

How to track disaster spending in your community

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After a disaster, huge sums of money trickle down and change hands to fund debris cleanup, repairs, reconstruction, and more. Where all this money goes, and how projects are prioritized, is important to understand as rebuilding gets underway.

Below are tips on how to track disaster spending in your own community, plus resources and websites where you can download public records and other information. We've also included guiding questions to ask local policymakers, government agencies, and community groups.

How to track public spending:

- **Stay informed.** Attend your local city council, county commission, and school board meetings. If structures like schools and city buildings are destroyed, your county or city will designate funds for repairs and rebuilds. By attending meetings and asking questions, you can stay updated and make sure local officials are spending money on the things that should be prioritized first.
 - [Here's an example from Southerly](#), which hired residents of Lake Charles, Louisiana, to take notes at meetings and write about the patterns they saw after Hurricane Laura.
- **Look at the contracts.** You can also use these meetings, plus news stories or press releases from the offices of your governor or mayor, to track which companies governments are contracting with to clean up debris, repair roads and buildings, and more.
 - For example, the [Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting](#) reported on complaints and lawsuits against a debris cleanup company accused of taking property without consent and leaving flood debris behind that clogged waterways in 2022. The city of Louisville [hired the same company](#) to clean up after floods in 2025.
- **Know what data to look at.** FEMA is required by law to provide a report by the fifth day of each month on the Disaster Relief Fund, or DRF, "which includes a funding summary, a table delineating the DRF funding activities each month by state and event, a summary of the funding for the catastrophic events, and an estimate of the date on which the funds will be exhausted." [You can search for these reports here](#). In addition, the agency must update the OpenFEMA dataset frequently after disasters; it provides [detailed applicant-level data](#) on the agency's individual and households

program. After the 2022 Kentucky floods, an Appalachian think tank [tracked funding for housing rebuilds](#) using this data. [Here's a link](#) to more datasets from OpenFEMA.

- **Did they provide an estimate of costs?** Do not allow the contractor to begin work without providing you with a detailed assessment of the damage and the cost of repairs. Some contractors may utilize the fact that you want to rebuild quickly to skip steps. But always ask for a cost estimate before work begins. Then, run the estimate by your insurance adjuster or compare against quotes from other contractors.
- **Take advantage of existing tools.** Several policy and research groups already monitor public disaster relief, giving users a quick and easy way to see spending trends. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for instance, maintains the [Disaster Dollar Database](#), a tool that tracks the major sources of grant-based federal funding for disaster recovery in the United States.

How to track private spending:

- **Find out who's getting paid.** Nonprofits are not obligated to report funds received in their annual tax filings, which makes tracking spending from these groups tricky. But their annual 1099 tax forms can hold clues about major contracts with nonemployees, those paid \$100,000 or more. In the case of disaster recovery, that could be food distributors, cleanup crews, or a construction company hired to rebuild homes. It isn't as straightforward as tracking public recovery funds, but it could provide some information.
- **Examine their board.** Look at the boards of nonprofit organizations and map out their members' connections and political donations. It might tell you who has sway where and about the relationships that give certain organizations access to powerful people.
- **Use public funds trackers.** Nonprofits often receive public funds to carry out humanitarian aid and disaster relief. Search [USAspending.gov](#) to see if any of the organizations you're interested in were recipients of this money.
- **Look at annual reports.** Most nonprofits produce annual reports that detail major projects and successes for the year, give funding updates, and list their major donors. The downside: These reports typically take months to produce, so don't expect quick answers. Press releases and blog posts on an organization's website may provide interim information.
- **Track social media.** Nonprofits, religious organizations, and businesses often use social media to raise funds, ask for volunteers, and highlight the work they're

doing to rebuild and recover post-disaster. Keep an eye on these posts to get a sense of how money is being spent.

- **Don't be afraid to ask directly.** While public spending is subject to transparency laws, private spending is not so it can be notoriously hard to track. If you can't find answers anywhere else, don't hesitate to ask an organization directly. If representatives are speaking at a public event, like a city hall meeting, attend, see what they say, and ask questions. You could also try sending an email or calling their office.

This story is part of [The Disaster Economy](#), a Grist series exploring the often chaotic, lucrative world of disaster response and recovery. It is published with support from the CO2 Foundation.

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