

ARMY EMERGENCY RELIEF



DATE: 7 MARCH 2022

ASSISTANCE BULLETIN NUMBER: 01-2022

SUBJECT: FLORIDA PANHANDLE WILDFIRES (2022) DISASTER ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

1. REFERENCES.

- a. Army Regulation 930-4, dated 5 May 2019
- b. Army Emergency Relief Section Reference Manual (SRM), Chapter 2, dated 15 October 2019

2. APPLICABILITY.

These instructions apply to Headquarters AER, all AER Sections, American Red Cross and Other Military Aid Society Offices in support of eligible Army personnel depicted in paragraph 5 below.

3. BACKGROUND.

Army Emergency Relief (AER) remains steadfast in its long-standing commitment to meet the needs of the 21st Century Soldier and Family during a crisis. Many Army Families have been impacted by the wildfires that has burned 1,500 acres and was 30 percent contained as of 5 March 2022. The fire forced hundreds of evacuations in the State of Florida over the past week.

4. PURPOSE.

This AER Bulletin provides guidance for Disaster Assistance to eligible individuals who have been impacted by the Florida Panhandle Wildfires within the surrounding areas of Tyndall AFB and Bay County, Florida, and any adjacent affected counties. Eligible Army personnel may be provided financial assistance to assist with evacuation and recovery from the devastation of the Wildfires. Disaster assistance may be provided for **travel related expenses associated with ordered evacuations from an impacted area, returning to an evacuated area of primary domicile, recovery and any other essential needs associated with restoration affecting Life, Health and Safety (LHS).**

5. ELIGIBILITY.

The individuals listed below who have been impacted by the Florida Panhandle Wildfires are eligible for AER Disaster Assistance:

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- a. Soldiers on Active Duty and their eligible Family Members;
- b. Soldiers Retired from Active Duty because of longevity and their eligible Family Members;
- c. Retired Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers receiving retired pay and their eligible Family Members;
- d. Medically Retired Soldiers and their dependents, including both those placed on the Permanent Disability Retired List (PDRL) or Temporary Disability Retirement List (TDRL);
- e. Surviving Spouses and Children of Soldiers who died while on Active Duty Orders or in an eligible Retired status;
- f. Members of the Reserve Component of the Army (National Guard and Army Reserve under Title 10 U.S.C) on continuous Active Duty for more than thirty (30) consecutive days and their eligible Family Members;
- g. Title 10, Title 32, and TPU Army National Guard and Army Reserve Soldiers who are NOT mobilized;
- h. Title 10, Title 32, and TPU Army National Guard and Army Reserve Soldiers mobilized for LESS THAN thirty (30) consecutive days;
- i. Title 10, Title 32, and TPU Army National Guard and Army Reserve Soldiers activated in support of Florida Panhandle Wildfire relief efforts.

6. GENERAL GUIDELINES.

- a. **Evacuation assistance** (Departure and Return) will only be considered for individuals who have been ordered to evacuate via a local municipal evacuation order. Return assistance will only be considered upon confirmation by the local municipality that it is safe to do so.
- b. Blanket Authority is authorized for Disaster assistance up to \$600 as a Grant for Evacuation (Departure and Return) to eligible members listed in paragraph 5 above who are impacted by the Florida Panhandle Wildfires. **Any requested amount above \$600 may be considered as a Loan, Grant, or a combination of both. Although assistance above \$600 can be provided for Evacuation and recovery, Blanket approval is only authorized up to \$600. This Blanket Authority guidance also applies to any adjacent affected counties, if proof of an evacuation order is provided.**

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- c. **The budget requirement is waived for Evacuation assistance (Departure and Return) when the amount is \$600 or less, however the request must be for a “valid need.”**
- d. **Assistance will be retroactive to 5 March 2022 and applicants may apply for reimbursement as a “one time” exception for basic essential evacuation (departure and return) needs.** Applicants will be required to provide receipts for expenses i.e. food, fuel and temporary lodging to be reimbursed.
- e. Active Duty Soldiers (**Recruiters, Active Guard Reserve, ARNG / USAR on Title 10 Orders**) ordered to evacuate by their Commander should leverage the Government Travel Card (GTC) for evacuation related expenses. Active Duty applicants who **do not** have a GTC will be assisted in the form of a Loan as they will be reimbursed via a Travel Voucher for evacuation related expenses as a result of the Commanders’ order to evacuate.
- f. **Recovery assistance** may be considered for Minor Home Repairs, basic needs to sustain oneself during recovery and any other essential needs associated with restoration that affect Life, Health and Safety (LHS). **There is no dollar cap on Recovery assistance, however the request must be for a “valid need.”**
- g. **Recovery assistance** may be provided as a **Loan, Grant, or a combination of both.**
- h. For **Recovery assistance** a Budget Planning Sheet (BPS) **is required.**
- i. Caseworkers should review property insurance documents and other related documentation to ensure applicants have submitted applicable claims for property damages. Assistance may be considered for deductibles as necessary to support an insurance claim.
- j. Repayment will be deferred for sixty (60) days.
- k. Repayment of a loan will not exceed twenty-four (24) months, except when approved by HQ AER. The Loan must be repaid sixty (60) days prior to ETS, end of the reserve commitment or within twenty-four (24) months after the first scheduled repayment, whichever comes first.
- l. Soldiers who find themselves in a situation where repayment of a loan is causing a financial hardship should contact the HQ AER Loan Management Section for further guidance.

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7. RESPONSIBILITIES.

a. HQ AER Assistance Section.

- 1) Establish Special Event Code (STAT A), “**Florida Panhandle Wildfires (2022)**” for assistance request and inform AER Sections, American Red Cross and Other Military Aid Society HQs.
- 2) Establish secure portal instructions for AER Officers to send and receive application information from Leaders, Soldiers, and Families.
- 3) Receive feedback from AER Sections on any procedural improvements required.

b. HQ AER Accounting Section.

- 1) Process ARMS ACH in a timely manner upon validation of signed AER Form 52, AER Check and Promissory Note in ARMS.
- 2) Provide feedback to the Assistance Section of any rejected ACH transactions and reason.

c. HQ AER Loan Management Section.

- 1) Establish repayment by allotment for cases processed through the American Red Cross.
- 2) Ensure repayment ends no later than twenty-four (24) months after repayment begins or sixty (60) days prior to ETS or end of Active Duty commitment (USAR/ARNG), whichever comes first.
- 3) Contact applicant, chain of command, and AER Officer for repayment issues (i.e. account closed, payment disputed, etc.).
- 4) Monitor and report delinquent loan payments by installation to Director, AER.
- 5) Execute collections on loans past due thirty (30) plus days.

8. PROCEDURE.

a. Routing of assistance requests.

Assistance requests received from Soldiers (**Active Duty, AGR, and ARNG/USAR under Title 10 for more than thirty (30) consecutive days**) will follow the existing Direct Access guidelines for assistance case processing. **If eligible for Direct Access, no COC involvement is required; if not eligible for Direct Access, COC involvement is required.**

b. Soldier or eligible Family Member with Special Power of Attorney (SPOA).

- 1) If not eligible for Direct Access Soldier’s will inform their Company Commander or First Sergeant.

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- 2) Electronically forward all required AER application information and the supporting documentation listed in Paragraph 9 below to the Unit COC for review, validation, and signature, as applicable.

Note: Soldiers who are eligible for Direct Access and a Spouse with SPOA should contact the local AER Section for guidance and may forward AER application information directly to the local AER Officer.

c. **Company Commander or First Sergeant.**

- 1) Validates the financial need exists for Florida Panhandle Wildfire expenses.
- 2) For Recovery assistance reviews Soldier Leave and Earning Statement (LES) and Spouse income sources (if applicable) when completing AER Form 57, Budget Planning Sheet (BPS) to determine the overall financial situation.
- 3) If AER assistance is required, verifies the amount(s) to meet valid financial needs.
- 4) Reviews documentation associated with Florida Panhandle Wildfires unbudgeted, unforeseen expenses.
- 5) Ensures Soldier completes AER Form 101, Application for Financial Assistance itemizing specific valid needs in Block 17.
- 6) Ensures Soldier completes AER Form 575, Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) Authorization Form for ACH transactions, if applicable.
- 7) Ensures Soldier obtains a Trustee approval letter (if under bankruptcy).
- 8) Ensures Soldier obtains Special Power of Attorney (AER Form 53 or civilian equivalent) or Allotment Authorization (AER Form 55) when Soldier is not available, and Spouse is requesting assistance on the Soldier's behalf.
- 9) Contacts the nearest AER Section or other service Military Aid Society (Air Force, Navy/Marine Corps or Coast Guard) within a fifty (50) mile commuting radius for application processing instructions.
- 10) Forwards AER application with supporting documentation listed in Paragraph 9 below to the nearest AER Section or Military Aid Society Office for review, evaluation, and assistance consideration.
- 11) If outside the fifty (50) mile commuting radius of any military installation, contact the American Red Cross at 1-877-272-7337 and select Option 1 for financial assistance. The American Red Cross will provide a secure link to transmit application information listed in Paragraph 9 below, conduct case intake on behalf of AER Section and forward case information to HQ AER for review, evaluation, and assistance consideration/decision.

NOTE: Unit Leaders, Soldiers and Family members will ensure documents containing Personally Identifiable Information (PII) are only transmitted electronically through a secure means i.e. encrypted email, DoD Safe secure portal or other secure means. A secure link can be requested from the local AER Officer or HQ AER to securely transmit documents containing PII.

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d. AER Officers.

- 1) Receive, evaluate, and process assistance requests in accordance with these outlines.
- 2) Ensure widest dissemination of these instructions to Soldiers and Families near their respective Posts, Camps, or Stations.
- 3) Provide instructions on how to process AER assistance request(s) electronically in accordance with these guidelines when “face to face” interaction is restricted for AER Staff members.
- 4) When Soldiers and Leaders request a secure link, send secure DoD safe portal links to allow them to **SEND** and **RECEIVE** application data securely.
- 5) Assist Soldiers and Leaders as necessary to validate Winter Storm expense needs.
- 6) Input the following case information in ARMS on the “**Assistance Tab**”:
 - a) Under “**Program**” select “**Disaster Assistance Program.**”
 - b) Under “**Assistance Reasons**” select “**Natural Disaster.**”
 - c) Under “**Disbursement Category**” on the Transaction Tab select “**Disaster Assistance**” as the category and select the appropriate sub-category.
 - d) When entering items not listed as a normal category of assistance, select “**Exception**” as the “**Disbursement Category.**”
 - e) Enter Special Event Code “**Florida Panhandle Wildfires (2022).**”
- 7) Verify client banking information is correct on AER Form 575 when the funds will be disbursed via ACH.

9. MANDATORY DOCUMENTS.

- a. AER FORM 101, Application for AER Assistance
- b. AER Form 57, Budget Planning Sheet (BPS) (When requesting over \$600 for Evacuation assistance (Departure and Return) and for Recovery assistance)
- c. AER Form 575, Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) Authorization Form for ACH transactions, as applicable
- d. Leave and Earning Statement (LES) and other earning statements for Soldier and/or Spouse, as applicable
- e. Documentation to support and validate the financial need, as required
- f. Trustee approval letter (if under bankruptcy)
- g. Special Power of Attorney (AER Form 53 or civilian equivalent) or Allotment Authorization (AER Form 55) when Soldier is not available

10. This bulletin will remain in effect until rescinded by HQ AER.

11. Points of contacts for this bulletin are as follows:

- Assistance Section: SGM(R) Glen Wellman or CSM(R) Charles Durr at (571) 389-7137/ Extension 1 or via email at assistance@aerhq.org.
- Loan Management Section: SGM(R) William Hagzan at (571) 389-7137/Extension 2 or via email at repayments-allotments@arehq.org.

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12. If additional guidance is required during non-business hours, please contact an HQ AER caseworker through the Army Operations Center at (703) 697-0218.

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Officer