

Replace important documents lost in a disaster

Author

Northwest Justice Project

Last Review Date

April 22, 2025

Disasters can destroy homes, storage units, garages, and other places where you might have stored important documents. Or the disaster could make it impossible for you to locate, get to, or access your documents. This tells you how to replace some of the most commonly lost documents after a disaster.

1. Right after the disaster

Can I apply for FEMA disaster assistance programs if I don't have my important documents?

Yes. You can start your application for FEMA assistance **without** having your documents. After applying, you may have to provide proof of your identity, your ownership or occupancy, or other personal information. You can send proof of your replacement documents to FEMA once you receive them. Usually, you can upload the replacement copies to your [Disaster Assistance](#)

account (<http://www.disasterassistance.gov/>).

The National Archives describes helpful [Salvage Procedures](https://www.archives.gov/preservation/disaster-response/salvage-procedures.html) (<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/disaster-response/salvage-procedures.html>) for damaged documents after a disaster.

What if I need other proof of identity or of where I live?

Ask your utility company for a copy of your last bill. This can help prove your address or residency (where you live).

You can also ask your local planning and zoning offices for proof of your “E911/physical address” which could help prove where you live.

Ask your employer or school for any copies of your identity documents that they may have. You may be able to use employment records to prove who you are. Ask any accountant or tax preparation service you use for copies of your tax return. This can help prove your identity (that you are who you say you are).

How do I get my mail after a disaster?

Contact your local or closest post office to make a change of address or ask how to pick up mail. If you can’t access your local post office, call 1-800-ASK-USPS (275-8777).

2. Essential IDs

How do I replace a birth certificate?

Contact family or your employer first. They might have copies of these. If so, they might be able to get them to you faster than Vital Records or Statistics. Otherwise, contact the Vital Records or Statistics agency for the place you were born in.

If you were born in Washington, you can order a replacement birth certificate (<https://doh.wa.gov/licenses-permits-and-certificates/vital-records/ordering-vital-record>). If you weren't born in Washington, use the CDC's information to learn where to write for Vital Records (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm>) for your birth place.

How do I replace my driver's license or state ID?

Your employer might have a copy of this. Contact them first. If they don't have a copy, contact the Department of Licensing (DOL).

The DOL might be able to get you a replacement quickly (<https://dol.wa.gov/id-cards/replace-id-card>).

How do I replace my Social Security card?

Your employer might have a copy of your Social Security card. Contact them first.

Otherwise, you will have to contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) about replacing your Social Security card (https://www.ssa.gov/ssnumber/replace_your_card.html). You can also go into the closest SSA office or call the national SSA helpline at 1-800-772-1213. For

TTY users, the number is 1-800-325-0778.

Does a lost Social Security card affect my Social Security payments?

No. To get your Social Security check after a disaster, call or visit your local SSA office (<https://www.ssa.gov/manage-benefits/make-an-appointment>) and ask them about Emergency Payments (<https://www.ssa.gov/agency/emergency/#h3>) and how to get your payment while you can't access your mail.

How do I replace my immigration documents?

Replace your Green Card (<https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/after-we-grant-your-green-card/replace-your-green-card>) (your permanent resident card or 2-year card) by filing a USCIS Form I-90 (<https://www.uscis.gov/i-90>). For other immigration-related documents, you should contact your immigration lawyer or the court of your most recent immigration hearing.

3. Account cards

How do I replace my Medicare cards?

Your doctor might have a copy of your Medicare cards.

You can replace your Medicare cards through your online Medicare account (<https://www.medicare.gov/>). You can order replacement cards over the

phone as well. Call 1-800-633-4227 (TTY users, call 1-877-486-2048).

You can also ask for replacements for your Medicare cards when you replace your Social Security card.

How do I replace bank accounts, credit and ATM cards?

If you don't have an ATM card, or the disaster destroyed your bank, contact your bank and tell them your cards were lost in a disaster.

How do I replace credit cards?

Call the bank or company that gave you the card to get a new one as soon as possible. Ask them to waive (excuse you from paying) payments, late fees and over limit fees. Ask if there are any emergency disaster assistance waivers that will pause or delay your payments while you recover.

How do I replace my EBT card?

For food stamps issued in Washington, call the EBT Card Vendor to report a lost card at 1-888-328-9271 or report the lost card in person.

4. Legal documents

How do I replace my marriage certificate?

If you were married in Washington, you can replace your marriage certificate by ordering one from the Department of Health (<https://doh.wa.gov/licenses->

permits-and-certificates/vital-records/ordering-vital-record/marriage-or-divorce-record). You can also see if the county auditor's office where you filed the certificate still has a copy.

How do I replace my divorce papers?

You will need to contact the court clerk of the court where the divorce was finalized. Contact the court that issued your divorce order.

How do I replace my parenting plan?

See if the other parent still has a copy that they will let you copy. Contact the lawyer who helped you to see if they have a copy. Contact the court that issued the parenting plan - they should have a copy.

How do I replace my name change court order?

Contact the court that granted you the name change order. Some courts will only keep records of name changes for a limited number of years if the name change wasn't recorded. This is especially true for District Courts. Ask the clerk if there is still a record of your name change or if it was recorded.

If not, you might have to try to get a copy from somewhere that you already submitted the name change order to (like the DOL). If all your name change records are gone, you may have to file for name change again to get a new order proving your name.

How do I replace my will and estate plan?

If you registered your Will or life planning documents with a depository, that service should have copies. You can also ask the lawyer who helped you write the planning documents. Your hospital or doctor might also have a copy if you ever gave them one. Ask anyone you gave copies to if they still have a copy.

Even if you get a copy, you might need to redo your planning documents so that you have original witnessed versions with your original signature on them again. It is important to have at least one original hard copy of your Will.

How do I replace my real estate or property records like deeds and mortgages?

Your county clerk has these documents, if you recorded them for filing. If the disaster destroyed your originals, you can probably get copies at the county recorder's office if you need them. Your mortgage company, real estate agent or escrow company could also have copies.

5. Other important documents

Insurance documents: Contact your insurance agency or company. Your doctor might also have a copy of your medical insurance card.

Medical records and prescriptions: Most medical and prescription records are kept electronically. Contact your medical provider or pharmacy.

Auto title: The DOL explains how to replace your [lost title or registration](https://dol.wa.gov/vehicles-and-boats/vehicle-registration/vehicle-title/lost-) (<https://dol.wa.gov/vehicles-and-boats/vehicle-registration/vehicle-title/lost->

title-or-registration).

Tax documents: If you or your tax preparer don't have electronic copies of your recent returns, you can contact the IRS to get copies of your tax record (<https://www.irs.gov/individuals/get-transcript>).

Children's immunization records: The Department of Health's Access Your Family's Immunization Information (<https://doh.wa.gov/you-and-your-family/immunization/access-your-familys-immunization-information>) can help you.

Veterans Affairs (VA) ID and paperwork: Contact the VA facilities where you have received treatment. They might have copies of your VA ID cards and other IDs or paperwork. You can also contact the national VA help lines (<https://www.va.gov/resources/helpful-va-phone-numbers/>).

Military records: Request your military service records (<https://www.va.gov/records/get-military-service-records/>) from the National Archives.

WashingtonLawHelp.org gives general information. It is not legal advice. Find organizations that provide free legal help on our Get legal help page.