. A household should only apply for financial aid once per disaster, according to FEMA guidance. If more than one family member submits an application, it will cause delays in the process.

“The reassurance right now is that nothing has changed in the field,” said Ahmed Gaya, director of the Climate Justice Collaborative at the National Partnership for New Americans, a coalition of 82 state and local immigrant and refugee organizations.

He added that “our communities’ trust in the federal government and trust in FEMA and DHS is at a historic low,” but that the law has not changed and that undocumented folks are still eligible for immediate emergency relief. “There’s a real, credible fear that there is a shift in leadership at DHS, in administration and in the rhetoric. But legal rights remain the same currently.”

As of June 2025, Gaya said, “We have not had reports from the field of FEMA's practices and policies deviating dramatically from how they have typically gone in regards to dealing with mixed status and undocumented communities.”

READ MORE: [How the agencies and officials involved in emergency response work](#)

What to do if you encounter Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE

“You probably wouldn’t see ICE officers at disaster shelters requesting documents, but we can’t predict how ICE will behave,” says Rich Stolz, a colleague of Gaya who is also a Senior Fellow with Just Solutions, focusing on the intersection of climate justice and immigrant rights strategy and organizing. “The challenge for advocates and emergency groups is making sure that people can make informed decisions. The concern is that people will be under even more stress in a disaster context, and they may forget their rights.”

It can be helpful to have a red card, or *tarjeta roja*, with you to show to ICE agents in the event of questioning. These cards outline your rights — like the right to remain silent and to talk to a lawyer — and anyone [can order them online](#). They are available through the National Immigration Law Center in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

There are several “know your rights” guides for immigrants that apply in all situations, not just disasters:

- The National Immigration Law Center provides a [Know Your Rights guide](#) recommended by legal experts. It is available in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Spanish.
- The National Immigrant Justice Center offers [a guide](#) available in Spanish, Haitian Creole, French, and English that includes laws to know, sample warrants, and helplines.
- The National Day Laborer Organizing Network and the National TPS Alliance (an organization for people with temporary protected status) put together an illustrated guide to your rights in [English](#) and [Spanish](#). On page 2, you can find step-by-step instructions on what to do if ICE stops you on the street or in a public space.

Best practices for staying safe

Accessing emergency shelter and supplies

You shouldn't need identification to receive emergency supplies or stay at most emergency shelters, but you may be asked to provide some. Identification may include a photo or non-photo ID; it does not necessarily mean you need to supply a driver's license, passport, or social security number. Some organizations offer community IDs for those who do not qualify for a state-issued ID. These may not be accepted depending on the county or location.

The Red Cross, which operates shelters after major disasters, says it [does not ask for any documentation](#) of legal status when providing aid.

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

Going to a shelter or government-run site can be intimidating. Here are some other tips gathered from immigrant rights organizations:

- **Use the buddy system:** There is safety in numbers. Go with multiple people to feel more confident in getting the help you need.
- **Find an English speaker:** Someone who speaks English may be able to help you get services if you are worried about language barriers.

- **Request language interpretation:** When talking to police, firefighters, or hospital workers, you have a legal right to an interpreter. Other agencies and institutions may have access to interpreters and translators as well.
- **Contact an advocacy organization:** Farmworker and immigrant advocacy organizations may be able to help you get the supplies and food you need at a safe space.
- **Talk to your faith community:** Speak with your local pastor, members of your place of worship, or someone else you trust about your options.

Support for disaster workers

If you are an immigrant disaster worker, day laborer, or second responder, you have rights and are legally protected by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA. Day labor worker centers and labor unions are excellent resources if you have any questions regarding safety on the job. The Resilience Force put together easy-to-read illustrated guides in [Spanish](#) and [English](#) for workers specifically working in disaster recovery.

How to advocate for better resources

Each disaster has ripple effects. That's why organizations that were not built to deal with disaster relief or response are often taking on that responsibility. "All of us need to figure that out," said Marisol Jimenez, founder of Tepeyac Consulting, a business based in Asheville, North Carolina, for community organizers around the country. "We're not disaster organizations, but how do we integrate this into all of our work?"

Here are some of the resources being created to help communities organize for change:

- Stolz, Gaya, and their Just Solutions colleagues representing Organizing Resilience, National Partnership for New Americans, National Immigration Law Center, and other groups plan to release a resource guide on disaster response as it relates to the Trump administration's policies for ICE. A similar [rapid response kit](#) was published in 2022.
- Researcher Melissa Villarreal at the Natural Hazards Center in Colorado put together [an annotated bibliography](#) of academic articles, government reports, and news reports related to emergencies and language access. You can use these examples when advocating for policy change where you live.

Disasters cause communities to spring into action out of necessity, which can result in positive pressure on local governments. The more you can stay connected to your community and trusted local organizations, the more you can create change and better policies that keep immigrants safe and supported.

“So much depends on grassroots organizations actually having a presence and a plan and a strategy,” said Stolz. “A community's ability to survive and thrive and recover is largely dependent on the existing community cohesion and relationships that exist.”

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

[GRIST.ORG](#) | [Republish our stories](#)