

FEMA GETTING ASSISTANCE TO INDIVIDUALS

WASHINGTON, DC - As the response efforts to get people out of harms way and placed in safe clean environments continues, the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency is reaching out to individuals and assisting them in the application process for disaster assistance. The registration process is one of the first steps in receiving aid through FEMA's programs, and assistance is being expedited to assist those in need.

Expedited assistance to help people with their emergency needs of food, shelter, clothing, and personal necessities is being made available to individuals as they apply to FEMA on line at www.fema.gov, or by calling 1-800-621-FEMA (3362), TTY 800-462-7585. FEMA personnel are fanning across the nation visiting shelters and setting up disaster recovery centers staffed with individuals to assist in the process of providing expedited assistance.

"We realize that many victims do not have access to the usual means of even registering for assistance, and FEMA is initiating efforts to bring the registration process to those in need," said Homeland Security's Principal Federal Official for Hurricane Katrina response and head of FEMA Michael D. Brown.

Currently, the amount of money being distributed through the expedited assistance program is \$2,000 per household. This expedited assistance is made available by FEMA to those residents severely impacted by disasters from Mississippi and Louisiana who do not have the usual means of identifying damage to their property or unable to provide the immediate documentation necessary.

This emergency assistance is provided to help with disaster needs such as transportation, clothing, rental housing, other housing accommodations, and food, and is included in the calculation of total benefits for which victims are eligible.

Once individuals register with FEMA for assistance, funds will be made available either through the use of electronic transfer to put funds directly in individuals' bank accounts, debit cards in some locations, or by check that can be delivered directly to individuals through the US Postal Service. The US Postal Service and FEMA have been coordinating to be sure mail is able to be forwarded and delivered to individuals staying in shelters.

In instances where individuals do not have access to direct deposit banking means, or are unable to receive checks, FEMA is also implementing a new assistance delivery tool of issuing debit cards to the thousand of evacuees at the Houston Astrodome. The program at the Astrodome, in coordination with the US Treasury, will consist of FEMA teams assisting people in the registration process, with additional assistance from the banking community to deliver the debit card on site.

Once the registration process is complete, individuals without electronic funds transfer (EFT) will receive their card with a personal identification number (PIN) and the assistance will be loaded onto the card within 24 hours, allowing the debit cards to be used at any automated cash machine (ATM), or at any location accepting bank cards with the *MasterCard* logo. Those with EFT capabilities do not have to wait 24 hours as their funds will transfer quickly.

The use of the debit card program may also be offered in other large shelters where FEMA has assisted in moving the evacuees into those areas.

The emergency funds distributed through debit cards do not provide victims with more assistance than what others may get, but simply utilizes a new delivery method for expedited assistance. The expedited assistance being made available to individuals will only be a portion of the total assistance many people may need, and normal eligibility determinations will result in subsequent payments of assistance in the future.

Affected individuals in designated counties can register online for disaster assistance at www.fema.gov or call FEMA's toll-free registration line 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) - TTY 800-462-7585. Victims are encouraged to register on-line due to the possibility of high call volume. If registering by phone, owners of commercial properties and residents with only minor losses are urged to wait a few days before calling so those whose homes were destroyed or heavily damaged can be served first. Phone lines are open 24-hours, 7 days a week.

FEMA prepares the nation for all hazards and manages federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident. FEMA also initiates mitigation activities, trains first responders, works with state and local emergency managers, and manages the National Flood Insurance Program and the U.S. Fire Administration. FEMA became part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on March 1, 2003.

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