



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 the displacement of disaster survivors. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state, local, tribal, and territorial governments (SLTTs) are [responsible](#) for conducting emergency sheltering operations. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) and [FEMA](#) have provided SLTTs with guidance and assistance to safely shelter disaster survivors during the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This Insight discusses emergency sheltering models used by FEMA, [FEMA's pandemic-modified emergency sheltering policies](#), pandemic-related emergency sheltering challenges faced by SLTTs, and policy considerations for Congress.

Emergency Sheltering Options

The federal government may provide assistance to SLTTs when the President declares an emergency or major disaster under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act, 42 U.S.C. §§5121 et seq.). 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. This assistance is commonly referred to as [Public Assistance \(PA\) Category B—Emergency Protective Measures](#). When PA is authorized, FEMA reimburses SLTTs and 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 additional guidance may be issued.

The following sections describe select, PA-authorized emergency sheltering options used during recent and past disasters as well as [FEMA's interim emergency non-congregate sheltering policy](#), effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sheltering options may vary depending on post-disaster needs and [shelter availability](#).

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Congregate Shelters

FEMA usually supports emergency [congregate shelters](#) (i.e., facilities with large, open spaces, such as schools and community centers) and may reimburse associated [costs](#), including facility leasing and utilities, eligible staffing, supplies including food and furnishings, and services including cleaning and medical care.

FEMA has acknowledged the need to ensure compliance with CDC pandemic guidelines in congregate shelters. As part of this effort, FEMA and the American Red Cross assembled “[Pandemic Sheltering Kits](#)” with “privacy walls, first aid kits, cleaning wipes, gloves, masks, thermometers, and other items to ensure safety in shelters.” The kits are available for distribution to SLTTs upon request. To mitigate transmission risk in congregate settings, FEMA recommends that SLTTs plan to implement [protective measures](#) at congregate shelters, including health screening and masking, as well as social distancing and isolation areas.

Per agency guidance, [FEMA will reimburse SLTTs](#) and eligible nonprofits for the costs of diagnostic testing, screening, vaccination, and personal protective equipment offered at emergency shelters opened for new declarations. FEMA will reimburse 100% of eligible costs incurred while operating [vaccination programs](#) that states may execute at the location of shelters that opened for hurricanes, wildfires, or other incidents through [December 31, 2020](#).

Non-Congregate Shelters

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA [has changed its typical policy](#) to [authorize non-congregate sheltering](#) (defined by FEMA as sheltering that affords privacy, such as separate dormitory, hotel, or motel rooms for evacuees from different households) [when necessary](#) to reduce risk of viral exposure or transmission among survivors. The policy is applicable for all Stafford Act declared incidents between June 1 and November 30, 2021, beginning [six days prior to and up to 30 days following an incident](#) (unless FEMA approves an extension). PA Applicants requesting reimbursement must provide [sufficient documentation](#), [meet all PA eligibility requirements](#), and follow [FEMA’s procurement policies](#). Additionally, PA Applicants may not receive assistance that [duplicates assistance](#) from other sources or federal agencies. For example, PA Applicants may not receive reimbursement for the costs of a temporary care facility executed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As with congregate shelters, FEMA [will reimburse](#) certain costs associated with operating [vaccination programs](#) at non-congregate shelters.

The [Transitional Sheltering Assistance \(TSA\)](#) program is a non-congregate sheltering option that uses hotels/motels to transition disaster survivors from emergency shelters to temporary or permanent housing solutions. Due to the pandemic, FEMA issued updated [interim TSA guidance](#), which is in effect until action is taken to revise, rescind, or supersede it. While in effect, FEMA can authorize TSA at the [written request of an affected state/territory/tribe](#) when there is a presidential Stafford Act declaration authorizing assistance under the Individuals and Households Program and emergency sheltering and there is a [demonstrated need for non-congregate sheltering](#). TSA can be provided for [30-180 days from the date of declaration](#). The interim TSA guidance also includes [eligibility](#) information for disaster survivors. Unlike PA-reimbursable emergency sheltering, TSA is provided as [Direct Federal Assistance](#), meaning FEMA directly pays the [lodging providers](#).

Emergency Sheltering Challenges During COVID-19

In 2020 and 2021, emergency managers sheltered disaster survivors in congregate and non-congregate settings, including in the aftermath of [wildfires](#) in the western United States and [Hurricane Ida](#). Challenges and considerations associated with SLTT emergency sheltering efforts include:

- [reducing and controlling COVID-19 transmission](#) among shelter residents,
- establishing and enforcing mask recommendations and [requirements/mandates](#),
- [isolating](#) shelter residents who refuse to wear masks or test positive for COVID-19,
- [opening additional congregate shelters](#) to support social distancing,
- vaccination administration and questions around the [separation of vaccinated and unvaccinated populations](#),
- staffing shortfalls in [shelters for evacuated pets](#), and
- individual [reluctance to evacuate](#) or [go to a shelter](#) due to risk of transmission.

Potential Policy Considerations for Congress

SLTTs bear significant responsibility for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. [Potential congressional considerations](#) to support SLTT emergency sheltering efforts during the pandemic include the following:

- Evaluating the need for new residential eviction moratoria, similar to what was ordered by the [CDC director](#) and recently [rejected by the Supreme Court](#), which could alleviate potential demand for emergency sheltering by eviction-displaced individuals. Some Members of Congress have [introduced legislation](#) that would automatically halt evictions and foreclosures following federally declared disasters.
- Examining options to support SLTT emergency sheltering staff given pandemic-related staffing shortages affecting adjacent social services and industries, including [health care](#), [hospitality](#), and shelters for [homeless populations](#). Direct federal staffing support could be provided, balanced against potential federal personnel capacity constraints.

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