

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.

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Disasters are overwhelming for everyone. If you're an immigrant, accessing emergency support and resources can be even more confusing, whether it's because of your citizenship status, language barriers, or limited knowledge around your rights. But you can prepare ahead of time with the right information.

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. It was updated in June 2026.

Finding reliable information

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

Sign up for alerts

There are a few types of weather alerts to know about:

- Wireless Emergency Alerts are emergency messages, usually less than 90 characters, that are sent directly to your phone by authorized government authorities through your mobile carrier. You may need to opt-in to receive them through your phone's settings ([more information here](#)). They may show up like a text or appear on your home screen. These messages are sent to all devices in a given area with severe weather or an emergency.
- The National Weather Service, or NWS, has regional and local branches that gather weather and climate data and offers information and updates on everything from wildfires to hurricanes to air quality. In some areas ([found here](#)), alerts are available in

multiple languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, French, Samoan, and Spanish, to warn of severe weather. 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 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.

- More states and counties across the country are offering emergency alerts in different languages, with Spanish being prioritized. 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. 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.
- American Red Cross: This nonprofit agency works around the world. Anyone can download the free Red Cross phone app to receive emergency alerts for your area. You can find more information on the Red Cross website; check out [this page in Spanish](#).

Know your emergency management agency

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 often have an SMS-based emergency alert system, so sign up for those texts. 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 emergency management 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.

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.

Read your local news

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.
- Grist published a guide in [Spanish](#) and [Haitian Creole](#) for Florida farmworkers during the 2024 hurricane season.
- In North Carolina, Enlace Latino NC launched [Prepárate NC](#), a Spanish-language resource guide for hurricane season. After Hurricane Helene in 2024, the publication launched a [robust FAQ](#) that includes information on accessing federal resources as an immigrant in any state.

Find out more from 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.

Here are a few organizations and the resources they offer:

- 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.
- The Hispanic Federation runs the NC Migrant Emergency Management Database, which offers residents, community organizations, and emergency managers the locations of farmworker camps and critical resource locations including hospitals, shelters, fire departments, and flooding zones. [You can request access here](#).
- 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.”
- The Just Solutions Collective, in partnership with multiple housing and immigrant organizations, developed this guide: [Know Your Rights During Disasters: FEMA and Immigration Enforcement](#). It is currently available in English, Spanish, French and

Vietnamese. They plan to update it based on incidents of greater cooperation with ICE, denial of benefits to mixed status households, and withdrawal of language access support. You can email them to report these incidents at disaster-response-information@justsolutionscollective.org.

What to know about federal disaster aid

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 — the same agency that oversees Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. These agencies are all separate; however, both CBP and ICE employees are recruited to help with federal disaster response.

FEMA is rarely the first resource on the ground after a disaster strikes. In order for the agency to send resources to a disaster area, the state's governor must first request a [disaster declaration](#) from the president, and the president must approve it.

For large disasters such as Category 4 or 5 hurricanes, this typically happens quickly. For a smaller crisis, like severe rain or flooding, it can take weeks or even months for the president to grant a declaration and activate the agency. FEMA has historically [not responded](#) to heat waves because it does not consider them a type of disaster.

FEMA is divided into regional offices and offers specific contacts and information for each of them, and for [tribal nations](#), which follow a different process. You can find your FEMA region [here](#). ([Read more about FEMA on Grist's website](#).)

The agency has two primary roles after a federally declared disaster:

- **Contributing to community rebuilding costs:** The agency helps states and local governments pay for the cost of removing debris and rebuilding public infrastructure.
- **Individual financial assistance:** FEMA awards financial assistance to individual people who have lost their homes and belongings. It can take several forms: FEMA gives out pre-loaded debit cards to help people buy food and fuel in the first days after a disaster, and may also provide cash payments for home repairs. The agency also provides up to 18 months of housing assistance for people who lose their homes, and sometimes houses disaster survivors in trailers. FEMA sometimes covers funeral costs as well as medical and dental treatment.

There is a [specific process](#) that cities, states, and tribal governments must navigate in order for residents to receive FEMA aid. If you are a U.S. citizen, or meet certain qualifications as a non-citizen, and live in a disaster declaration area that was approved by FEMA and the president, [you are eligible to apply](#) for aid immediately after they announce it. You can apply on

[disasterassistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov), through the FEMA app, or at a FEMA recovery center. FEMA offers survivors eligible for individual assistance:

- A one-time grant of \$750 for emergency needs and essential items like food, baby items, and medication
- Temporary housing assistance equivalent to 14 nights in a hotel in your area
- Up to 18 months of rental assistance
- Payments for lost property that isn't covered by your homeowners or renters insurance
- Other forms of assistance, depending on your needs and losses

Regardless of citizenship or immigration status, if you are affected by a federally declared disaster, you may be eligible for crisis counseling, disaster legal services, disaster case management, medical care, shelter, food, and water.

But in order to apply for individual 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. You can read more, in multiple languages, [about how to apply here](#). FEMA [recommends](#) contacting an “immigration expert” to verify if you meet requirements needed as a non-citizen before applying.

Just Solutions Collective’s 2025 [guide](#), however, explicitly urges caution. The group recommends that households receive counsel from an immigration attorney prior to applying for financial assistance from FEMA. It states: “We are concerned that there may be changes on the horizon or new ways in which recent executive actions may be applied to emergency assistance (for example, greater cooperation with ICE, denial of benefits to mixed status households, withdrawal of language access support, etc.)” More information can be found on page seven of the guide linked above.

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 2025, the Trump administration [rescinded that policy](#). This means that ICE can use its [own discretion, which it calls “common sense enforcement.”](#) on whether to enact enforcement actions in sensitive locations that were previously prohibited. This often requires a court order, but enforcement is known to happen without one.

Prepare an emergency plan

To create a readiness plan for natural disasters, the federal government provides key resources through its website www.ready.gov. The website is also available in Spanish at www.listo.gov. Guides on the [“ready in your language” page](#) are available in Arabic, French, Haitian Creole, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Tagalog, Vietnamese and Simplified Chinese.

You can also [read Grist's disaster preparedness guide](#) for more links, lists, and preparedness tips.

As an immigrant or family of mixed status, your emergency plan should also include a family preparedness plan. This could be helpful in the event that family members are separated from one another. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center offers a comprehensive [step-by-step family plan](#), also available [in Spanish](#). Written for residents of California, the guide is universally applicable to think through important things like who can legally care for children in the event of family separation, listing emergency contacts and more. This plan should also include the information of an immigration lawyer or other group providing legal counsel to you and your family. [You can download the plan here.](#)

You also have the legal right to recover immigration documents if they get lost or destroyed in an emergency or disaster. The NC Justice Center recommends visiting [this USCIS page](#) to replace or recover information.

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

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.

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.

Best practices for staying safe

Going to a shelter or government-run site can be intimidating. Even showing up to a community center for supplies or support can be overwhelming if you don't know who is running it. 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.

Benefits for workers

Access to disaster relief benefits

The Disaster Unemployment Assistance program provides temporary benefits to people who, as a result of a major disaster, lost their jobs or had their self-employment interrupted. You are eligible for this assistance if you live in a city, county, or state where a federal disaster declaration has been made and you aren't eligible for regular unemployment insurance benefits. You must file a claim with your state insurance agency. If you have evacuated to another state, you can still apply.

To learn more, contact your state's unemployment office. [Search for yours here](#). If you've moved or have been evacuated to another state, contact your home state. The Department of Labor also has other tips if you need to find a job, relocate, or replace your driver's license, birth certificate, or other documents.

Designated lawfully-present immigrants, including green card holders, refugees, asylees, trafficking victims, certain victims of domestic violence and people with humanitarian parole for more than one year, are eligible for more disaster unemployment benefits.

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.

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

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