



News Release

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5,000 IRS Telephone Operators Register Hurricane Victims for FEMA Benefits

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WASHINGTON – The Internal Revenue Service announced today that several thousand telephone operators are helping the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) answer telephone calls from Hurricane Katrina victims.

The IRS has 2,743 employees working these telephone calls today at locations in Atlanta, Buffalo, Dallas and Philadelphia. By Friday, the number of IRS employees will reach nearly 5,000.

IRS telephone assisters are taking calls seven days a week from 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. to help people with the FEMA registration process. Hurricane victims call in and provide IRS employees with basic information, such as name, address and types of property damage. They are also referred to other essential services, like the American Red Cross.

"We've given the FEMA registration process priority over our regular telephone service to taxpayers. Hundreds of thousands of families have suffered because of this hurricane and they are scattered in communities across America," said IRS Commissioner Mark W. Everson. "They can't get the cash and housing benefits to which they are entitled until they register with FEMA. By calling back to work over 4,000 of our seasonal workers, we are speeding assistance to hurricane victims while minimizing disruption to our normal taxpayer services."

Those needing FEMA assistance can call 1-800-621-FEMA (3362).

The IRS began its assistance efforts on Aug. 29 at the request of FEMA. Through mid-day Wednesday, IRS employees have answered 175,000 calls with a 92 second average speed of answer. The average length of call is 16 minutes. About one-third of the FEMA calls are being handled by IRS assisters, with that number expected to top 50 percent soon.

Regular IRS telephone operations involving tax questions will continue during this period.

The IRS has also established a separate toll-free number for Katrina victims with tax issues. That number is 1-866-562-5227.

Providing telephone support for FEMA is just the latest step the IRS has taken to assist the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Other steps, the IRS has taken include:

- Victims of Hurricane Katrina will have until Jan. 3, 2006 to file any returns, pay any taxes or make any deposits due.
- An abatement of interest and any late filing, late payment or failure to deposit penalties that would otherwise apply to those in Hurricane Katrina affected areas. This relief includes the Sept. 15 due date for estimated taxes and for calendar-year corporate returns with automatic extensions; the Oct. 17 deadline for individuals who received a second extension for filing their individual income tax returns; and the Oct. 31 deadline for filing quarterly federal employment and excise tax returns.
- Affected taxpayers in a Presidential Disaster Area have the option of claiming disaster-related casualty losses on their federal income tax return for either this year or last year. Claiming the loss on an original or amended return for last year will get the taxpayer an earlier refund; alternatively, waiting to claim the loss on this year's return could result in a greater tax saving, depending on other income factors.
- Providing special tax treatment to support leave-based donation programs to aid victims who have suffered from the extraordinary destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. Under these programs, employees donate their vacation, sick or personal leave in exchange for employer cash payments made to qualified tax-exempt organizations providing relief for victims of Hurricane Katrina.
- Hurricane Katrina also impacted petroleum and gasoline production, affecting gasoline prices. In recognition of recent gasoline price increases, the IRS made a special adjustment to the standard mileage reimbursement rate for the final months of 2005.

In the aftermath of this natural disaster, the IRS assures individuals, businesses and tax professionals that it will continue to work aggressively to monitor the situation and resolve other potential tax administration issues as they are identified.