

Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Program: Frequently Asked Questions

This document addresses Frequently Asked Questions related to the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Program. Applicants should refer to the SAFER Program Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for full details and application requirements.

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General Program Questions

What is the purpose of the SAFER Program?

The purpose of the SAFER Program is to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to assist with increasing the number of firefighters to help communities meet industry minimum standards, to attain 24-hour staffing to provide adequate protection from fire and fire-related hazards, and to fulfill traditional missions of fire departments. The SAFER Program is separated into two activities: Hiring of Firefighters (Hiring) Activity and Recruitment and Retention (R&R) Activity. Using a competitive process that is informed by fire service subject-matter experts, grants in both activities are awarded to applicants whose requests best address the priorities of the SAFER Program.

What changes were made to the SAFER Program since last year?

The SAFER Program NOFO contains information on Program Updates in the appendix.

What do I need to know about Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation (EHP)?

SAFER Program projects that involve the installation of supplies/equipment not specifically excluded from a FEMA EHP Review, per the Grant Programs Directorate Programmatic Environmental Assessment, such as ground-disturbing activities, or modification/renovation of existing buildings or structures, will require an EHP review. Some equipment activities will require an EHP review, as well. Such activities include but are not limited to:

- Building renovations, such as removal of wall or installation of electrical or waterlines;
- Training/exercises in natural settings, such as rope or swift water;
- Installation of LED signs; and
- Any scope of work that involves ground disturbances.

Please see FEMA's EHP Screening form and instructions at EHP Screening Form. EHP policy guidance can be found at [Preparedness Grants EHP Compliance webpage](#). Recipients will be notified of their EHP responsibilities in the grant award package.

It is FEMA policy that actions initiated and/or completed without fulfilling the specific EHP requirements will not be considered for funding.

Who is eligible to apply under the SAFER Program?

Eligible applicants for the SAFER Program include fire departments; any federally recognized Indian tribe or tribal organization; and national, regional, state, local, tribal, and nonprofit interest organizations representing the interests of volunteer firefighters.

How do I determine whether I represent a volunteer, combination, or career fire department or a national, regional, state, local, tribal, and nonprofit volunteer firefighter interest organization?

A **volunteer fire department**, as defined in 15 U.S.C. § 2229, has an all-volunteer force of firefighting personnel. For a fire department to have an all-volunteer force, no member may receive financial compensation (in the form of salary or wages) for their services other than life and health insurance, workers' compensation insurance, and/or a nominal stipend per call. For the purposes of this SAFER Program, a department whose membership is comprised of all volunteer firefighters, including any paid-on-call firefighters who receive only a nominal stipend, will be considered a volunteer fire department.

A **career department**, as defined in 15 U.S.C. § 2229, has an all-paid force of firefighting personnel other than paid-on-call firefighters. Fire departments that provide reimbursement on a paid-on-call basis are considered a combination fire department for the purposes of this program.

A **combination department**, as defined in 15 U.S.C. § 2229, has paid firefighting personnel and volunteer firefighting personnel. At a minimum, a combination fire department must have at least one active firefighter who receives financial compensation for services (including paid-on-call) and at least one active firefighter who does not receive financial compensation for services other than life, health, and workers' compensation insurance.

For the purposes of this SAFER Program, a department whose membership is composed of any paid-on-call firefighters who receive more than a nominal stipend will be considered a combination fire department.

FEMA considers a department to be combination majority volunteer if more than 50 percent of its membership is made up of personnel who do not receive financial compensation for services. Departments are considered combination majority career if more than 50% of the active firefighting membership is salaried staff.

A **national, regional, state, local, tribal, and nonprofit volunteer firefighter interest organization** is defined as an organization that supports or represents the interests of firefighters in front of legislative bodies at the local, state, tribal, and federal level. Such organizations include but are not limited to state or local firefighter and/or fire chiefs' associations, volunteer firefighter relief organizations, and associations. FEMA shall make the final determination as to whether an applicant is an appropriate volunteer firefighter interest group.

Fire departments applying for a regional grant on behalf of itself and other participating fire departments are not considered an interest organization.

What activities may I apply for under the SAFER Program?

The SAFER Program is separated into two activities:

Hiring Activity: Provides federal financial assistance to help fire departments hire new, additional firefighters (or change the status of part-time or paid-on-call firefighters to full-time firefighters), and to rehire laid off firefighters or retain firefighters facing imminent layoff. National, regional, state, local, tribal, and nonprofit interest organizations are not eligible to apply for funding under the Hiring Activity.

R&R Activity: Assists volunteer and combination fire departments and national, regional, state, local, federally recognized tribal, and nonprofit interest organizations with the recruitment and/or retention of volunteer firefighters who are involved with or trained in the operations of firefighting and emergency response. Career fire departments are not eligible to apply for funding under the R&R Activity.

How many applications may I submit?

Eligible applicants may submit only one application for each eligible activity under the SAFER Program (one under the Hiring Activity and/or one under the R&R Activity). Applicants interested in applying under both the Hiring Activity and the R&R Activity must submit two separate applications, one for each activity. All submissions of duplicate applications may be disqualified.

Applications differ based on the applicant type. For example, the Hiring Activity application will be different from the fire department application for the R&R Activity; the R&R Activity application will be different for a fire department than an interest organization. Be sure to select the appropriate applicant type when applying. Applications submitted under the wrong type (e.g., regional fire department R&R Activity application applied through the interest organization application) will be deemed ineligible.

I have an open SAFER Program award(s). May I still apply under the next application period?

Yes. However, because the possibility exists that the period of performance on the open grant award(s) and the next grant period of performance will overlap, you need to ensure that the start of your new grant does not depend on the completion of your open grant(s), or that receipt of a new award will not impact your ability to continue with and/or complete your open grant award(s). The grant activities requested in the new grant must supplement the current award(s) and cannot be for the same activities, expenditures, or personnel funded under the open grant award(s). Applicants with an active SAFER Program award who wish to apply under another SAFER open application period are subject to the guidelines and requirements outlined in the SAFER Program NOFO.

How much funding is available under the SAFER Program?

Please review the SAFER Program NOFO, which defines funds appropriated as part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (Pub. L. No. 117-103). However, the following specific funding parameters are either required by law or are the outcome of recommendations from the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program Criteria Development Panel:

- 10% of the funding is set aside for grants awarded to all volunteer or majority volunteer departments for hiring of firefighters.
 - If FEMA awards less than 10% of the funds available for the hiring of firefighters to volunteer and majority volunteer fire departments, it will transfer the remaining funds to provide grants for the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.
- 10% of the funding is set aside for the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.

- No more than 33% of the total amount allocated for the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters can be awarded to national, regional, state, local, territorial, or federally recognized tribal organizations that represent the interests of volunteer firefighters.

What is the maximum amount of funding a recipient may be awarded?

There is no maximum award amount for SAFER Program awards. However, it is important to note that all awarded SAFER Program costs and activities must be incurred, received, and completed within the period of performance; therefore, applicants should carefully consider what costs and activities they can reasonably accomplish within the period of performance.

Is there a cost share for all applicants?

Please review the SAFER Program NOFO for specific information on cost share.

When will the awards be announced?

Award announcements will be made at the beginning of the summer and on a continuous basis thereafter until all available funds have been awarded, but no later than September 30th.

Recipients are notified via email and through the FEMA Grants Outcomes (FEMA GO) system of the award offer and must accept their awards no later than 30 calendar days from the award date. The recipient must notify FEMA of its intent to accept and proceed with work under the award through the FEMA GO system. Funds will remain on hold until the recipient accepts the award through the FEMA GO system and all other conditions of the award have been satisfied, or until the award is otherwise rescinded. Failure to accept a grant award within the specified timeframe may result in a loss of funds.

Recipients may request additional time to accept the award if needed.

When a SAFER Program award is accepted, when does the period of performance start?

The period of performance under the Hiring Activity is 36 months for all grants awarded. A default 180-day recruitment period, which allows grant recipients to begin hiring SAFER Program-funded firefighters, begins when FEMA approves the application for an award under this activity. The 36-month period of performance automatically starts after the 180-day recruitment period, regardless of whether the recipient has successfully hired the requested firefighters.

The period of performance under the R&R Activity is 12, 24, 36, or 48 months for all grants awarded. A default 90-day recruitment period, which allows recipients time to gather resources, initiate processes, and finalize contracts needed to implement SAFER Program grant activities, begins when FEMA approves the application for award. The period of performance automatically starts after the 90-day recruitment period ends, regardless of whether the recipient is ready to begin implementing its grant award.

Application Questions

What are some important reminders for each year?

The online SAFER Program application is only available in the [FEMA GO application portal](#).

- Applicants must complete the following to start and submit a SAFER Program application: The applicant organization must be currently registered and active in the System for Award Management (SAM) to apply. Applicants are advised that FEMA may not make a federal award until the applicant has complied with all applicable SAM requirements. Therefore, an applicant's SAM registration must be active not only at the time of application, but also during the application review period and when FEMA is ready to make a federal award. SAM is available from Grants.gov at [Register with SAM \(grants.gov\)](#).
- Effective April 4, 2022, the federal government transitioned from using the Data Universal Number System or DUNS number to a new, non-proprietary identifier known as a Unique Entity Identifier or UEI. For entities that have an active registration in the System for Award Management (SAM) prior to this date, the UEI has automatically been assigned and no action is necessary. For all entities filing a new registration in SAM.gov after April 4, 2022, the UEI will be assigned to that entity as part of the SAM.gov registration.
- FEMA GO has also been updated to use the UEI as the Primary Entity Identifier for registered organizations.
- New registrations in both SAM and FEMA GO will require the use of the UEI.
- For more information about the transition, go to [GSAFSD Service Portal Landing-- GSA Federal Service Desk Service Portal](#) and select the green "Help" on UEI Transition button.
- Additional information about UEI and FEMA GO is provided in the [FEMA GO Startup Guide](#).

What is program income?

Although not common, recipients may generate income while carrying out grant-supported activities during the period of performance under the SAFER Program award. This is referred to as program income. This income can be used to defray program costs, where appropriate, consistent with 2 CFR § 200.307. The Budget Summary section of the grant application contains a field for program income. The response should be \$0 unless the recipient anticipates generating program income during the period of performance. If the recipient plans to generate program income, it should be explained in the narrative. The FEMA GO application will not include program income estimates in the total budget. FEMA will review the program income submitted and adjust the budget as appropriate, prior to award. Any program income must be used and managed in accordance with 2 C.F.R. § 200.307.

What is Management and Administration (M&A)?

M&A costs are administrative expenses that are incurred during the administration of a SAFER Program award. Applicants may apply for M&A costs if the costs are directly related to the implementation of the program for which

they are applying. M&A costs are identifiable costs directly associated with the implementation and management of the grant and cannot exceed 3% of the federal share of SAFER Program funds awarded. If you are requesting M&A expenses, you must list the costs under the "Other" category in the budget and explain the purpose for the administrative costs in your Project Narrative. All M&A costs must be in accordance with 2 C.F.R. Part 225, Cost Principles for state, local and Indian Tribal Governments (OMB Circular A-87) or 2 C.F.R. Part 230, Cost Principles for Non-Profit Organizations (OMB Circular A-122), as applicable and should be based on actual expenses only, not a percentage of the overall grant.

M&A costs are not eligible under the Hiring Activity.

Where do I submit the federally approved Indirect Cost Rate Agreement?

Applicants required to have a negotiated indirect cost rate agreement that desire to charge indirect costs to an award must provide a copy of their negotiated indirect cost rate agreement at the time of application. Applicants that are not required by 2 C.F.R. Part 200 to have a negotiated indirect cost rate agreement but are required by 2 C.F.R. Part 200 to develop an indirect cost rate proposal must provide a copy of their proposal at the time of application. Copies of the indirect cost rate agreements or proposals, along with the SAFER Program application number, must be submitted electronically to FireGrants@fema.dhs.gov. Please ensure that the request details budget portion of your application includes information pertaining to your indirect cost rate agreement or proposal. Post-award requests to charge indirect costs will be considered on a case-by-case basis and based upon the submission of an agreement or proposal as discussed above or based upon on the de minimis rate or cost allocation plan, as applicable.

Indirect costs are not allowable under the Hiring Activity.

What standards does the SAFER Program focus on?

The SAFER Program focuses on the Deployment or Staffing and Deployment compliance standards of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA):

- NFPA 1710 Assembly Requirements – Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Department (Section 5.2.4.1 – Single-Family Dwelling Initial Full Alarm Assignment Capability): This standard applies primarily to career fire departments and combination departments if the combination department chooses it.
- NFPA 1720 Assembly Requirements – Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments (Section 4.3 – Staffing and Deployment): This standard applies primarily to all-volunteer fire departments, but it may also apply to combination departments if the combination department does not choose to comply with the NFPA 1710 standard.

FEMA prioritizes bringing non-compliant (NFPA 1710 or 1720) departments into compliance in the most cost-effective manner.

Do applicants have to report to the National Fire Incident Reporting System?

No. FEMA does not require SAFER Program applicants to report to the National Fire Incident Reporting System.

Do applicants have to comply with the National Incident Management System?

SAFER Program applicants are not required to comply with the [National Incident Management System \(NIMS\)](#) to apply for federal assistance under the SAFER Program. However, any applicant who receives a SAFER Program award must achieve the level of NIMS compliance required by the Authority Having Jurisdiction over the applicant's emergency service operations (e.g., a local government), prior to the end of the grant's period of performance.

SAFER Hiring

What type of firefighter positions will be funded under the Hiring Activity?

Grants awarded under the Hiring Activity enable all volunteer, combination, and career fire departments to restore staffing levels to attain a more effective level of response and a safer incident scene. FEMA awards Hiring Activity grants directly to volunteer, combination, and career fire departments to help fire departments increase their cadre of frontline firefighters by providing financial assistance in three categories:

- **Rehire:** Rehiring firefighters who were laid off within the two years prior to the start of the application period outlined in the NOFO;
- **Retention:** Retaining firefighters facing imminent layoff – within 120 days of the close of the application period outlined in the NOFO; and
- **New Hire:** Hire new, additional firefighters.

What are the eligible expenses under the Hiring Activity?

The only eligible expenses are the salary and associated benefits (actual payroll expenses) for the positions funded under the SAFER Program grant. Costs are reimbursable if they are included as part of the standard package, available to all operational firefighter positions, contractually obligated, and reimbursed via payroll. Compensation for a firefighter's normal, contracted work schedule is reimbursable, but overtime costs are not eligible for reimbursement by the SAFER Program grant award (including overtime for holdovers, extra shifts, to attend training, etc.). Only costs for overtime that the fire department routinely pays as a part of the base salary or a firefighter's regularly scheduled and contracted shift hours, in order to comply with the Fair Labor Standards Act, are eligible.

What are the requirements if applying under the Rehire or Retention categories?

Eligible positions for funding under the **Rehire** category must have been laid off in the two years prior to the start of the application period outlined in the NOFO. Copies of the official, signed, and issued layoff notices will be required at the time of application.

Firefighters who have been issued a formal layoff notice, which includes a specific date for the layoff action, prior to the start of the application period, and those who face imminent layoff – within 120 days of the close of the application period outlined in the NOFO – are eligible for SAFER Program funding under the **Retention** category. Copies of the official, signed, and issued layoff notices will be required at the time of application.

Eligible positions under the **Retention** category must be employees of the department at the time the application is submitted. Note: if a retention position becomes vacant after the application is submitted, departments must fill the vacancy with a new hire in order to maintain the operational staffing level.

A layoff notice that is not executed within the specified terms will be considered void unless an additional notice is provided within 14 days of the original action date will not qualify for funding in the Rehire or Retention categories.

Applicants who do not meet these parameters must apply under the New Hire category.

Any layoff action not executed in accordance with the terms of the official layoff notice, or which does not meet the above requirements, will not qualify for funding in the Rehire or Retention categories. Applicants who do not meet these parameters must apply under the New Hire category.

SAFER Recruitment and Retention

What are the eligible expenses under the R&R Activity?

Applicants must correlate the activities for which funding is being requested with the identified recruitment and/or retention problems/issues being addressed. SAFER Program grant funds may only be used for volunteer firefighters who are involved with, or trained in, the operations of firefighting and emergency response. FEMA will not provide funding for a budgeted line item if an applicant does not provide enough information detailing how the item and/or activity will enhance the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. Allowable costs may be limited to reasonable amounts, as determined by FEMA.

All grant-related purchases and activities must be incurred, received, and completed within the period of performance. Additionally, all funded activities under the R&R Activity must be governed by formally adopted Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Minimally, these SOPs should specify who qualifies for each of the incentives, specific requirements for earning the incentives, and the disposition of the awarded incentives if an individual fails to fulfill the stipulations. FEMA may ask for copies of SOPs prior to, or after a grant is awarded.

Examples of eligible expenses include but are not limited to the following:

- Marketing Program (e.g., media and print advertising) to recruit new volunteer firefighters;
- New recruit basic training;
- Leadership/career development training; and

- Personal Protective Equipment for new recruits.

For the full list of eligible and ineligible costs, please refer to the Programmatic Information and Priorities, in the SAFER Program NOFO.

How is “new recruit” defined according to the SAFER Program?

The SAFER Program defines a “new recruit” as a volunteer that joins the department with the intent to serve as a firefighter after the recipient is notified of the grant award (e.g., the date of the award notification email in FEMA GO).

Does the SAFER Program allow regional applications?

Yes. Eligible applicants may apply for a regional R&R Activity grant if the request will have a direct regional or local benefit beyond the immediate boundaries of the applicant’s first-due response area. Direct regional or local benefit means that other eligible organizations will receive a portion of the grant awarded funds, or the department will receive items purchased with the grant funds.

An eligible applicant will serve as the “host applicant” and can apply for funding on behalf of itself and any number of other participating R&R Activity eligible organizations. The application must include a list of all the participating organizations, including the point of contact information and EIN for each organization benefitting from a proposed regional project.

If awarded, the host applicant must agree to be responsible for all aspects of the grant. This includes but is not limited to accountability for all assets and all reporting requirements. Regional host applicants and participating partner agencies must execute a Memorandum of Understanding or equivalent document, signed by all parties participating in the award, before applying under the Regional Program activities.

The Hiring Activity is not eligible as a regional project.

Application Process

How do I apply for a SAFER Program grant?

The online SAFER Program application is available through the [FEMA GO application portal](#). The application will also be linked with the [U.S. Fire Administration’s website](#) and the [Grants.gov website](#).

Which internet browsers are compatible with FEMA GO?

FEMA GO is compatible with the most recent major release of Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Apple Safari, and Microsoft Edge. Users who attempt to use tablet type devices or other browsers may encounter issues with using FEMA GO.

When can I apply?

Applications will only be accepted during the application period outlined in the NOFO. FEMA GO automatically records proof of timely submission and the system generates an electronic date/time stamp when FEMA GO successfully receives the application. The individual with the Authorized Organization Representative role that submitted the application will also receive the official date/time stamp and a FEMA GO tracking number in an email serving as proof of their timely submission on the date and time that FEMA GO received the application.

Applications not received by the application submission deadline will not be accepted. Applicants using unreliable internet connections, such as dial-up connections, should be aware that submission can take some time before FEMA GO receives your application.

Applicants who experience system-related issues will be addressed until 3 p.m. ET on the day the application closes. No new system-related issues will be addressed after this deadline.

Do I need to register with the System for Award Management (SAM)?

Yes. Per 2 C.F.R. § 25.205, SAM registration is required to both begin and submit a SAFER Program application in the FEMA GO system. Organizational SAM.gov registrations are only active for one year and must be renewed annually. Therefore, applicants must ensure the applicant entity has a valid and active registration in SAM.gov before starting an application.

Step-by-step instructions for registering with SAM can be found at [SAM.gov | Entity Registrations](#). Applicants should contact SAM.gov with questions or concerns about their SAM registration.

DHS may not make a federal award to an applicant until the applicant has complied with all applicable DUNS/UEI and SAM requirements. An applicant's SAM registration must be active not only at the time of application, but also during the application review period and when FEMA is ready to make a federal award. If an applicant has not fully complied with the requirements by the time DHS is ready to make a federal award, DHS may determine that the applicant is not qualified to receive a federal award and may make a federal award to another applicant.

The submission of payment requests and amendments are also contingent on the information provided in the entity's SAM.gov registration. It is imperative that all information in the application is correct, current, and matches the information in the SAM.gov registration. Please ensure that your organization's name, address, DUNS number, and Employer Identification Number (EIN) are up to date in SAM.gov and that the DUNS number used in SAM.gov is the same number used to apply for all other FEMA grant program awards.

More information on SAM.gov may be located in the SAFER Program NOFO and on the [Assistance to Firefighters Grant Programs Website](#). If applicants have questions or concerns about a SAM registration, please contact the [Federal Support Desk](#) or call (866) 606-8220, Monday – Friday between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. ET.

May I change or edit my application after it has been submitted?

You will be able to review or edit the entire application prior to submission. However, if you would like to edit or change your application after submission, you will need to withdraw the application from consideration of award. The

application must then be resubmitted to FEMA prior to the application submission deadline to be considered for an award.

How are the applications reviewed and selected for funding?

SAFER Program applications are reviewed through a multi-phase process. All applications are electronically pre-scored and ranked based on how well they align with the funding priorities outlined in the SAFER Program NOFO.

Applications are then scored competitively by no less than three members of a Peer Review Panel.

Applications with the highest score rankings per activity will also be evaluated through a series of internal FEMA review processes for completeness, adherence to programmatic guidelines, technical feasibility, costs/quantities, and anticipated effectiveness of the proposed project(s).

How important is it to address all Narrative Statements in the application?

The Narrative Statements of the application must provide unique and specific details about the activity for which applicants seek funding, including budget details. Peer Review Panelists will evaluate and score each activity based on the narrative elements within each activity. The weighted evaluation criteria used by the peer reviewers in determining the grant award, as described in the NOFO, make up the elements of the Narrative Statements' score.

Under the Hiring Activity, the peer review panel score is 50% of the total application score. Under the R&R Activity applications, the peer review panel score is 70% of the total application score.

Note: FEMA conducts reviews of a random sampling of applications to compare them for duplication including the narrative statements and statistical data. Therefore, all elements of the narrative statements must be specific and unique to the applying entity, and all statistical data must be accurate.

Applications with narrative statements that have substantial duplication of statements, sentences, or paragraphs to other submitted applications, and/or inaccurate data that may mislead reviewers may be disqualified. Discovery of falsification, fabrication, or plagiarism of other grant proposals will disqualify the application(s).

What are the character limitations for text boxes in FEMA GO?

The Narrative Statements blocks do not allow for formatting. Do not type the Narrative Statements using only capital letters. Additionally, do not include tables, special characters, or fonts (e.g., quotation marks, bullets), or graphs. Space for the Narrative Statements is limited. Although each element must have a minimum of 200 characters, the maximum number of total characters is 3,000 per each narrative element, except Financial Need, which is 4,000 characters.

FEMA Contacts

How can I help FEMA prevent fraud, waste, and abuse?

If you have information about instances of fraud, waste, abuse, or mismanagement involving FEMA programs or operations, you should contact the Department of Homeland Security [Office of Inspector General Hotline](#), at 1-800-323-8603, or by fax at 202-254-4297.

How can I obtain help with the application?

The SAFER Program Help Desk at 866-274-0960 will be available to provide technical assistance with completing your SAFER Program application(s).

During the application period, the Help Desk will be staffed between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. ET, Monday through Friday; and until 5 p.m. ET on the last day of the application period. However, these hours may change as the application period progresses. The toll-free number also accepts voicemail messages after hours or if the line is busy. Questions may also be e-mailed to FireGrants@fema.dhs.gov.

Where can I find SAFER Program documents and other information?

You can find SAFER Program documents and additional information on the [Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Program webpage](#).

How do I sign-up for e-mail notifications about the SAFER Program?

To register for automatic e-mail notices of NOFO availability and other important program information go to: [Signup for FEMA Email Updates](#).