

CRS Emergency Preparedness Newsletter

May 2026

Theme: Vital Documents



Vital (Important) Documents — Your Paper Trail for Recovery

Major Reference: <https://www.clallamcountywa.gov/m/newsflash/home/detail/558>

Disasters are not only about food, water, radios, and flashlights. After a fire, earthquake, evacuation, medical emergency, or major storm, one of the first questions is often: Can you prove who you are*, what you own, what coverage you have, and who should be contacted?

This month's preparedness step is to gather, copy, protect, and share access to your most important household documents. FEMA's Emergency Financial First Aid Kit recommends collecting key identity, financial, insurance, medical, and household records before an emergency happens. Ready.gov also recommends keeping paper copies of critical documents in a waterproof/fireproof container, safe deposit box, or with a trusted person.

What to gather

Visit the CRS website for information on, and a checklist of which documents are considered “Vital.”

Protect Your Vital Documents

https://www.bellelealand.net/files/ugd/93ebf6_1f5b365fa65644e184cb43b9cce051f6.pdf

Create a simple “important documents system” with three layers:

1. Grab-and-go paper folder: Copies of the most important papers in a waterproof pouch or folder kept near your go bag.
2. Protected home set: Originals or backup copies in a fire-resistant, water-resistant document box or home safe.
3. Digital backup: Scans or clear photos stored securely in an encrypted cloud account, password manager vault, or encrypted USB drive.

Do not overcomplicate this. A partial set of documents today is better than a perfect system that never gets finished.

Photographing or Videoing Your Home and Belongings

After a house fire, earthquake damage, theft, or evacuation, insurance claims can be much easier if you can show what you owned before the loss. Once a year, walk through your home with your phone and record a slow video of every room.

Open closets, cabinets, drawers, the garage, and storage areas. Narrate what you are seeing: “living room furniture,” “television,” “tools,” “bicycles,” “kitchen appliances,” “jewelry box,” “computer equipment.” For higher-value items, take close-up photos of serial numbers, receipts, appraisals, and model labels.

Include the outside of the house, roofline, outbuildings, propane tank area, generator, garden equipment, vehicles, and any major improvements. Store the video somewhere outside the home, such as encrypted cloud storage or a secure drive kept with a trusted family member.

A good household inventory is not just for insurance. It can also help family members understand what exists, where things are located, and what may need attention after an emergency.

Important Documents and Family Medical Emergencies

Document preparedness is not only for earthquakes and wildfires. It also matters during family emergencies: a fall, stroke, hospitalization, sudden illness, or death in the family.

In a medical emergency, family members may need to know medications, allergies, physician names, insurance information, preferred hospital, emergency contacts, and

whether advance directives exist. If the person who “knows where everything is” is the one who becomes ill, the family can lose precious time.

Every household should have a simple medical information sheet for each person. Include current medications, major diagnoses, allergies, medical devices, doctors, pharmacy, insurance numbers, emergency contacts, and the location of legal documents such as a health care power of attorney or advance directive.

Keep one copy at home, one in the go bag, and one accessible to a trusted family member or emergency contact. The Red Cross recommends older adults review and refresh plans, supplies, emergency contacts, and important documents every six months.

Devices for Protecting Paper Documents

Important documents need protection from three things: water, fire, and disorganization.

Good options include:

Waterproof document pouch: Inexpensive and easy to grab. Good for copies of passports, insurance cards, medication lists, and emergency contacts.

Fire-resistant document bag: Often rated for heat resistance and useful for copies or less bulky records. Choose one that also has a water-resistant zipper or store it inside a waterproof container.

Fire-resistant document box: A small portable box can hold passports, birth certificates, insurance papers, USB drives, and backup keys. Look for products that list both fire and water protection.

Home safe: More secure than a small box, especially if bolted down, but it may not be easy to carry during evacuation.

Safe deposit box: Useful for originals that are rarely needed, such as property deeds or archival documents. Do not keep items there that family might need immediately during a weekend, holiday, or medical emergency.

Examples of items to look for include a SentrySafe fire/water chest, Honeywell fire-resistant document safe, DocSafe fireproof document bag, or similar UL-rated or ETL-verified products. Check the product’s actual fire and water rating before buying; “fireproof” in advertising does not always mean the same thing as a tested rating.

Electronic Protection — Passwords, Backups, and a YubiKey

Many of our most important documents are now electronic: bank accounts, Social Security, Medicare, insurance portals, email, cloud photos, password managers, and medical portals. Protecting access to those accounts is part of emergency preparedness.

Start with three basics:

Use a password manager. Create unique passwords for important accounts, especially email, banking, medical, insurance, and cloud storage.

Turn on multi-factor authentication. Text-message codes are better than nothing, but stronger options include authenticator apps, passkeys, and hardware security keys.

Back up important files. Keep encrypted digital copies of important documents and home inventory photos in more than one place.

A YubiKey is a small physical security key that plugs into USB or works by NFC with many phones. It can be used as a strong second factor for accounts such as email, password managers, and some financial or cloud services. CISA describes FIDO2/WebAuthn security keys as a form of phishing-resistant authentication, meaning they are designed to resist many fake-login and credential-stealing attacks. Yubico, the maker of YubiKey, describes its keys as hardware security keys for strong two-factor authentication.

A practical household setup:

Keep two YubiKeys: one on your keychain and one backup stored in your protected document box. Register both keys with your password manager and main email account. Your email account is especially important because it is often the recovery path for many other accounts.

Also write down emergency access instructions for a trusted person. Do not write down all passwords in plain sight, but do make sure someone you trust knows where your password manager emergency access, backup key, legal documents, and medical information can be found.

This Month's 30-Minute Preparedness Task

Choose one drawer, folder, or file box and begin. By the end of the month, try to complete these five steps:

1. Copy or scan your most important IDs, insurance cards, and medical information.
2. Create or update a one-page emergency contact sheet.
3. Take a slow video inventory of your home and garage.
4. Put paper copies in a waterproof pouch or fire/water-resistant box.
5. Turn on strong multi-factor authentication for your main email and password manager.

Preparedness is not about fear. It is about making recovery easier for yourself, your family, and the neighbors who may be helping you.

*<https://abcnews.com/GMA/jersey-homeowner-calls-cops-bob-dylan/story?id=8331830>