



Policy Backgrounder: Emergency Management

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Sitting squarely in the likely path of Atlantic basin hurricanes, Florida has developed a professional emergency response and management system that has often been praised for being among the best-run in the nation. In addition to hurricanes and tropical storms, the state's emergency management and response infrastructure is tasked with responding to any number of potential emergencies, from incidents involving hazardous materials or nuclear power, to [wildfires](#), sinkholes and recently, emergency officials played a role in the COVID-19 pandemic. For several years, emergency management officials have also been tasked with planning for the effects of climate change. Monroe County, which includes the Florida Keys, was the [top county in the nation for being hit by hurricanes](#) from 1960 to 2008, having been affected by 15 of them.

Division of Emergency Management (DEM)

The state agency tasked with overseeing emergency preparedness and response is the [Division of Emergency Management](#). The agency creates and implements a statewide Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, and conducts exercises to test state and county emergency response capabilities. It serves as a contact point linking local, state and federal agencies working on emergencies, and helps local governments with technical assistance. The governor appoints the director of the agency. [Kevin Guthrie](#) was appointed as Director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management by Gov. Ron DeSantis in June 2021. After a disaster, the agency does damage assessment and advises the governor on whether to declare an emergency and seek federal relief funds. The agency is responsible for the operation of the state [Emergency Operations Center](#) in Tallahassee.

Emergency Management Law

The statutes governing emergency management in Florida are in [Chapter 252, F.S.](#)

Recent Legislation

2023 - Hurricane Relief, Ian and Nicole

In early 2023, lawmakers met in a special session to provide emergency relief for local governments following the destruction of the 2022 hurricane season, which included two

major storms, Hurricanes Ian and Nicole. Lawmakers passed [SB 2B](#), which [created the \\$50 million Local Government Emergency Bridge Loan Program](#) to provide financial assistance to local governments impacted by either of the storms. The bill also transferred \$650 million to the Emergency Preparedness and Response Fund to be used for responding to a declared state of emergency.

2022 - High Rise Condos After the Surfside Collapse

In the overnight hours of June 24, 2021, a 12-story beachfront condominium tower in the Miami suburb of Surfside, [the Champlain Towers South](#), partially collapsed, [killing 98 people and injuring 11 others](#). It was [one of the deadliest non-deliberate structural failures](#) in U.S. history. The building was in a stretch of condo high rises lining the beach on the north end of the barrier island that includes the city of Miami Beach to the south of Surfside and Bal Harbour to the north. And with condo and apartment high rise towers a feature of beach communities around the state, [public attention quickly turned to the safety of the buildings](#), particularly older ones. After [failing during the 2022 regular legislative session to agree on a statewide residential high rise safety plan](#), the Legislature returned to work in a special session later that same year to pass a response. Lawmakers in May of 2022 [passed](#), and [Gov. Ron DeSantis signed SB 4D](#), which requires coastal Florida condo buildings three stories or higher to have new inspections 25 years after construction and every 10 years after that and put in place new financial reserve requirements for condominiums.

2021 - The COVID Bill

The Legislature's COVID-19 response from an actual emergency management standpoint was contained in [SB 2006](#) of 2021. The most high profile part of the bill codified an emergency order that prohibits "any business operating in this state" from requiring patrons or customers to provide documentation of vaccination for COVID-19. It also prohibits government agencies from requiring vaccine proof before serving someone, and bans schools and colleges from requiring COVID vaccination for enrollment, though the measure didn't repeal the ability of schools to require vaccines for other diseases. It also exempted health care providers.

Another significant part of the measure attempted to spell out some parameters for emergency response orders, including limiting state emergency orders to 60 days - though allowing for renewal - and authorizing the Legislature to terminate orders and directives issued under a state of emergency. While the Republican-controlled Legislature was in general agreement with GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis over emergency orders related to the

pandemic, that wasn't the case in many other states, where lawmakers and governors were at odds over certain orders related to issues ranging from mask requirements to school openings. The bill also took aim at local governments that were more aggressive in their response to the pandemic, authorizing the governor to invalidate any local order that “unnecessarily restricts individual rights or liberties.” That provision, however, exempted



local emergency orders related to hurricanes or weather emergencies.

Among other [changes made by the bill](#) was a new requirement that DEM maintain a stockpile of personal protective equipment. Before, the agency had procedures for acquiring PPE, but no ready supplies, and early in the pandemic there were reports of PPE shortages at health care facilities - though the supply chain eventually caught up. It also required DEM and DOH to update plans to better react to pandemics, including a requirement that emergency shelter plans be updated to allow for distancing between people. DeSantis [signed the bill](#) May 3.

2020 - Resiliency and Hurricane Sheltering

Construction Project Sea Level Impact Studies ([SB 178](#)): The bill prohibits the public financing of construction projects without a sea-level impact projection study and requires the Department of Environmental Protection to develop a standard in rules for such studies. The measure passed unanimously in both chambers and was signed into law in June of 2020 by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Emergency Shelters for Pet Owners ([HB 705](#)): The measure requires that counties that have designated shelters must have one that can accommodate people with their pets. The bill also requires the Department of Education to help identify strategies for the evacuation of people with pets. It passed both chambers unanimously and was signed into law by the governor on June 29, 2020.

Recent Hurricanes

Hurricane Ian (2022)

[Hurricane Ian](#) hit Southwest Florida as a Category 4 storm in late September of 2022, leaving devastation in parts of Lee County, including on the barrier islands off the coast of Fort Myers in that city and Cape Coral. [The storm would be the third costliest weather disaster](#) on record when adjusted for inflation, [causing more than \\$113 billion in damage](#). It was also the deadliest hurricane to hit Florida since 1935, leaving [at least 148 people dead in the state](#). Most of those deaths by far were recorded in Lee County.

Hurricane Michael (2018)

Hurricane Michael was the first Category 5 hurricane to strike the mainland U.S. coast since Andrew in 1992 and the fourth strongest ever to hit the contiguous United States. [Michael](#) was the first Cat 5 storm to ever make landfall in the Florida Panhandle, and it devastated an area that included the Panama City area and nearly wiped out the town of Mexico Beach, which recorded a 14-foot storm surge that destroyed most homes along the shore and about half the buildings in the city.

Hurricane Irma (2017)

The first major hurricane to make landfall in Florida since the devastating 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, [Irma](#) came ashore Sept. 10, 2017 in the Florida Keys as a Category 4 storm and would become at the time the costliest storm in Florida history. It weakened to a Category 3 as it made a second landfall near Marco Island the same day and eventually would [affect all 67 counties](#) and cause widespread power outages. Irma forced record evacuations of an estimated 6.5 million people in the state and more than 7 million homes and businesses lost power in Florida. The hurricane also caused widespread, severe flooding. Irma losses were estimated at potentially more than \$50 billion, pushing it past 1992's Andrew as the costliest storm ever for the state. Irma was blamed for the deaths of 84 people in 27 counties, including [12 who died at a Broward County nursing home](#) without power after the storm.

The costliest U.S. hurricane was Katrina in 2005, which was better known for its destruction in New Orleans and on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but also brushed the Florida Keys. [It is estimated to have done \\$190 billion in damage](#) when adjusted for inflation. Other hurricanes among the most costly that have affected Florida include 2022's Ian; Irma in

2017, which caused about \$60 billion in damage in 2023 dollars, and [Hurricane Andrew](#), which devastated Miami-Dade County in 1992 and remains the eighth most damaging hurricane in U.S. history with \$15.5 billion in damage at the time, which would have been nearly \$60 billion in 2023 dollars.