



# FEMA

Sharing Information  
Enhancing Preparedness  
Strengthening Homeland Security

**Lessons Learned  
Information Sharing**  
[LLIS.gov](http://LLIS.gov)

---

## LESSON LEARNED

---

### **Joint Field Office Operations: Coordinating with Personnel Deployed in Disaster Areas Who Are Not Assigned to the Joint Field Office**

#### **SUMMARY**

Joint Field Offices (JFOs) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Regions should consider assigning a check-in recorder to monitor non-JFO- and non-Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT)-assigned Federal personnel arriving at a disaster area.

#### **DESCRIPTION**

On Tuesday, September 29, 2009, at 6:48 a.m. Samoa Standard Time (SST), an earthquake with an 8.1 magnitude struck in the Pacific Ocean approximately 120 miles from the Samoan islands. The earthquake generated tsunami waves, the first of which struck the American Samoan island of Tutuila at 7:08 a.m. SST. The tsunami flooding resulted in 34 deaths, and 131 people reported to hospitals or clinics with injuries. Thousands of people were left without shelter or food, while more than 46,000 cubic yards of debris were strewn across the islands. Critical infrastructure throughout American Samoa suffered major damage due to tsunami wave inundation.

American Samoa is an unincorporated territory of the U.S. It has a total land area of 200 square kilometers and a population of approximately 65,000 people. American Samoa is located in the South Pacific Ocean, 2,400 miles from Hilo, Hawaii, and 4,500 miles from San Diego, California.

The Federal response began immediately after the earthquake in American Samoa, before the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued the first tsunami warning for this disaster. FEMA Region IX, based in Oakland, California, activated its Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) to level 1 at 6:57 a.m. SST (11:57 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time). The National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) also activated to level 1 with selected Emergency Support Functions. After the tsunami struck, FEMA Region IX worked with American Samoa Governor Togiola Tulafono to submit an expedited request for a major disaster declaration. President Barack Obama declared a major disaster (FEMA-1859-DR) on September 29, 2009, hours after the tsunami struck.

Hundreds of personnel from Federal agencies and voluntary agencies deployed to American Samoa and were assigned to the joint Territorial/FEMA-led IMAT. The IMAT began initial operations on October 4, 2009, and assumed operational control for the disaster from the Region IX RRCC on October 7. Personnel from FEMA, other components of the Department of Homeland Security, as well as the Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Department of Energy, the Department of the Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the General Services Administration, the Small Business Administration, the

Social Security Administration, the American Red Cross, and other agencies served in the JFO in American Samoa. The IMAT worked closely with the American Samoa government to pursue key operational objectives including developing a sheltering strategy, power restoration, debris and hazardous materials removal, mass care, and the provision of individual assistance.

Various Federal agencies sent personnel to American Samoa after the disaster to conduct scientific studies, to assess tsunami damage, or to support other disaster response functions. These personnel deployed under their agency's statutory authorities and were not assigned to the joint Territorial/FEMA-led IMAT. These agency personnel often failed to inform the IMAT of their presence and intended purpose on the island upon arrival to American Samoa. This created several problems for the IMAT. First, the IMAT was unable to account for all Federal personnel within the disaster area. Second, it increased the Federal presence within American Samoa at a time when there were limited resources in the area. Third, it raised the possibility that these Federal personnel could convey information or messages to the American Samoa government or public that had not been coordinated with the IMAT.

To address this issue, the Federal coordinating officer assigned an IMAT staff member to notify him when non-JFO-assigned Federal personnel arrived in American Samoa. The non-JFO-assigned Federal personnel were encouraged to meet with the IMAT and to notify the American Samoa government of their presence and intended purpose for being on the island. This action enabled the IMAT to partner effectively with non-JFO-assigned Federal personnel so that they worked toward common goals in a coordinated manner. It also helped to promote the safety of all Federal personnel working in American Samoa.

After the conclusion of response operations, the FEMA Region IX Response Division decided that during future incidents, it will assign a check-in recorder to monitor non-JFO-assigned Federal personnel arriving in a disaster area.

JFOs and FEMA Regions should consider assigning a check-in recorder to monitor non-JFO- and non-IMAT-assigned Federal personnel arriving at a disaster area.

#### **CITATION**

Federal Emergency Management Agency. *The American Samoa Earthquake, Tsunami, and Flooding (FEMA-1859-DR) Joint Field Office and Pan-Pacific Regional Response Coordination Center After Action Report/Improvement Plan*. 09 Sep 2010.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

*Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov)* is the Department of Homeland Security/Federal Emergency Management Agency's national online network of lessons learned, best practices, and innovative ideas for the emergency management and homeland security communities. The Web site and its contents are provided for informational purposes only, without warranty or guarantee of any kind, and do not represent the official positions of the Department of Homeland Security. For more information on *LLIS.gov*, please email [feedback@llis.dhs.gov](mailto:feedback@llis.dhs.gov) or visit [www.llis.gov](http://www.llis.gov).