

# Ensuring Civil Rights in Multiple Disasters During COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic, like all emergencies, has affected people of different races and ethnicities, geographic area and income levels. As stated in the January 21, 2021 [Executive Order 13995, Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response and Recovery](#), COVID-19 has a disparate impact on communities of color and other underserved populations “including sexual and gender minority groups, those living with disabilities, and those living at the margins of our economy.” These communities are now preparing for and responding to additional, simultaneous disasters, such as hurricanes, fires and tornados.

## Background

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) remains committed to ensuring equal and equitable access to its programs and services in response to both the ongoing pandemic and to concurrent disasters that may arise. During COVID-19, and all emergencies and disasters, FEMA’s mission of helping people before, during and after disasters remains, as does FEMA’s commitment to and enforcement of civil rights. Civil rights laws and legal authorities remain in effect, and cannot be waived, during COVID-19 and other disasters. FEMA’s Office of Equal Rights is responsible for ensuring compliance with and enforcement of FEMA’s external civil rights obligations under the [Stafford Act, Civil Rights Act, Rehabilitation Act, and Age Discrimination Act](#), among other statutes. FEMA also has responsibilities under Executive Order 13166, Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency, and Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. FEMA is also committed to the principles set forth in Executive Orders 13994 and 13995, which seek to ensure a data-driven and equitable response to COVID-19.

Under the Stafford Act, FEMA provides operational coordination, financial, and other Federal assistance to state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) partners. To help SLTT emergency managers and public health officials respond to incidents amid the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA previously issued the [COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season](#) and the [COVID-19 Supplement for Planning Considerations: Evacuation and Shelter-in-Place](#). In addition, FEMA issued [Ensuring Civil Rights During the COVID-19 Response](#) to provide best practices to assist SLTT partners in anticipating and attending to civil rights concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most recently, FEMA issued an advisory on Civil Rights Data Collection, reminding recipients of FEMA financial assistance of their data collection obligations under various civil rights statutes and regulations.

FEMA now offers additional best practices for communities facing a disproportionate rate of COVID-19 illness and death during response and recovery efforts in simultaneous disasters.

In the event that simultaneous disaster occurrences continue, FEMA offers the additional information below, to assist partners, communities, and individuals.

## Effective Communication Access

- Increase communications to the public through social media platforms, virtual townhalls and coordinated messaging from FEMA officials and SLTT leadership regarding preparedness and response during COVID-19 in ways that are accessible for individuals with disabilities (e.g., ensure qualified sign language interpreters are available and clearly visible to participants; solicit requests for reasonable accommodations from the public before meetings or event; verify the accessibility of meeting platforms).
- Develop accessible communication materials and methods, such as open-captioning and embedded interpreters on videos, that address preparedness and response during COVID-19 for people with disabilities, such as updating messaging in the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System and temporary road signs along evacuation routes to address plan alterations required by COVID-19.
- Without sacrificing safety precautions, develop plans for people who cannot wear masks due to medical or other conditions or require the removal of masks to communicate, including socially-distanced communication when removing masks is required, use of a clear mask or cloth mask with a clear plastic panel or use of speech-to-text technology or writing notes.

## Inclusive Planning, Response and Recovery

- Reassess community demographics and identify populations facing high risk to contracting or developing COVID-19, including those under stay-at-home orders, at higher risk of serious medical complications from COVID-19, individuals with disabilities, and others with access and functional needs.
- Conduct additional risk and needs assessments to account for additional financial hardship impacts on individuals and households during COVID-19.
- Maintain the availability of mass transit and paratransit services that provide a transportation option for individuals who are unable to use the fixed-route bus or rail system for the evacuation of individuals with disabilities or access and functional needs, in accordance with CDC guidance and social distancing requirements.
- Develop a mechanism to increase public transportation capabilities, if necessary, to offset the increased time to evacuate communities, including screening individuals for COVID-19 and social distance considerations.
- Develop accessible, timely and actionable communication plans that incorporate COVID-19 related terms and public health guidance regarding alterations to sheltering and evacuation strategies for communities likely impacted by hurricane season, including people with limited English proficiency and disabilities.
- Support applicants in new virtual application processes, particularly underserved communities with existing gaps in information technology resources.
- Engage community-based partners that support and serve persons with disabilities and limited English proficiency, low-income communities, communities of color, and houses of worship to establish trust and build partnerships to meet community specific needs and ensure the equitable and impartial delivery of disaster assistance during COVID-19.
- Ensure consideration and development of policy modifications to accommodate employees with disabilities.

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### Language Access

- Prepare for the increased need for accessible and multilingual messaging and communications through available ethnic media outlets, wireless emergency communications, and use of virtual townhalls for coordinated communications to survivors from SLTT leadership, FEMA officials and others during COVID-19.
- Increase accessible communications to people with limited English proficiency through social media platforms and coordinated messaging in major languages from FEMA officials and SLTT leadership.
- Translate vital documents and public messaging in top languages used in the community.

### Physical Accessibility

- Pre-identify locations and alter sheltering strategies to account for the care of individuals requiring additional assistance during COVID-19, including underserved populations, older adults, individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.
- Review alternative commodity distribution sites, used to limit direct contact between personnel and survivors, and plan to provide services in an accessible manner to individuals with disabilities.
- Plan for and develop alternative solutions and reexamine existing service and resource agreements with partner organizations to address the needs of persons with disabilities who rely on power for medical equipment during extended power outages during COVID-19.
- Prepare for the use of telehealth services to reach members of underserved communities, or those who are displaced or unable to access a healthcare provider.
- Without sacrificing safety precautions, develop a plan to provide reasonable accommodations for persons who are unable to wear a facemask due to a disability.

### Environmental Justice

- Ensure the meaningful inclusion of disadvantaged communities, including low-income and racial and ethnic minority groups, in the development and implementation of policy decisions impacting the environment during response and recovery throughout COVID-19.
- Ensure environmental justice considerations are included in public communications to ensure the inclusion of low-income communities, racial and ethnic minority groups, and other disadvantaged communities.

### Civil Rights Complaints and Concerns

Members of the public may bring civil rights complaints to OER's attention in connection with FEMA programs and activities or FEMA-funded or-assisted programs and activities as follows:

- Call the FEMA Office of Equal Rights at 202-212-3535 and press 1; or for TTY users, call 800-462-7585
- Send an email to the FEMA Office of Equal Rights: [FEMA-CivilRightsOffice@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:FEMA-CivilRightsOffice@fema.dhs.gov)
- Mail a complaint to the FEMA Office of Equal Rights:  
FEMA Office of Equal Rights

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C Street, SW, Room 4SW-0915  
Washington, DC 20472-3505

Members of the public may also file civil rights complaints with the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL). For more information about filing complaints with CRCL, see [www.dhs.gov/compliance-branch](http://www.dhs.gov/compliance-branch), email [CRCLCompliance@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:CRCLCompliance@hq.dhs.gov), or call CRCL at (202) 401-1474 or 1 (866) 644-8360. For information about civil rights offices and how to file complaints with other Federal agencies, please see [DOJ List of Civil Rights Offices at Federal Agencies](#).

## Resources

- FEMA Civil Rights Bulletin, Ensuring Civil Rights During the COVID-19 Response -  
<https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1586893628400-f21a380f3db223e6075eeb3be67d50a6/EnsuringCivilRightsDuringtheCOVID19Response.pdf>.
- FEMA COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season -  
<https://www.fema.gov/media-collection/covid-19-pandemic-operational-guidance-2020-hurricane-season>.
- FEMA COVID-19 Supplement for Planning Considerations: Evaluation and Shelter-in-Place,  
[https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/fema\\_covid-19\\_supplement-evacuation-shelter-in-place.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/fema_covid-19_supplement-evacuation-shelter-in-place.pdf)
- DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Webpage, Civil Rights in Emergencies and Disasters,  
<https://www.dhs.gov/civil-rights-emergencies-and-disasters>.
- CDC Guidance, Natural Disasters, Severe Weather and COVID-19 - [https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/covid-19/disasters\\_severe\\_weather\\_and\\_covid-19.html](https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/covid-19/disasters_severe_weather_and_covid-19.html).
- EEOC Technical Assistance Questions and Answers, What You Should Know About COVID-19 and the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and Other EEO Laws - [https://www.eeoc.gov/wysk/what-you-should-know-about-covid-19-and-ada-rehabilitation-act-and-other-eeo-laws?utm\\_content=&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_name=&utm\\_source=govdelivery&utm\\_term=](https://www.eeoc.gov/wysk/what-you-should-know-about-covid-19-and-ada-rehabilitation-act-and-other-eeo-laws?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=)

For copies of FEMA documents in alternative formats, please call 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585).

If you speak a language other than English and need help with this document, please call 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585) and you will be connected to an interpreter who will assist you at no cost.

Si habla un idioma diferente al inglés y necesita ayuda con este documento, llame al 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585) y lo contactaremos con un intérprete que lo ayudará sin costo alguno para usted.

Если вы не говорите на английском языке и нуждаетесь в помощи, позвоните по номеру 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585). Вас соединят с переводчиком, который бесплатно поможет вам.

Se você fala um idioma além do inglês e precisa de ajuda em relação a este documento, ligue para 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585) e você será conectado a um intérprete que irá ajudá-lo sem nenhum custo adicional.

Nếu quý vị nói một ngôn ngữ khác Tiếng Anh và cần giúp đỡ với tài liệu này, hãy gọi 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585) và quý vị sẽ được kết nối với một thông dịch viên, là người sẽ trợ giúp miễn phí cho quý vị.

영어를 사용하지 못하는 사람으로써 본 문서에 대해 도움이 필요할 경우, 전화 800-621-3362

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(텔레타이프라이터: 800-462-7585)로 연락주시면 여러분을 무료로 도와줄 통역사와 연결해 드립니다.

Si vous parlez une langue autre que l'anglais et que vous avez besoin d'aide en rapport avec le présent document, veuillez composer le 800-621-3362 (numéro TTY pour les malentendants : 800-462-7585) pour qu'un interprète soit gratuitement mis à votre disposition.

Si w pale yon lang ki pa lang Angle e ou bezwen èd avèk dokiman sa a, tanpri rele 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585) epi yo pral konekte w ak yon entèprtèt ki pral ede w, gratis.

英語以外の言語でこのページの詳細をお知りになりたい方は、お電話で800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585)までお問い合わせください。無料で通訳をご利用いただけます。

Kung nagsasalita ka ng wikang bukod sa Ingles at nangangailangan ng tulong sa dokumentong ito, mangyaring tumawag sa 800-621-3362 (TTY: 800-462-7585) at maikokonekta ka sa isang interpreter (tagasalin sa wika) na tutulong sa iyo nang walang bayad.

如果您使用除英语之外的其他语言并且就本文件需要帮助，请致电800-621-3362（听障及语障用户（TTY）：800-462-7585），您将与翻译人员联系，该翻译人员将为您提供免费帮助。

إذا كنت تتكلم لغة غير الإنجليزية واحتاجت إلى مساعدة مع تلك الوثيقة، يرجى الاتصال بالرقم 800-621-3362 (الطباعة عن بعد: 7585-462-800) وسيتم وصلك مع مترجم شفهي سيقدم لك المساعدة مجانا.