

# 25 Pro Tips for Working with FEMA: Lessons Learned that Work

This is a summary from a disaster legal aid roundtable held on June 2018. This roundtable was organized and hosted by Lone Star Legal Aid and Pro Bono Net, with participation from other advocates responding to the 2017 major disasters. For the full recording and materials, please visit [www.disasterlegalaid.org/advocates/roundtables](http://www.disasterlegalaid.org/advocates/roundtables).



Minute	Pro Tips for Attorneys Representing Clients Before FEMA	
1	6:42	<b>Call FEMA.</b> Practice advocacy on behalf of your client by checking the status of an application or an appeal.
2	9:22	<b>Explain to your client that they should ask questions when a FEMA inspector examines the property.</b> Your client's eligibility, acceptance, or denial will depend on their answer to this question.
3	11:59	<b>Don't hesitate to question FEMA's determination.</b> Inspectors come from a variety of backgrounds.
4	13:17	<b>Empower your client to continue with the process.</b> FEMA's determination is not only about the Individual Assistance program. It is also used to determine eligibility for other programs.
5	15:32	<b>Fax in your appeal.</b> You have the fax sheet as confirmation that you sent your appeal.
6	18:10	<b>Never underestimate the relationships you can build in preparation for a disaster.</b> Community partnerships help in the long-term process, especially in areas that are likely to be affected by disasters.
7	19:40	<b>For mixed families cases and people with documentation status</b> where a child doesn't have a picture ID, you can submit the child's birth certificate, social security card, and some other form of a document, such as proof of public benefit or a Numident (Numerical Identification System) file from the Social Security Administration.
8	22:03	<b>Prep your client for inspection and voluntary withdrawal denials.</b> Talk to your client about what a FEMA inspection is going to look like.
9	23:21	<b>You can appeal a voluntary withdrawal denial.</b> If the client doesn't respond to the FEMA inspector right away, FEMA might send your application back and get a voluntary withdrawal denial.
10	24:36	<b>Make sure your client estimates the damages so that the damages are not "unknown."</b> If you say "unknown" for damages, the assistance will be denied.
11	26:30	<b>Know whether FEMA administers both housing assistance and other needs assistance</b> or if it's through the state.
12	27:30	<b>Prepare your clients as you would for any representation.</b> Explain what they should expect from the process.
13	30:23 and 42:17	<b>Get detailed contractor estimates</b> for the damages and take <b>high-quality pictures</b> of everything.
14	32:39	<b>Ask for a Tier II worker if you call in.</b> They are caseworkers with more experience.

15	33:20	<b>If you're calling in about a client that needs rental assistance, ask for CHAD (Continued Housing Assistance Department).</b> This is a special group that can help you resolve the issue.
16	34:33	<b>Your client does not need to have a legal title of the home in order to be eligible for home repairs.</b> Encourage clients that do not have legal title to pursue their case.
17	36:15	<b>For shared households, FEMA expects pre-disaster household members to stay together.</b> Under certain circumstances, they can split them up if the disaster caused family members to end up in different locations.
18	37:25	<b>Be aware of what's going on with community partners.</b> Where are the cases going to?
19	39:09	<b>File a consent letter with a photo ID of your client before representing them.</b> You will need to attach this document for everything you send FEMA.
20	39:50	<b>Request a copy of your client's file as soon as you take a case.</b> It's really helpful if your client has access to the online application but that is not always going to be the case.
21	40:12	<b>If you're at a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC), talk with the FEMA caseworkers.</b> Let them know what you can do and what the legal issues are.
22	44:52	<b>FEMA can reconsider an appeal decision if there is new evidence.</b> Submit a second appeal if you have new evidence that you believe would change the determination.
23	46:15	<b>Understand denial codes</b> and common reasons that FEMA denies or reduces a claim.
24	47:29	<b>Let people know about other resources</b> such as pro bono associations or state bars so they know where to go when they learn they have a legal issue other than a FEMA appeal.
25	52:07	<b>Visit <a href="http://disasterlegalaid.org/advocates/">disasterlegalaid.org/advocates/</a></b> for specialized advocacy resources.

The **National Disaster Legal Aid Advocacy Center** is a new DisasterLegalAid.org feature to inform the legal community about disaster legal aid efforts, resources, and events, and facilitate connections between advocates working on disaster relief and recovery. Membership is free, but some of the resources are password-restricted and require a log-in. The 2018 Disaster Legal Aid Roundtables were a series of conversations to discuss topics of interest to legal aid and pro bono attorneys across regions. All roundtable recordings and materials are available on [www.disasterlegalaid.org/advocates/roundtables](http://www.disasterlegalaid.org/advocates/roundtables). To gain access, you must first complete our membership form. For questions or comments, please contact Jeanne Ortiz-Ortiz at [jortiz@probono.net](mailto:jortiz@probono.net).

**Created:** June 2018