

FEMA/SBA Civil Rights & Disability Integration Twitter Space Chat

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KEVIN: Good morning, Twitter Space and Happy Friday! I'm Kevin Sur with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA.

CARL: And I'm Carl Dombek with the Small Business Administration or SBA.

KEVIN: For the last few weeks, we've kept you informed on how to apply for FEMA and SBA assistance, available programs, and appeals. And we'll be sure to go over that information again.

However, this week we've also brought along two special guests to speak with us today about how FEMA ensures equal opportunity, as well as maximizes the inclusion of, and accessibility for, people with disabilities. Today we welcome Daniel Willems, a FEMA External Civil Rights Advisor, and Olanda Bryant a FEMA Disability Integration Advisor. Thank you for joining us today, Daniel and Olanda.

DANIEL: Good morning, everyone!

OLANDA: Hello, everyone!

KEVIN: Before we discuss Civil Rights and Disability Integration, we'd like to remind our New York communities who were affected by Hurricane Ida the deadline to apply for FEMA assistance is Monday, Dec. 6. You can visit



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DisasterAssistance.gov; register with the FEMA app; or call 800-621-FEMA, that's 800-621-3362. If you use a video relay service, captioned telephone service or others, give FEMA the number for that service. Helpline operators are available from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Press 2 for Spanish. Or Press 3 for an interpreter who speaks your language. You can also stop by a Disaster Recovery Center, or DRC, in one of the affected counties. The locations are listed at [fema.gov/drc](https://www.fema.gov/drc).

Homeowners, renters, and business owners affected by Hurricane Ida within New York's 9 eligible counties may apply for FEMA assistance. These counties include Bronx, Dutchess, Kings, Nassau, Queens, Richmond, Rockland, Suffolk and Westchester.

If you have homeowner's or renter's insurance, file a claim as soon as possible. By law, FEMA cannot duplicate benefits for losses covered by insurance. So, if you are uninsured or underinsured, you may be eligible for FEMA assistance.

Disaster assistance may include financial assistance for temporary lodging and home repairs, along with other programs to assist families recover from the effects of the disaster.

Recovery is a whole community approach. And FEMA is working closely with our state and local partners, as well as voluntary, faith-based and nonprofit organizations to get disaster survivors the resources they need.

I'll now turn it over to Carl to briefly discuss how the Small Business Administration helps disaster survivors. Carl?

CARL: In times of disaster, the Small Business Administration assists homeowners, renters, nonprofit organizations and businesses of all sizes.

The SBA offers low-interest loans that provide the funds necessary to repair, rebuild and recover. These loans are intended to cover what isn't covered by insurance or other recoveries and can provide the funds to allow you to get your property back to where it was, pre-disaster.

The SBA loan application is an important part of the recovery process. If you're referred to the SBA, it is important that you complete and return the application even if you don't want a loan or don't feel you can afford one. If we agree a loan isn't appropriate, we will refer you back to FEMA, potentially for



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additional grant assistance. However, if you don't submit an application, the process stops.

An SBA loan can cover real estate damage and damage to personal property – including automobiles - for homeowners, personal property for renters, and all types of business assets for business owners. Real estate, machinery and equipment, furniture and fixtures, leasehold improvements, lost inventory. And we can also provide working capital so businesses can meet their ongoing operating expenses until things return to normal.

KEVIN: Thank you, Carl.

So, once your registration has been processed through FEMA and your SBA loan has been submitted, you will receive a Determination Letter from FEMA either electronically or in the mail. Please read that letter carefully. It may include eligibility notifications or a request for additional information.

The letter will inform the disaster survivor whether they are eligible or ineligible for FEMA assistance, the amount of assistance FEMA will provide, the reason you may be ineligible, an explanation of the appeals process, and other key information regarding disaster assistance, including proper use of funds.

If FEMA determines you are ineligible for any reason, we encourage you to file an appeal. That process is outlined in the determination letter and can also be found on [DisasterAssistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov). Appeals must be in writing and mailed within 60 days of the date of FEMA's decision letter.

Please read the determination letter carefully to understand why FEMA decided you were “ineligible.” It could be something as simple as they need additional documentation.

In the appeal, explain why you disagree with the decision. You must submit a written request that includes your full name, FEMA application number, disaster number, address of the damaged property and your current mailing address, your date of birth and your signature.

Include any supporting documents, such as contractor estimates or denial letters from insurance companies with your appeal request.



Appeals can be physically brought to your local Disaster Recovery Center, uploaded online at DisasterAssistance.gov, faxed to 800-827-8112, or mailed to the FEMA Individuals & Households Program National Processing Service Center at P. O. Box 10055, Hyattsville, MD 20782.

Visit a FEMA Disaster Recovery Center or call 1-800-621-3362 for more information.

Now, let's return to our guest speakers. Today we bring you Daniel Willems, our FEMA External Civil Rights Advisor, and Olanda Bryant, our FEMA Disability Integration Advisor. We want you to know FEMA is committed to ensuring equal and equitable access to programs and services. Let's start off by discussing ways in which we do this with Civil Rights Advisor Daniel Willems.

DANIEL: Good morning everyone! My name is Daniel Willems and I'm a Civil Rights Advisor with FEMA's External Civil Rights Division. I'm so happy to be here and able to discuss the ways FEMA works to ensure everyone can access our programs.

KEVIN: Thanks for being with us today, Daniel! Can you explain exactly what the External Civil Rights Division does in FEMA?

DANIEL: Absolutely! Basically, our role is to make sure FEMA upholds its obligation to equal access and non-discrimination under the Stafford Act and Civil Rights Laws. We work with the different programs within FEMA, like the Individuals and Households Program, to ensure that things like the FEMA application process are done equitably and everyone eligible to apply for FEMA assistance is treated fairly. Specifically, FEMA cannot deny access to or provide a different program, benefit, or service based on race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, English proficiency, or economic status.

KEVIN: That sounds important and something we all want. How exactly does FEMA go about doing that?

DANIEL: It starts with making sure all Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) are accessible to everyone. Before any FEMA facility opens to the public, we perform an inspection. At that inspection we check the entrances, parking, interior spaces, ramps, bathrooms, and more to verify that anyone with a disability or access or



functional need can access the DRC. It is so important for people to be able to come in, get their questions answered, and receive the help they need, so we don't want any barriers keeping disaster survivors away.

KEVIN: We both know that New York is such a diverse place, with residents from all over the world. Is there a way for an individual whose primary language isn't English to apply and ask questions?

DANIEL: Yes! One of the things I like most about working for FEMA is how diverse our workforce is. We have staff members who speak so many languages and can often work with survivors in their most comfortable language. But even if there isn't a staff member who speaks a survivor's preferred language, we can call an interpreter over the phone and get someone who speaks whatever language is needed. This makes sure there is no confusion, and everyone involved leaves with all the information they need and no miscommunications.

Also, we have printed materials at the DRCs translated into various languages. No one should be worried about visiting a DRC because of a language barrier.

KEVIN: And what about disaster survivors who don't come into the DRCs? Is there anything FEMA does for them to make sure they can apply and have questions answered related to FEMA programs.

DANIEL: Just like the staff and interpreters we have at the DRCs, when someone calls the 1-800 number to apply for assistance or speak to someone with FEMA Individual Assistance, they can press 1 for English, 2 for Spanish, and 3 for other languages. This works the same way as in the DRCs. The survivor will either talk with a FEMA employee who speaks the desired language or an interpreter will be brought in over the phone.

KEVIN: That's great info to know and it seems like there are a lot of ways to make sure everyone has equal access to FEMA programs. Is there anything else someone listening to Twitter Space Live needs to know about access to FEMA programs?

DANIEL: I think one good last thing to know would be that disaster survivors who need a reasonable accommodation to access FEMA programs due to a disability can and should ask for one. As long as the request doesn't cause an undue



hardship to FEMA, we can work with the survivor to get them the exact help they need to uphold our commitment to equal access. The request can fit the exact needs of the applicant and it never hurts to ask if it can make the process easier.

KEVIN: Thank you, Daniel! That's actually a great point. Soon we'll transition into the topic of Disability Integration with Advisor Olanda Bryant. But before we do, I just want to say you've covered so much of what FEMA does to accomplish equal access and non-discrimination, are there any outlets for disaster survivors who feel they've experienced discrimination in the process and wants to file a complaint? Is there a way to do this?

DANIEL: Yes. If any disaster survivor believes they or someone they know was discriminated against in any part of the FEMA process, like accessing a DRC, submitting an application, receiving a site inspection, or receiving their application determination, they have the right to file a complaint with the FEMA Civil Rights Office. This complaint must be filed within 180 days of the alleged discriminatory event and there are 4 ways to do this:

1. Calling the Civil Rights Resource line at 833-285-7448, where you can talk to a representative from the Civil Rights Division in English or Spanish or through an interpreter in any other language.
2. Emailing FEMA-CivilRightsOffice@fema.dhs.gov
3. Visiting the External Civil Rights Division website on FEMA.gov
4. Mailing a complaint to the FEMA Office of Equal Rights

Once reported, someone from the External Civil Rights Division will reach out and conduct a fact finding to gather more details about the situation.

The first step will be to try and settle the complaint informally, but if that isn't possible, the complainant will be told the next steps to formally file a complaint and start enforcement proceedings.

KEVIN: It's good to know there's an outlet for people to express concerns and complaints. Anything else before we let you go?



DANIEL: Thank you so much for having me! I hope I was able to explain some of the Civil Rights process today and how FEMA works to ensure non-discrimination, equal access, and equity in our program. Also, it's really important to know about the Civil Rights Complaint process so we'll share a flyer FEMA has that explains it. Have a great day!

KEVIN: Thank you, Daniel!

We've discussed a lot about how FEMA considers civil rights and part of that is making sure those with disabilities also have equal access to resources. For the next portion of this conversation on Twitter Space, we'd like to turn our attention to FEMA Disability Integration Advisor, Olanda Bryant. Thanks for joining us, Olanda!

OLANDA: Hello, everyone!

KEVIN: Olanda, tell us about Disability Integration and how it fits into FEMA?

OLANDA: Disability Integration (DI) falls under the Office of Disability Integration & Coordination (ODIC) in support of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Disability Integration Advisors (DIADs) work with program areas and field leadership to provide advice, tools and resources, and strategies on integrating the needs of individuals with disabilities in the delivery of FEMA's programs and services to ensure survivors with disabilities have access to and can participate in those programs and services.

KEVIN: Can you tell us about the Disability Integration mission "Helping people with disabilities before, during and after disasters" and what we will be discussing this morning?

OLANDA: The Disability Integration team works collaboratively with all FEMA teams to support our FEMA leaders and advise our team on equitability throughout all FEMA programs, from the response to the recovery stage. This morning we join you to discuss our supportive services available to individuals impacted by the Remnants of Hurricane Ida, in the State of New York. Our teams work closely with our State, City, and Local Partners to support the Americans with Disabilities Act Standards.

- We Provide Advise, Provide Guidance, Provide Tools, & Provide Resources



KEVIN: So, how is this implemented?

OLANDA: Connecting disaster survivors with the resources they need to ensure all FEMA programs and services are accessible is a key component to our mission. Equitability is a necessary component to ensure all applicants receive proper services to move forward with their recovery. This includes reviewing the application process to ensure accessibility methods and technology is in place and to properly capture the information needed to identify areas of disabilities/ barriers/ limitation/ or access and functional needs. Upon each mission we provide Disability Etiquette trainings/briefing to our FEMA teams. Our goal is to empower the team to be mindful, compassionate, respectful, and understanding when engaging with applicants. Ensuring assistive devices and services to connect resources are available to our teams to support applicants and removing barriers is a critical component to our success.

KEVIN: Great! Can you tell our audience where you're joining them from?

OLANDA: Yes, Kevin, thank you. I'm joining you live from our Joint Field Office in Lower Manhattan, here in New York, today. However, we support each of our remote Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) and Mobile Disaster Recovery Centers (MDRCs), throughout New York.

KEVIN: What resources are available for individuals or households to register at the DRCs and MDRCs?

OLANDA: To help eliminate barriers for applicants, FEMA provides the following accommodations and assistive technology to ensure the process is accessible and welcoming for all communities:

- On-site registration and applicant support with documents (this helps to eliminate communication and technology barriers)
- Continued training for teams on disability etiquette
- This includes providing the team with informative disability integration documents such as
- Disability Etiquette Job Aid = this document provides a set of suggested guidelines to foster respectful language and behavior when communicating and



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engaging with people with disabilities. These guidelines promote respect and inclusion; they assume ability, rather than limitations, and set expectations for a mutually respectful interaction.

- Language Guidelines for Inclusive Emergency Management (LGIEM) = offers guidelines when referring to people with disabilities whom may be disproportionately impacted during a disaster, as well as those with access and functional needs. (people first language) Also provides links on inclusive communication and the proper approaches to managing this level of communication
- Disability Etiquette Brochure = provides more guidance on facilitating communication with a respectful and friendly approach.
- Z5 to provide American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreters (iPad)
- Wheelchairs (with guided support, if needed)
- Assistive Listening Devices
- Illuminated Magnifiers
- Staff Designated with Clear Mask/face shields to Support Lip Reading

KEVIN: Wow. That's impressive. Are there any other ways in which the Disability Integration team works to support ADA throughout FEMA programs?

OLANDA: We know how important it is to create a safe inclusive environment and to ensure all individuals have access to FEMA programs and services by

- Keeping in mind People-First
- Using Plain Language
- Advising on the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) Codes and Standards
- Being available to advise on Universal Design (HM – 406), as needed



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- And being available to advise on the rules applying to the Path of Travel

KEVIN: Thanks again for enlightening us with all of this information regarding Disability Integration, Olanda.

OLANDA: Thank you for providing this platform and taking the time to learn more about the importance of Disability Integration.

KEVIN: We appreciate you joining us today.

All right, Twitter Space! Let's do a quick recap on the FEMA assistance application process. I'm Kevin Sur with FEMA.

CARL: And I'm Carl Dombek with the SBA.

KEVIN: Thank you again for joining us today. Remember, **the deadline to apply for FEMA assistance is Monday, Dec. 6.** Be sure to apply if you're a homeowner, renter, or business owner who has been affected by Hurricane Ida within New York's 9 eligible counties. That includes the Bronx, Dutchess, Kings, Nassau, Queens, Richmond, Rockland, Suffolk and Westchester counties.

You can visit DisasterAssistance.gov; register with the FEMA app; call 800-621-FEMA, that's 800-621-3362. Or, stop by a Disaster Recovery Center in one of the affected counties. Locations are listed on fema.gov/drc. DRCs are a one-stop shop for disaster survivors, where FEMA is co-located with the State and the SBA to assist with disaster assistance registration, answer questions, and help connect you with other resources available for recovery.

CARL: After registering with FEMA, some disaster survivors may be asked to fill out an SBA application. We provide low-interest disaster loans to individuals, families, businesses and nonprofit organizations. You must complete and return your SBA application to be considered for certain types of grant assistance. If we determine we cannot offer you a loan, we will refer you back to FEMA, for other types of assistance. But you must complete and return the SBA application. Without a completed application, the process stops.

KEVIN: When you apply for FEMA assistance, please have the following available

- A current phone number where you can be contacted



- Your address at the time of the disaster and the address where you are currently staying
- Your social security number
- A general list of damage and losses
- And, if insured, the policy number or the agent and/or the company name

Again, visit DisasterAssistance.gov; download the FEMA app; call 800-621-FEMA, that's 800-621-3362. Or, stop by a Disaster Recovery Center. You can find DRCs near you at fema.gov/drc.

CARL: Apply and let the process work for you.

KEVIN: Thank you for listening to us Live on Twitter Space. Join us again next week.

