AMERICAN LEGION | National Emergency Fund

PREPARATION GUIDE

What to do before, during and after a natural disaster strikes

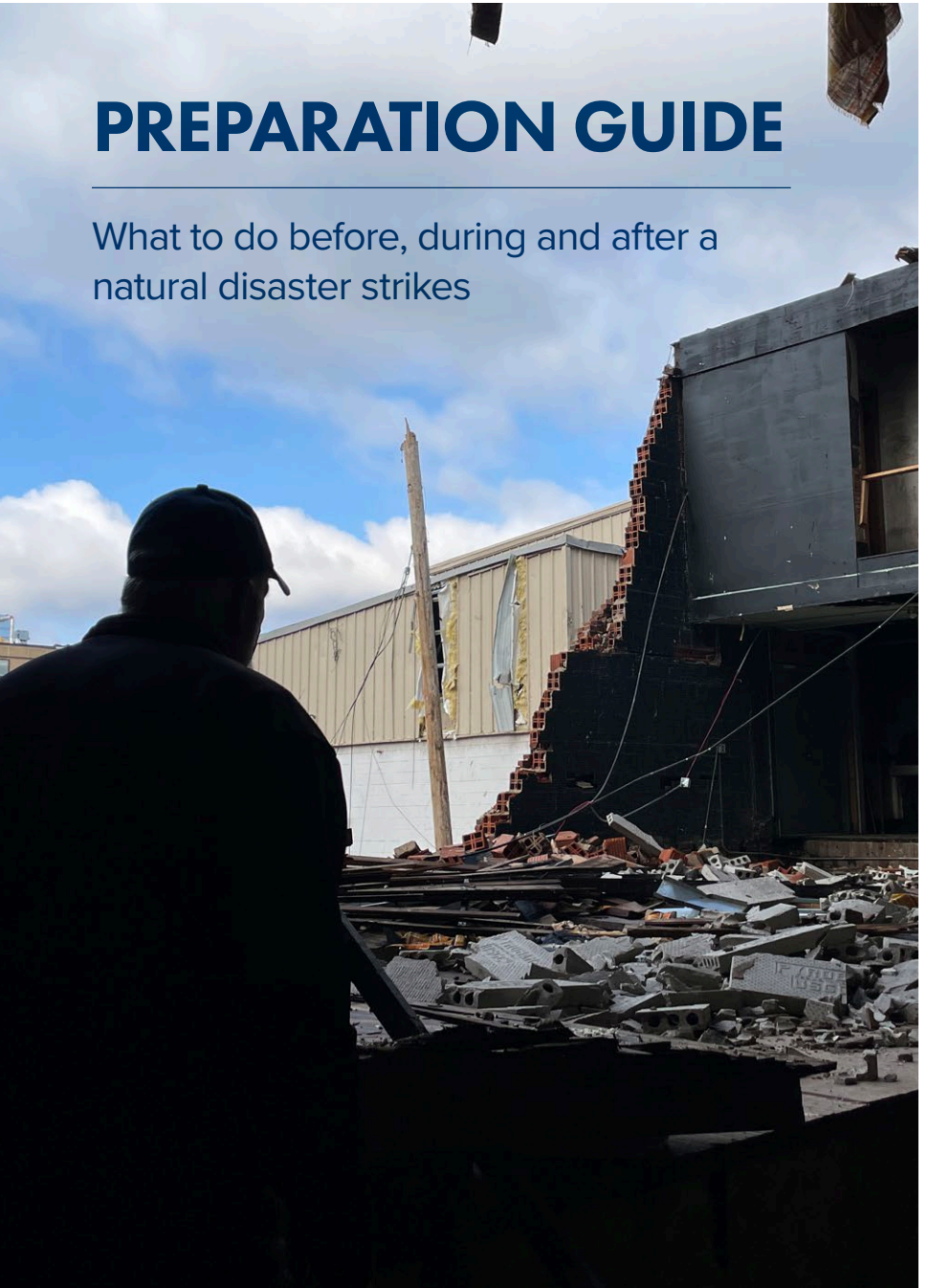


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"The NEF grant kept us going while I was still trying to get other funds raised. If it wasn't for (the grant), we would have been doing nothing."

- *Mark Erskine, past commander of Post 230 in Spring Lake, N.C., which received NEF funds after torrential flooding*



INTRODUCTION

The American Legion National Emergency Fund (NEF) was established to provide immediate financial grants to Legionnaires and Sons of The American Legion (SAL) members who were displaced or evacuated and are recovering from a declared natural disaster, and American Legion posts that sustained damages which will cause programs and events to be impacted.

NEF was created in 1969 as a one-time effort in the wake of Hurricane Camille, which devastated the Gulf Coast – primarily Mississippi, and parts of Louisiana and Alabama. The American Legion's National Executive Committee (NEC) approved a resolution in August that year establishing the fund to "meet the most urgent needs through American Legion channels."

In 1989, NEF was resurrected when Hurricane Hugo pummeled the Carolinas and Puerto Rico. The NEC again pledged $25,000, called for a fundraising drive and approved a resolution stating that any leftover funds would be saved for future natural disasters.

Since then, NEF has provided millions of dollars in direct financial assistance to Legionnaires, SAL and American Legion posts.

This publication serves as a guide for departments and posts to use before, during and in the aftermath of a declared natural disaster.

WHAT TO DO BEFORE AN EMERGENCY

In order for the National Emergency Fund to remain successful, there must be emphasis placed on several critical initiatives before a community faces a natural disaster. These include:

- Establishing a team and game plan to implement when a disaster occurs.
- Identifying resources that can be counted upon during emergencies.
- Understanding how NEF grants work.
- Securing donations that will be used for future NEF grants.

SET UP A TEAM

- Departments should identify their NEF coordinator(s). They should be well-versed in how NEF applications are gathered, how the grants are distributed and have the flexibility to head to disaster scenes at a moment's notice. The individuals should be strong communicators, be able to work through logistical challenges and demonstrate leadership skills.
- Departments in larger states or those that are affected more often by natural disasters should consider identifying regional NEF coordinators. This would help ensure that someone with knowledge of the program can react quickly and, if need be, receive assistance from other coordinators.
- Coordinators should have team members on call to respond to emergencies. Depending on the size and scope of a disaster, a team could be comprised of at least five other people:
    - » Two people to process the applications and follow up with the victims. They would assist with getting information to the claimants, including letting them know when and where to get their check, what additional information is needed and other details.
    - » A driver with a vehicle who would be responsible for picking up supplies for the NEF team (food, water, notebooks, etc.) and victims (clothes, water, boxes, etc.)
    - » A courier who would be responsible for delivering the NEF checks from department headquarters to victims at the staging area.
    - » Someone to spread the word about what The American Legion offers and connect with those eligible for NEF, Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA), Auxiliary Emergency Fund (AEF) or other American Legion programs. This person would be on the ground, finding those who qualify.

IDENTIFY RESOURCES

- The team should create a procedure for establishing a command post. Ideally, this includes a large vehicle to transport bottled water, computer equipment and other supplies. (See the resources page at **legion.org/emergency** for a downloadable checklist of items to bring.)
- Recruit American Legion Family members to be on call for emergencies and establish a phone tree to get a team on the ground quickly. Members of the American Legion Auxiliary and Sons of The American Legion can provide logistical help, assist in distributing food and help in other ways. Ham Radio Clubs can also be valuable in emergency situations.
- Reach out to other organizations such as Team Rubicon, Student Veterans of America, the Red Cross and other immediate responders to establish potential relationships. This can be as simple as meeting with their representatives to understand their programs and explaining what The American Legion can provide.

UNDERSTAND NEF

- Make sure that the coordinators and others on the scene understand the differences between NEF and TFA. This will help in ensuring that coordinators will be able to assess the victims' needs quickly and direct them to the proper application and program.
- Distribute NEF materials to districts and posts so that they can be prepared.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Make sure that coordinators and others understand their mission, have their key players in place and are familiar with the nuances of NEF so that when a disaster strikes, The American Legion can quickly and efficiently provide financial support to Legionnaires, SAL members and posts in need.

ENCOURAGE DONATIONS

The American Legion's NEF program provides grants to affected American Legion and SAL members, and American Legion posts. Donations should be collected year round. Posts can host a special dinner, golf outing, American Legion Riders rally or other fundraising event to create donations and raise awareness.

To donate: Proceeds from fundraisers, individuals or groups may be donated to NEF by visiting **legion.org/emergency** or mailing a check to **The American Legion, Donation Processing, P.O. Box 361626, Indianapolis, IN 46236-1626**.



WHAT TO DO DURING AN EMERGENCY

When a disaster strikes, emergency responders, rescue crews, the National Guard, the Red Cross and others jump into action. To quickly provide NEF grants, Legionnaires must also react quickly.

It's hard to know what a disaster scene will look like or how widespread the damage will be. Often, chaos rules the day. Fortunately, Legionnaires and others with military training will be able to provide leadership, logistics knowledge and quick decision-making skills that will help work through difficult decisions.

ACTIVATE THE TEAM

When a disaster strikes your state, district or community, now is the time to activate the NEF response team. A sense of urgency is critical to get help to those in need. On the ground, it is important to spread the word quickly about what The American Legion can offer victims to other nonprofits, the local media and other groups in the community who have already responded.

Among the first priorities is for the NEF coordinator to secure a van or other large vehicle necessary to transport other volunteers, supplies, cases of water, etc. Depending on the emergency you should also consider bringing equipment that would help get through blocked roads such as chainsaws, crowbars and axes.

ASSIST THOSE WHO NEED HELP

- Find out where the staging area is located. The Red Cross or law-enforcement authorities should be able to provide details.
- Make sure that the coordinator and helpers understand their assignments and have exchanged cell phone numbers.
- Make sure that the person responsible for finding and directing American Legion members to your location is hitting the streets, communicating with partner organizations and reaching out to local posts.
- Download information from **legion.org/publications** about NEF, TFA and other programs that might be applicable to those displaced by the disaster.

PROCESS APPLICATIONS

Members of the NEF response team should follow the standard operating procedure for processing NEF applications:

- Ensure there is a local, state or federal disaster declaration.
- Work with those affected by the disasters to fill out the application completely and accurately, including verification of membership in The American Legion.
- Attach additional supporting data (photos of damage, receipts for temporary lodging and food, gas, etc.).
- Be sure that the applicant keeps all original documentation.
- Send all grant requests to the department adjutant for approval before being forwarded to National Headquarters.
- Stay in touch with the applicants to make sure they know when and where to collect their checks, if the NEF grant is approved.

SPREAD THE WORD

- Contact the local media and let them know that The American Legion is distributing grants and that the coordinator is available for interviews. Also, send out a press release so that the local media can help distribute information about NEF, how to apply, where to go and more.
- Contact National Headquarters to let them know the scope of the disaster, who the points of contact are, and make sure you understand what's needed for the NEF applications.

- Use social media to communicate. Work with your post's or department's social media coordinator to share photos and updates on how you are helping American Legion Family members. Posts that tag the National Headquarters Facebook page (**facebook.com/americanlegionhq**) or X account (**@AmericanLegion**) will be shared with the followers.



WHAT TO DO AFTER AN EMERGENCY

In the aftermath of an emergency or natural disaster, there is a lot of work to be done: rebuilding physical structures and healing the lives of those affected. NEF grants will provide immediate relief to those affected.

An NEF coordinator's role does not end when he or she finishes assisting applicants as they fill out the proper paperwork. After the initial work to locate Legionnaires and SAL members and submit their paperwork, there are still tasks to be completed.

ENSURE CHECKS ARE DELIVERED

It takes about a week for checks to be delivered from the National Headquarters to the department headquarters. As the processors are taking the applications, they should use a spreadsheet to document the details: name, contact information, etc. A sample spreadsheet created by National Headquarters has been provided to departments and is available on the resources page at **legion.org/emergency**.

It is also recommended to use this sheet to follow up with those who have not received their checks. Contact them to coordinate when and where they can receive their checks.

KEEP COMMUNICATING

NEF coordinators should conduct discussions with their team members soon after the NEF work is completed. Find out what worked well, what did not work well and what improvements should be implemented before the next disaster occurs. NEF coordinators are encouraged to make recommendations to their department leadership.

ENCOURAGE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

After leading a team through the NEF process in a disaster aftermath, the NEF coordinator has unique knowledge and perspective. Consider discussing with your department leadership what you learned and what would be helpful for other communities in the event of a disaster. What you learned also may serve as a good session during a department convention.

GENERATE GOOD PR

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, you most likely came in contact with members of the local media. As you finalize grants and other assistance, this would be a good time to reach out to the media again for positive coverage. For example, you could write a letter to the editor and/or issue a press release detailing the number of grants and money distributed to victims. The media often looks for positive stories after an emergency, so you could also suggest stories on how a post building or veteran's home is recovering in the aftermath.

HELP THOSE IN NEED

After a community recovers from disaster, there is often a desire to give back. At the same time, charities such as the National Emergency Fund need to replenish their coffers. This is a good time to consider a fundraising drive for future emergencies.

To raise money: Fundraisers such as motorcycle runs, fish fries or raffles are great ways to gather donations. Another American Legion post, American Legion Auxiliary unit, Sons of The American Legion squadron or American Legion Riders chapter can assist in sponsoring or promoting a fundraiser for NEF.

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