

Potential FEMA Emergency Sheltering Options During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Some hazards (e.g., hurricanes, wildfires) may result in evacuations and displacement of survivors. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state, local, tribal, and territorial governments (SLTTs) [are responsible for coordinating](#) emergency sheltering support after a declaration under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act; 42 U.S.C. §§5121 et seq.). The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic may [complicate efforts to provide sheltering](#) in typical congregate settings. This Insight discusses potential emergency sheltering models previously used by FEMA and challenges posed by COVID-19, as well as policy considerations.

Emergency Sheltering Solutions

The federal government may provide financial assistance through FEMA to SLTTs when the President declares an emergency or major disaster under the Stafford Act. Emergency sheltering may be authorized under [Stafford Act Section 502](#) following an emergency declaration and [Stafford Act Section 403](#) following a major disaster declaration or [Fire Management Assistance Grant declaration](#) (FMAG). This assistance is commonly referred to as [Public Assistance \(PA\)](#) Category B—Emergency Protective Measures. When PA is authorized, FEMA will reimburse state, tribal, territorial, and local governments, as well as eligible nonprofits (PA Applicants) for at least 75% of [eligible costs](#) incurred while performing [eligible work](#). FEMA's regulations on emergency sheltering are limited, though program guidance may be issued for a specific incident.

FEMA usually supports [congregate sheltering](#) in facilities with large, open spaces, such as schools and community centers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, FEMA has acknowledged the need to ensure appropriate social distancing. Thus, FEMA issued an [interim policy for non-congregate sheltering](#) in the event of a Stafford Act declaration through December 31, 2020. FEMA also recommends [sheltering with friends or family](#) and [other housing solutions](#).

The following sections describe select, PA-authorized emergency sheltering solutions used in the wake of past disasters, as well as [FEMA's current interim sheltering policy](#). Emergency sheltering programs offered may vary depending on post-disaster needs and [shelter availability](#).

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Congregate Shelters

FEMA may reimburse congregate sheltering costs, including [facility leasing and utilities](#), eligible [staffing, supplies](#) including food and furnishings, and [services](#) including cleaning and medical care.

COVID-19 has [spread rapidly in congregate shelters](#), leading the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to designate this option as “a last resort.” To mitigate risk, FEMA recommends that congregate shelters [provide at least 110 square feet per person](#). SLTTs should identify additional sheltering space, [use tracking systems](#) for contact tracing, and prepare [registration procedures](#) that separate ill and well evacuees. The CDC also recommends evacuees [self-quarantine after leaving a disaster shelter](#).

Non-congregate Shelters

FEMA [has changed its policy](#) to [authorize non-congregate sheltering](#) (i.e., sheltering that affords privacy, such as dormitories, hotels, and motels, to include [cleaning and disinfection](#)) as an eligible emergency protective measure [when needed](#), if it is the [legal responsibility of the PA Applicant](#) (generally, SLTTs are responsible for protecting public health and safety). The policy is applicable for all Stafford Act declared incidents between June 1 and December 31, 2020, beginning [six days prior to and up to thirty days following an incident](#) (unless FEMA approves an extension). PA Applicants requesting reimbursement must provide [sufficient documentation](#) and must follow [FEMA’s procurement policies](#) when contracting to carry out emergency protective measures, including the [provision of non-congregate sheltering](#). Additionally, PA Applicants may not receive assistance that [duplicates assistance](#) from other sources or federal agencies. FEMA will [review its policy](#) by December 31, 2020.

Due to the pandemic, FEMA recommends that SLTTs [anticipate and mitigate staffing shortages](#), prepare [registration procedures](#) to separate ill and well evacuees, and secure contracts for [infant and child feeding and hygiene needs](#).

To provide a recent example, under the Stafford Act declarations for COVID-19, [FEMA authorized PA for non-congregate sheltering](#) for limited periods of time, limited to specific populations (e.g., individuals [diagnosed with or exposed to COVID-19](#) that do not require hospitalization), if necessary to uphold public health directives.

Transitional Sheltering Assistance

The [Transitional Sheltering Assistance \(TSA\)](#) program provides temporary hotel/motel accommodations for eligible disaster survivors [transitioning from congregate or non-congregate shelters](#) to temporary or permanent housing solutions. FEMA’s [interim policy](#) describes the information PA Applicants should collect to ease the transition from non-congregate sheltering to TSA during COVID-19.

[TSA](#) is only available once it has been requested by the state, territorial, or Indian tribal government and approved by FEMA. TSA may be [authorized](#) under Stafford Act Sections 502 or 403; however, unlike PA-reimbursable emergency sheltering, [TSA is provided as Direct Federal Assistance \(DFA\)](#) (i.e., FEMA pays the lodging providers directly).

[FEMA issues disaster-specific guidance when TSA is authorized](#). The guidance includes [TSA eligibility and program implementation](#) information. Unlike PA-reimbursed congregate emergency sheltering, which is available to [all disaster survivors](#), TSA applicants must satisfy the eligibility criteria established in the guidance.

Operation Blue Roof

In response to some disasters, FEMA has issued a [mission assignment](#) to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to manage [Operation Blue Roof](#) (a form of DFA). The program provides homeowners with [free, fiber-reinforced sheeting](#) to cover damaged roofs, allowing disaster survivors to remain in their homes while permanent repairs are completed. This program could reduce the need for emergency shelters if hurricanes or other hazards were to damage homes during the pandemic.

Policy Considerations

State, local, tribal, and territorial governments bear significant [responsibility](#) for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. To that end, [potential congressional considerations](#) to support emergency sheltering during the pandemic include:

- reducing or eliminating the FEMA PA nonfederal [cost share](#) (the nonfederal share is generally 25%), given potential [state and local budget shortfalls](#);
- reducing the demand for emergency sheltering, such as by extending the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136) [moratoria on evictions and foreclosures](#), or [temporarily extending housing assistance](#) for individuals who lack housing during the pandemic; and
- examining options to increase COVID-19 testing in shelters, given that FEMA's [operational guidance](#) documents do not mention plans to provide or expedite testing sheltered populations.

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