

Turning Vacancy into Sanctuary: The Emergency Lodging Program

When a hurricane forces an evacuation or a wildfire displaces a town, thousands of people need immediate shelter. While gyms and stadiums are often the first image on the news, the preferred solution for the government is the hotel industry. FEMA's Emergency Lodging Assistance (ELA) program relies on a network of pre-approved hotels and motels to provide temporary housing for disaster survivors. For hotel owners, participating in this program is a way to serve the community while also securing guaranteed occupancy during a crisis that might otherwise kill tourism.

However, FEMA does not walk into a hotel lobby with a credit card. The system is automated and centralized. To be part of this network, a hotel must have its federal paperwork in order. While there is no single document called "**FEMA certification**" for hotels, the process involves a specific set of vendor registrations that allow the property to be listed in the Corporate Lodging Control (CLC) system or directly contracted by relief agencies. Without this digital footprint, a hotel is invisible to the emergency managers booking thousands of room nights.

Direct Billing vs. Reimbursement

The primary benefit of proper registration is the ability to participate in direct billing. In a declared disaster, FEMA often authorises a program where the government pays the room and tax directly to the hotel for eligible survivors. This is crucial for evacuees who may have fled without their wallets. For the hotel, it ensures payment stability. If a hotel is not registered, they may be forced to ask survivors to pay upfront and seek reimbursement later—a chaotic and often impossible situation for displaced families. Registration smoothens the financial transaction for everyone involved.

Vendor Codes for Hospitality Assets

In the federal database, hotels are categorised by specific NAICS codes (typically 721110 for Hotels and Motels). However, it is important to also list capabilities related to "long-term stay" or "emergency housing." During a crisis, logistics officers search for properties that can handle extended stays, pet-friendly rooms (a huge factor in evacuations), and ADA-compliant units. Ensuring your federal profile details these specific amenities helps match your property with the specific needs of the evacuees, increasing the likelihood of being selected as a primary shelter site.

Capacity Management and "Blue Sky" Setup

The worst time to try and sign up is when the storm is making landfall. The systems are often overwhelmed, and verification takes time. "Blue Sky" setup—registering when the weather is clear—is the industry best practice. It allows hotel management to train their front desk staff on how to process FEMA check-ins and how to handle the unique reporting requirements. Being pre-registered means that when the governor declares a state of emergency, you can simply flip your status to "available" and immediately start receiving placements.

Supporting First Responders

It is not just survivors who need beds; it is also the army of utility workers, National Guard troops, and insurance adjusters who flood the zone. These groups also rely on federal and state contracting lists to find accommodation. A valid federal registration makes your hotel a prime candidate for housing these responders. These contracts often last for months during the recovery phase, providing a steady baseline of revenue that helps the hotel—and its employees—survive the economic disruption of the disaster.

Conclusion

For the hospitality industry, disaster preparation is not just about boarding up windows; it is about opening doors. By integrating your property into the federal emergency housing network, you transform your hotel from a commercial asset into a vital community resource, ensuring you can do well by doing good when your neighbours need it most.

Call to Action

Prepare your property to support emergency relief efforts by completing your vendor profile today.

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