

Ensuring Civil Rights in Multiple Disasters During COVID-19

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. 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 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, FEMA's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is working to help people before, during, and after disasters. FEMA's mission remains, as does the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Civil Rights Division's (CRD) mission. Civil rights laws and legal authorities remain in effect, and cannot be waived, during COVID-19 and other disasters. FEMA's responsibilities 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 of 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.

[Ensuring Civil Rights During the COVID-19 Response](#) provides 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.

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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

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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 service

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