



# Elected Officials' Guide to Emergencies & Disasters



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## Introduction

Responding effectively to disasters requires a coordinated, community-wide effort. Virginia's Emergency Operations Plan clearly spells out how the Virginia Emergency Response Team will respond during a disaster.

As an elected official, your response to a disaster will influence government, citizens, schools, media and businesses. The Virginia Department of Emergency Management, in partnership with the Virginia Municipal League and the Virginia Association of Counties, created this guide to inform elected officials about emergency management at the local level.

This guide will familiarize you with the local declaration process and the responsibilities of a local emergency manager, but the best way to learn about disaster response in your area is to meet with your local emergency manager.

We would like to acknowledge the Prince William County Office of Emergency Management for inspiring this guide for elected officials. Ideas like these help strengthen the Commonwealth's ability to respond to disasters.

## Disaster Declarations

A federal disaster declaration is the mechanism through which state agencies of the Commonwealth of Virginia, local governments, certain nonprofits, businesses and individual citizens become potential recipients of federal disaster aid. There are two main types of federal disaster assistance declarations: Public Assistance and Individual Assistance. Generally speaking, state agencies, local governments and certain nonprofits become potential recipients of federal aid through a Public Assistance Declaration. Individual citizens and businesses become potential recipients of federal aid through an Individual Assistance Declaration. Only the president has the authority to approve either type of disaster declaration.

Disaster declarations are always geographically specific to a locality. The presidential declaration must include the locality's name for it to receive aid. It is also important to understand that a locality can receive one type of declaration and not the other type of declaration. For example, a locality may receive an Individual Disaster Declaration, but not a Public Assistance Declaration.

Most importantly, the governor must request a federal disaster declaration. Not all disaster events in the Commonwealth result in a governor's request for a declaration. Additionally, it is important to understand that an approval for a requested declaration is not automatic.

## The Disaster Assistance Process

The governor makes a request for a federal disaster declaration to the president through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In the request, federal law requires the governor to certify that:

- All local resources have been applied to a disaster and those resources are not sufficient to overcome severe consequences caused by the disaster.
- All state resources, used to supplement local efforts, have been applied to a disaster and those state resources are not sufficient to overcome severe consequences caused by the disaster.

To support the request for a federal disaster declaration, localities must submit initial damage assessments to the Virginia Emergency Operation Center. Damage assessments are usually required within 72 hours of the disaster event. If the damage appears to meet the criteria for a declaration, the state coordinator of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management will request FEMA to perform a joint Preliminary Damage Assessment. A field team consisting of federal and state personnel will then visit a locality to gather data, which becomes an essential ingredient in the overall argument made to the president that the Commonwealth needs federal help.

## Individual Assistance

When the president approves a federal disaster declaration for Individual Assistance, the declaration activates the Individuals and Households Program. Under IHP, two main categories of assistance are available to private citizens – Housing Assistance and Other Needs Assistance. However, specific criteria must be met before federal assistance can be approved. First, the individual or family applying for assistance must live in a federally declared disaster jurisdiction. Second, federal law prohibits the duplication of benefits. For example, federal assistance will not be provided if insurance covers the damage or losses. Note that the U.S. Congress sets an annual, overall monetary cap on individual assistance. Disaster assistance received for Housing Assistance and Other Needs Assistance is counted against that cap. Within Housing Assistance, applicants are limited on what they can receive for home repair or home replacement.

To apply for federal assistance, citizens who live in declared areas should register by calling the special toll-free telephone number, 1-800-621-FEMA (TTY: 1-800-462-7585) or register online at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov).

## Housing Assistance

Decisions for this category of assistance are made by FEMA and any dollars expended are 100 percent federal dollars. The state shares none of the cost.

- **Reimbursement for certain types of transient accommodations.** For example, the need to stay in a hotel because of a mandatory evacuation order.

- **Rental assistance for temporary housing when the primary dwelling has been rendered uninhabitable by the disaster.** In some cases, FEMA may provide assistance in the form of temporary manufactured housing instead of a monetary payment for rental assistance.

- **Home repair cash grant.** This assistance cannot exceed the annual cap.

- **Home replacement cash grant.** This assistance cannot exceed the annual cap.

## Other Needs Assistance

State personnel make some decisions for Other Needs Assistance. This form of disaster assistance is provided on a cost share basis – 75 percent federal dollars and 25 percent state dollars. The subcategories of ONA disaster assistance are:

- **Medical & dental.** Assistance for injuries and illnesses that are directly caused by a disaster.

- **Funeral.** Assistance for funeral expenses, if the death is directly attributable to a disaster.

- **Miscellaneous other.** Captures some items, not covered elsewhere, and gives the state some flexibility to add items that might only apply to certain types of disasters.

For the following Other Needs Assistance sub-categories, some applicants must first apply for a low-interest loan through the Small Business Administration. In this instance, only applicants denied a SBA loan will be considered for disaster assistance grants. The subcategories are:

- **Personal Property.** Assistance for damage to appliances and household furnishings.

- **Transportation.** Assistance for damaged and destroyed personal vehicles. Certain public transportation costs may also be eligible.

- **Moving & storage.** Primarily assistance for items needing to be moved and stored while repairs are being made to a home or apartment.

Other forms of assistance available through the Individual and Households Program

- Disaster unemployment benefits
- Crisis counseling
- Free legal counseling
- Low-interest loans for home repair from the SBA
- Tax breaks

## Federal Disaster Assistance and Small Businesses

The only form of disaster assistance available to small businesses under the IHP program is through low interest loans from the SBA. Loans can cover damage to the physical structure of a business, loss of inventory or business operating expenses.

## Federal Disaster Assistance and Agriculture

When there are significant crop losses in a declared disaster, the U. S. Department of Agriculture may make its own disaster declarations and provide loans and grants to farmers.

## Public Assistance

Public assistance is disaster aid to repair, replace or supplement parts of a community's public infrastructure. The program is one way federal assistance gets to state and local governments and to certain private nonprofit organizations. These grants reimburse local and state governments for the expenses involved in response and recovery operations in disasters. They also provide assistance in repairing public infrastructure.

To be eligible, the required work must be the result of the disaster, be located within the designated disaster area and be the legal responsibility of the applicant. Eligible work is classified as either emergency work or permanent work.

## Emergency Work

- Debris removal from public roads and rights-of-way and from private property when determined to be in the public interest.
- Emergency protective measures performed to eliminate or reduce immediate threats to the public, including search and rescue, warning of hazards, and demolition of unsafe structures.

## Permanent Work

Facilities eligible for permanent work:

- Roads, bridges and associated features, such as shoulders, ditches, culverts, lighting and signs.
- Water control facilities, including drainage channels, pumping facilities and the emergency repair of levees. Permanent repair of flood control works is the responsibility of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.
- Buildings, including their contents and systems.
- Public utility distribution systems, such as water treatment and delivery systems; sewage collection and treatment facilities; and municipal power generation facilities and distribution lines.
- Public parks, recreational facilities and other facilities, including playgrounds, swimming pools and cemeteries.

In Virginia, state and local governments will combine funds to match 25 percent of the federal reimbursement amount under the federal public assistance program. How much the local government will contribute depends on its fiscal stress. Some localities might be required to provide 13 percent and the state 12 percent, while other localities might only need to provide two percent as the state provides the remaining 23 percent.

## Virginia Emergency Services and Disaster Laws

There are a number of sections in the Code of Virginia, specifically the Virginia Emergency Services and Disaster Laws, Title 44: Chapters 3.2 to 3.5, that cover local emergencies and the declaration of a local emergency by political subdivisions. These are summarized in the shaded boxes.

### Authority

Each local jurisdiction in the Commonwealth is within the jurisdiction of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, and will be served by VDEM. However, responsibility for local disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery falls on the local government. Emergency management organizations in towns are usually integrated into county government, unless specified by charter. Towns shall appoint a coordinator of emergency management to ensure integration into their county's emergency management organization. Each political subdivision shall have a director of emergency management. Each political subdivision shall have an agency of emergency management, which has jurisdiction over the entire political subdivision.

The local director of emergency management or a designee may declare a local emergency with the consent of the governing body of the political subdivision. If the governing body cannot convene, the director, or designee, or in the absence of both, any member of the governing body may declare a local emergency, subject to confirmation by the governing body at its next regularly scheduled meeting (or at a special meeting within 14 days of the declaration, whichever occurs first).

### Preparedness

- The director may develop mutual aid arrangements for reciprocal assistance in case of a disaster too great to be dealt with alone. Such arrangements should

be consistent with state plans and programs, and it shall be the duty of each local organization for emergency management to render assistance in accordance with the provisions of such mutual aid arrangements.

- Each local and interjurisdictional agency shall prepare and keep current a local emergency operations plan for its area. The plan should include responsibilities of all local agencies and establish a chain of command. Each political subdivision with a nuclear power station or other nuclear facility within 10 miles of its boundaries shall, if so directed by VDEM, prepare and keep current an appropriate emergency plan for its response to nuclear accidents.

- All political subdivisions shall provide on or before July 1 each year an updated emergency management assessment to the State Coordinator of Emergency Management.

- All localities with populations greater than 50,000 shall establish an alert and warning plan for the dissemination of adequate and timely warning to the public in the event of an emergency or threatened disaster. The local governing body shall amend its local emergency operations plan to include rules for the operation of its alert and warning system, to include sirens, Emergency Alert System, NOAA Weather Radios, other personal notification systems, amateur radio operators, or any combination thereof. EOPs should be updated to reflect the addition of new information as it becomes available, or, at a minimum, annually.

## Response

- Whenever a local emergency has been declared, the local director of emergency management may control, restrict, allocate or regulate the use, sale, production and distribution of food, fuel, clothing and other commodities, materials, goods, services and resource systems. The director may enter into contracts and incur obligations necessary to combat the threatened or actual disaster in order to protect the health and safety of persons and property and to provide emergency assistance to the victims of the disaster, as long as these actions do not affect systems in adjoining or other political subdivisions.

- The director may proceed in exercising the powers vested in this section, under the supervision and control of the governor, without regard to usual procedures and formalities prescribed by law (except mandatory constitutional requirements).

- A declaration of a local emergency activates that jurisdiction's Emergency Operations Plan and authorizes aid and assistance in accordance with the plan.

- No interjurisdictional agency or official thereof may declare a local emergency. However, an interjurisdictional agency of emergency management shall provide aid and services to the affected political subdivision because of a local or state declaration.

- When the local governing body decides that all emergency actions have been taken, it shall take appropriate action to end the declared emergency.

## Preparedness

One of the most important things you can do to prepare for an emergency is to participate in training and exercises and to encourage your staff to do so as well. FEMA's Emergency Management Institute (<http://training.fema.gov>) offers online training, and VDEM offers classroom training. A complete list of VDEM training opportunities is available on the Training Calendar at [www.vaemergency.com](http://www.vaemergency.com). Statewide and regional exercises are conducted regularly. Local participation provides a good opportunity to practice your Emergency Operations Plan.

As an elected official, you have the opportunity to be a good example to your community by developing a family disaster plan and by creating an emergency supplies kit for both your home and your workplace. Contact your local emergency management office, or go to VDEM's Web site, [www.vaemergency.com](http://www.vaemergency.com) for more information.

Contact your local emergency management office to learn about your community's emergency operation plan. Familiarize yourself with these procedures before an emergency, and know where you should be and who to contact during an emergency.

VDEM created the online Virginia Business Emergency Survival Toolkit to assist businesses of all sizes in preparing for emergencies. Encourage businesses in your area to use the toolkit: [www.vaemergency.com/business/index.cfm](http://www.vaemergency.com/business/index.cfm).

## Response

During a disaster, you probably will receive calls from your constituents. You and your locality's staff should help manage public expectations about what government can or cannot provide during or after a disaster. Reassure citizens that responders are doing all they can, but do not raise unrealistic expectations or make empty promises. The more you familiarize yourself with your locality's emergency operation plan, the more confidently and accurately you will be able to answer questions.

If possible, work with the public affairs officer designated in your Emergency Operations Plan to set up a Public Inquiry Center to take calls from citizens so you can concentrate on your leadership role during emergencies.

Because of safety concerns, you should not visit disaster scenes. However, if you do choose to visit, please follow these guidelines regardless of the nature of the disaster:

- Report to the Incident Commander as soon as you arrive at the scene. This person is responsible for directing all activities at the incident scene. Be prepared to follow the Incident Commander's guidance, and know that if you are denied access it is for your safety.
- Park your car in a safe place away from the incident where it will not block the road.
- Pay attention to your surroundings. Cars strike many responders every year because they are operating in the roadways where drivers are easily distracted by the disaster or incident.
- If the disaster is a hazardous materials spill, watch where you step. Any hazardous materials at the scene can contaminate your clothing or skin, and you can contaminate others. Do not walk into or touch spilled material or floodwater. Avoid inhaling fumes, smoke and vapors.
- Wear appropriate clothing and protective equipment. Keep sturdy steel-toed boots, a hardhat and safety glasses handy. If you do not have the proper equipment, the Incident Commander will make arrangements to get you the proper safety gear.
- The incident might be a crime scene. Do not disturb possible evidence.

## Recovery

Recovery involves all of the cleanup, repair and financial assistance needed to return an area back to pre-disaster conditions. As soon as it is safe to do so, local and state government will conduct preliminary damage assessments to determine the level of damage to private property and community infrastructure.

During the recovery phase, get regular briefings on the extent of damage and status of the recovery process. These briefings will keep you informed and better able to answer questions from your constituents and the media.

State and local priorities follow the same order:

1. Life safety
2. Critical facilities (systems)
3. Private property damage

During and after a disaster, the first priority of emergency officials is to save lives, followed by restoring utilities and opening roads. Often, residents think that officials are ignoring their individual situations because they are unaware of the scope of a disaster. Reassure them that their concerns will be addressed.

Some of the biggest issues that occur after the disaster involve the following:

- **Debris Removal:** FEMA and local government do not cover the cost of debris removal on private property unless it poses a hazard to the community at large. Otherwise, it is the property owner's responsibility. If you have a constituent who has a significant problem with debris removal, have your local emergency management office contact the VEOC. They might be able to find ways to help using volunteers.
- **Sandbags:** Constituents might not understand why localities cannot provide sandbags. The number of bags and amount of sand required to adequately protect just one home is really more than most people understand. For example, it requires 800 sandbags and 13 tons of sand to build one 100-foot-long wall that stands one foot high.
- **Rebuilding:** Residents might want to rebuild their house or business in the flood plain. These efforts bring up zoning and ordinance issues. Get regular briefings about the status of these issues from the appropriate agencies.
- **Response Time:** Residents might think that local government is slow to respond. You should tell them the safety of the citizens and responders is a priority.
- **Public Information:** Residents might report difficulty getting critical information about the disaster from the news media. Despite efforts to communicate through the media by issuing regular news releases, local media often edit the information significantly, or do not use it at all. Foster positive working relationships with all facets of the media now to get your message out when it is most needed.

## Mitigation

Mitigation is taking sustained actions to reduce the impact of natural hazards on people and property. Often called the cornerstone of emergency management, mitigation can also be the most difficult concept to understand. Mitigation activities protect people and structures and reduce the cost of response and recovery. For example, maintaining strong building codes can reduce property damage from storms, and storm water management can minimize flooding risks.

A mitigation strategy identifies the following priorities:

1. A list of the high-risk areas by magisterial district or other division.

- 2. Existing and potential mitigation projects that improve the resiliency of critical infrastructure.
- 3. Funding support.
- 4. Disaster preparedness outreach to special needs groups, which include, but are not limited to, the elderly, visually impaired and non-English speaking populations.

## Media Guide

During a disaster, all media requests should come through the designated Public Information Officer and communications staff first, so that information released is consistent. Read your local EOP to find out who will act as the PIO. The on-scene Incident Commander or PIO can be with you during an interview. If you cultivate good relationships with the media before an emergency, you will get better support from them during an emergency.

### Responding to questions:

- Answer all questions directly and as completely as possible.
  - If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. Do not guess or exaggerate. Erroneous information can damage your credibility, and can cause the public to make bad choices. Get the reporter's contact information, and call back when you have the answer.
  - Avoid using "no comment." No comment gives the impression that you have something to hide.
  - There is no such thing as "off the record." Anything you say to a reporter is fair game.
  - Never argue with reporters or lose your cool. Do not be rude even if the interviewer or reporter appears to doubt your credibility.
  - Be sure the reporter understands your answers and is not putting words in your mouth.
  - Avoid answering speculative "what if" questions. Be sure to emphasize positive points you want to make.
  - Speak naturally and use terms the public can understand. Avoid acronyms.
  - Say the most important thing first and then elaborate if necessary. Be succinct and clear in your responses.
  - Make one point at a time. During times of high stress people are generally only able to remember short, concise bits of information.
  - If you must read a prepared statement, review the information before going to the press. Read in a relaxed manner.

- Be believable, personable and conversational. Credibility is vital to getting your message across.
- Coordinate any requests to tour the scene with the Incident Commander before making any promises to the media.
- Let the EOC and the PIO know if you talk to the media.

## Glossary

- EOC – Emergency Operations Center
- EOP – Emergency Operations Plan
- FEMA – Federal Emergency Management Agency
- IHP – Individuals and Households Program
- ONA – Other Needs Assistance
- PA – Public Assistance
- PDA – Preliminary Damage Assessment
- PIO – Public Information Officer
- SBA – Small Business Administration
- VDEM – Virginia Department of Emergency Management. The lead state agency that protects the lives and property of Virginia's citizens from emergencies and disasters by coordinating the state's emergency preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery efforts.
- VEOC – Virginia Emergency Operations Center
- VERT – Virginia Emergency Response Team. The VERT includes state and federal agencies and volunteer organizations that are ready to respond to disasters and emergencies.



# Important Phone Numbers

VDEM State Coordinator	(804) 897-6500
Virginia Emergency Operations Center	(804) 647-2400 or (800) 468-8892
VDEM Director of Public Affairs	(804) 897-6510
Local Electric Company	_____
Local Telephone Company	_____
VDEM Regional Coordinator	

**Consult the map on opposite page to find your region's locality.**

Contact information for your regional coordinator is available at VDEM's Web site, [www.vaemergency.com](http://www.vaemergency.com) or by calling (804) 897-6500.

Virginia Department of Health	(866) 531-3068
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## Virginia State Police

Administrative Headquarters, Richmond	24-hour response: (804) 674-2000
Division 1 Central Virginia	(804) 553-3444 or (800) 552-9965
Division 2 Culpeper	(540) 829-7401 or (800) 572-2260
Division 3 Appomattox	(434) 352-7128 or (800) 552-0962
Division 4 Wytheville	(276) 228-3131 or (800) 542-8716
Division 5 Hampton Roads	(757) 424-6820 or (800) 582-8350
Division 6 Salem-Roanoke	(540) 375-9500 or (800) 542-5959
Division 7 Northern Virginia	(703) 323-4500 or (800) 572-4510

## Virginia Department of Emergency Management Regions





Sponsored by:



**Virginia Municipal League**

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