

FEMA Extending Public Assistance to Houses of Worship Is Welcome News to Religious Leaders in Northwest Florida

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Religious leaders whose houses of worship were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Michael can apply for FEMA's Public Assistance program, as many continue to contribute to their communities' recovery despite their own losses.

More than 100 leaders traveled through devastated communities in mid-November to hear about the January 2018 federal rules change that allows houses of worship to be eligible for federal Public Assistance without regard to their secular or religious nature. The theme of the summits was "The critical role of faith-based organizations in community response and recovery after disasters."

"I am praying like all the rest of you that this will help us," said Dr. Michael Claunch, senior pastor of St. Andrews Baptist Church which was host to the first summit in Panama City and attended by about 60 leaders. A second summit Friday afternoon was held at Riverwood Community Church in Marianna with approximately 50 attending.

"I am your biggest fan because, around the world, I have seen what faith-based communities can do," said Kevin Smith, who conducted the two summits engaging the religious leaders with disaster specialists from the State of Florida and FEMA.



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Smith is the director of the Faith and Opportunity Initiatives for the Department of Homeland Security. The Land of Lakes, Fla. resident served as state director for the Salvation Army for 16 years through many disasters. He and the disaster team urged the leaders to apply for Public Assistance before the Dec. 14th deadline.

The rules change, contained in the federal budget that passed in January, made houses of worship owned or operated by private nonprofit organizations eligible applicants for Public Assistance.

Houses of worship interested in receiving reimbursement for repair costs must first submit a Request for Public Assistance through the State of Florida at <https://floridapa.org>.

Houses of worship who have questions about the Public Assistance request process can also email rpa.help@em.myflorida.com.

FEMA will provide financial assistance for repair costs not covered by insurance or the SBA loan. FEMA may still provide PA funding if the house of worship is denied a loan or if the loan is insufficient to cover repair costs.

Houses of worship deemed eligible for Public Assistance are still subject to the 25 percent non-federal cost share and must apply for a U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) loan as do other private nonprofits.

"Submitting a Request for Public Assistance will get the Public Assistance process started," Smith told the leaders.

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FEMA's mission: Helping people before, during, and after disasters.

For a list of resources available to individuals and businesses affected by Hurricane Michael, visit www.floridadisaster.org/info

For more Hurricane Michael recovery information, visit www.fema.gov/disaster/4399.

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