



FEMA

OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
PARTNERS IN SHAPING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES



## Environmental and Historic Preservation (EHP) Fact Sheet: Community Safe Rooms

Environmental resources, cultural institutions, and historic assets define communities and contribute to their well-being and unique character. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plays a critical role in helping communities incorporate environmental stewardship and historic preservation into emergency management decisions. As disasters continue to challenge our nation and communities grapple with issues of preparedness and sustainability, FEMA offers expertise to ensure both legal compliance and informed local, State, Tribal, and national planning.

### Community Safe Rooms and EHP Review

Projects undertaken to strengthen or rebuild communities can have long-term impacts on environmental and historic resources that are important to us all. The construction of community safe rooms—whether built as new structures or retrofitted from existing ones—is no exception. These hardened structures, which are designed to provide a protective space for residents during extreme weather events like tornadoes or hurricanes, can be critical to public safety, community preparedness, and resiliency. Safe room construction may also have adverse impacts on environmental and historic resources like archaeological sites and wetlands. Before FEMA grant funding can be secured for a community safe room, EHP review must be completed to ensure compliance with all relevant environmental requirements and to minimize project impacts on environmental resources.

### Considering EHP Impacts

FEMA has experts available who are experienced in examining the potential impacts of community projects on environmental and historic resources and providing guidance to address them. This helps State and local governments anticipate and address potential EHP issues so they are better positioned to satisfy requirements and more quickly secure FEMA grant funding. Specifically, when building a safe room, applicants must coordinate with FEMA and carefully consider how the project may impact resources such as historic structures, archaeological sites, endangered and threatened species, critical wildlife habitats, soils, water and air quality, hazardous materials, floodplains, wetlands, and other elements of the local landscape and infrastructure.

#### **EHP Considerations for Safe Rooms**

When planning the development of a community safe room, FEMA advises communities to:

- Avoid undisturbed areas and vegetation clearing.
- Avoid sensitive areas (including archaeological sites, wetlands, floodplains, habitats for protected species, contaminated sites).
- Limit ground disturbance to less than five acres.

### Completing EHP Review

Community safe room projects may be eligible for funding support through certain FEMA grant programs, including the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. When applying for a FEMA grant to construct a safe room, it is important to provide complete and accurate information to facilitate EHP review and avoid unnecessary delays. In the application, communities must include the project scope of work; proposed location; labeled color photographs of the potential site; and other relevant information that will support FEMA's clear understanding of key project details. See the checklist on the next page for more guidance on documentation required for EHP review of a community safe room project.



## Community Safe Rooms: EHP Review Checklist

The checklist below describes project information that FEMA requires in order to complete EHP review of a community safe room project.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Location</b>	State the location of the project, including both the site address and latitude/longitude in decimal degrees (e.g. 38.5342° N, -77.0212° W).
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Description of Project Scope of Work</b>	Provide a detailed description of the project scope of work including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size and exact location of the safe room, and whether it is free-standing, an addition, or a retrofit or modification to an existing building</li> <li>• Plans for excavation, demolition, construction, or alteration of existing buildings</li> <li>• Level of ground disturbance (e.g., the amount, depth, and extent of trenching, fill, and vegetation removal)</li> </ul>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Timing</b>	Describe when the work will occur. While specificity is important to complete the review, exact timeframes may not be available until after initial project approval.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Age of Existing Buildings</b>	Provide the original date of construction for any buildings located on the proposed construction site.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Land Use</b>	Describe what the land has been used for in the past; if industrial, be specific regarding industry type and duration of use.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Photographs</b>	Provide clear photographs of the site, including any existing buildings and a 360-degree view of the surrounding area. Label photographs with the location and orientation of the camera relative to the construction site.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Agency Coordination</b>	Coordinating with applicable resource agencies prior to submitting your application to FEMA can help streamline EHP review. Please note any such communications and provide copies of correspondence and permits.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Additional Information</b>	Include copies of other relevant information (i.e., floodplain and wetlands maps, historic property and archaeological surveys, and environmental assessments). Some level of design information may be required should EHP review identify potential impacts on buildings listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places or located within the viewshed of a historic district.

### Timeframes for EHP Review

The review process for safe rooms generally takes 30 to 60 days after FEMA has received a completed grant application and project review has been initiated. However, additional consultation required to resolve impacts identified under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act or Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act will extend the review period a minimum of 60 to 90 days as it involves outside resource agencies and other stakeholders. Early coordination with resource agencies prior to the submission of a grant application can greatly reduce EHP review time. In addition, efficiencies continue to increase through FEMA's use of tools such as Programmatic Environmental Assessments (PEAs)—including one for safe room construction—that allow projects to be processed in a more streamlined manner.

### EHP Best Practice: Texas State Safe Room Initiative

In the wake of a series of damaging storms in 2010, the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) launched an initiative to provide funding to local communities for the construction of safe rooms to protect residents from future disasters. TDEM, communities, and FEMA coordinated with various State and Federal agencies to ensure compliance with EHP laws and regulations. Using the PEA as a guide to help focus the EHP review process, communities were able to avoid impacts and submit complete and accurate applications and documentation, which facilitated timely grant review and the award of critical FEMA funding. Through this collaboration, communities across the State continue to construct safe rooms and help protect lives.

**Additional Resources:** For more information on EHP review and FEMA grant assistance, contact your State Emergency Management Agency or Tribal office or visit <http://www.fema.gov/environmental-planning-and-historic-preservation-program>.