

The Virgin Islands Consortium

FEMA Says It's Working To Ensure Equal Access To All Hurricane Survivors

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To ensure all U.S. Virgin Islanders have equal access to disaster assistance programs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is coordinating with federal, territorial and local agencies as well as volunteer organizations to identify survivors' needs and connect them with resources, the federal agency said Wednesday.

"Disasters negatively affect everyone in the community, but senior citizens and individuals with disabilities or access and functional needs often face additional challenges," said FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer William Vogel. "Ensuring disaster survivors have the resources to participate fully in the recovery process is our commitment to all Virgin Islanders."

FEMA's Disability Integration team has been in the Virgin Islands since Hurricane Irma to help coordinate the broad effort to assist all survivors. Team members are working closely with FEMA Individual Assistance specialists, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Virgin Islands Department of Health Services, the American Red Cross, the territory's aging and social services programs and other partners to get goods and services to the islands' most vulnerable survivors. These include medical services and durable medical equipment, pharmacies that can meet medication needs, relief supplies provided by voluntary agencies and many other services.

They also visit survivors in their homes to check on their well-being and ensure their needs are being met.

"Our top priority is to make sure no one gets left behind as we deliver assistance to all disaster survivors," said Roxann Crawford, who leads FEMA's Disability Integration team in the U.S. Virgin Islands. "Our specialists are out in the communities every day, making connections with survivors who may have been disproportionately impacted by the disasters."

In coordination with territorial agencies and volunteer organizations, Disability Integration works with senior centers, local American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, disability rights and independent living centers, and special education programs. They attend these groups' meetings to share post-disaster health and safety tips, important community updates such as boil water advisories, as well as locations that are providing supplies, emergency food, first aid and medical care. The specialists also assist in getting survivors registered with FEMA for assistance.

In addition, Disability Integration has worked with FEMA's External Affairs staff to develop videos in American Sign Language (ASL) for posting on FEMA's Facebook page at www.Facebook.com/FEMAUSVirginIslands. And the team ensures Disaster Recovery Centers across the territory are set up to fully accommodate survivors. The recovery centers are all physically accessible, and are equipped with amplified and captioned phones, assisted listening devices, magnifiers and video relay interpreting on iPads.

The team also provides ASL interpreters for meetings and for survivors who request this assistance during their housing inspection. Survivors may ask for an ASL interpreter at the time the housing appointment is made or they may call the FEMA Helpline at 800-621-3362. Disaster survivors who are deaf, hard-of-hearing or have a speech disability and use a TTY may call 800-462-7585. Those who use 711 or Video Relay Service may call 800-621-3362.

"All hurricane survivors are encourage to call the FEMA Helpline to let us know if there is a need our Disability Integration staff can help with," said Crawford. "FEMA is just one part of the massive recovery effort in the Virgin Islands. If we don't have the assistance you need, we can put you in touch with partners who may be able to help."