

# TIMES RECORD

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## NEWS

# Prepare for the next natural disaster with the Center for Arkansas Legal Services guide

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When a natural disaster hits a community, devastation sweeps across neighborhoods. Nonprofits, often there to provide aid in recovery, also share resources to help families prepare for these events.

The Center for Arkansas Legal Services created the “How to Prepare for and Recover from a Disaster: A Self-Help Toolkit,” filled with resources and frequently asked questions about disaster kits as well as communication and evacuation plans.

Following the 2019 flooding of the Arkansas River, the center received a 2019 Disaster Supplemental Appropriation Grant from the Legal Services Corporation to help with legal services, including creating the guide.

“We had a lot of people who were uninsured or underinsured trying to access those funds and sometimes also asking for more funds,” said Helen Newberry, the central regional supervisor at the Center for Arkansas Legal Services. “There were some people who appealed to ask for a higher payout to cover more of the damage. Definitely at the beginning, accessing FEMA funding was probably our biggest question.”

The historic flood in 2019 impacted thousands of residents in the region and cost Arkansas and Oklahoma millions of dollars in economic impact.

Natural disasters have continued to impact Arkansas, most recently with the tornado damage in northeast Arkansas.

By creating a disaster plan, you and your family can prepare for any weather-related event.

“When people come up with their emergency plans, they really need to tailor it to themselves,” Newberry said. “We provided as much information as we could in our disaster

booklet, but we couldn't predict what every person is going to need.”

## **Inside the guide**

The “How to Prepare for and Recover from a Disaster: A Self-Help Toolkit,” accessible at [www.arkansaslegal.org](http://www.arkansaslegal.org), includes commonly asked questions, a checklist for an emergency preparedness kit, resources from the American Red Cross and contact information for the Center for Arkansas Legal Services.

Newberry recommends having your identification papers, medicines and a list of your doctors and medications as indispensable items for a disaster kit.

Other medical items and devices should also be considered for your emergency plan.

“That is one thing that people don't often think about until a disaster happens if they have like medical equipment that requires electricity,” said Amber Quaid, communications specialist for the Center for Arkansas Legal Services. “You need to also be able to plan and prepare for that, like have battery backups and alternate devices or abilities to get to places with electricity.”

Important documents, such as birth certificates, marriage licenses and other papers need to be stored safely.

“We all know that our social security cards are a little weak piece of paper. I think in terms of anything that you don't keep in your wallet, think about where to keep it that's flood-proof, fireproof. For floodproof and fireproof, there are safes that can do both. For waterproof alone, you could put them in a sealed plastic bag.”

Other recommendations include placing physical copies on higher shelves in case of flooding, keeping electronic copies of documents in cloud storage or email and having copies in another location such as a safety deposit box.

## **Creating a plan**

Two key elements of any disaster plan include communication and meeting locations.

Your household should select a meeting place and a backup location, depending on the disaster, Quaid said.

“That way, you can make sure that everyone at the same place, and then actually practice meeting there,” she said. “I know it sounds a little weird, but we can say we’re meeting at the park and then we can be split up on different sides of the park and never see each other. So, you want to make sure that you practice exactly where you’re going to meet, what you are going to look for and then signs and situations of when you know you will then have to go to the alternate meeting place.”

Having a designated contact person in another location can also help your family if they are unable to reach each other.

“Let’s say you all live in Little Rock,” Newberry said. “Well, if you have cousin Brenda who lives in Fort Smith, then everyone in the family, if they get separated and can’t contact each other, everyone needs to contact cousin Brenda as quickly as possible. That way everyone’s calling the same person and that person can coordinate.”

“Of course, you need to let that person know ahead of time,” she said. “... You need to make sure that person is okay with being the point of contact for your family.”

## **After the storm**

When you have reunited with your loved ones and secured safe shelter, it is important to act quickly to get additional assistance, especially if you face legal issues.

“If it’s with a contractor scam, if it’s a FEMA denial issue, whatever it is, a lot of people tend to wait, and there are often deadlines,” Quaid said. “... All of that stuff is pretty immediate. Just make sure that once you get your family safely settled, any other issue that comes along, that you handle it right away because there will be deadlines.”

One common issue homeowners face is using Federal Emergency Management Agency funds to pay dishonest contractors.

Newberry said “if someone is having a legal issue that stems from the [2019] floods, let’s say ... several people used their funds to work on their home, gave the money to a contractor who either did a terrible job or never showed up to complete the job. That’s actually something that we can still see next year, even though it’s been so long.”

The Center for Arkansas Legal Services also has a factsheet of warning signs when working with a contractor from the Arkansas Legal Services Partnership. These include being unable to verify their license, having to pay for the entire job upfront or not letting you know about your right to cancel the contract.

“If someone is selling something door to door, whether it be services to fix a roof or a vacuum cleaner, you have three days to cancel,” Newberry said.

## **How to get help**

The Center for Arkansas Legal Services encourages people to act quickly if they face legal issues after a natural disaster.

“When it comes to disasters, you’re going to of course take care of all of the immediate things you need to take care of, but after that, if you face any kind of issue, especially if it’s a legal issue, the sooner you get help, the better,” Quaid said.

For more information, call the Center for Arkansas Legal Services Helpline at 501-376-3423 or visit [www.arkansaslegal.org](http://www.arkansaslegal.org).