

How to Prepare Before a Disaster Strikes

July 11, 2011

A home disaster can be stressful enough without reconstructing important records and accounting for belongings. The Internal Revenue Service encourages taxpayers to safeguard their financial and tax records before disaster strikes. Listed below are four simple tips for individuals on preparing for a disaster.

1. **Recordkeeping** Take advantage of paperless recordkeeping for financial and tax records. Many people receive bank statements and documents electronically and important documents like W-2s and tax returns can be scanned into an electronic format and stored on a flash drive or CD in a safe place. Keep it with other essential documents like home-closing statements, vehicle titles, insurance records and birth, death or marriage certificates and legal paperwork. Some online services can automatically back up computer files and store them offsite. Regardless of how you save your documents (whether it is electronically or on paper) ensure they are safe from the elements, but also encrypted and/or locked up to guard against disclosure or theft.
2. **Document Valuables** The IRS has disaster loss workbooks for individuals that can help you compile a room-by-room list of your belongings. One option is to photograph or videotape the contents of your home, especially items of greater value. You should store the photos or video in a safe place away from the geographic area at risk. This will help you recall and prove the market value of items for insurance and casualty loss claims in the event of a disaster.
3. **Update Emergency Plans** Make sure you have a means of receiving severe weather information; if you have a NOAA Weather Radio, put fresh batteries in it. Make sure you know what you should do if threatening weather approaches or if a fire occurs. Review your emergency plans annually.
4. **Count on the IRS** In the event of a disaster, the IRS stands ready to help. The IRS has valuable information you can request if your records are destroyed. If you have been affected by a federally declared disaster, you can receive copies or transcripts of previously filed tax returns free of charge by submitting Form 4506, Request for Copy of Tax Return, or Form 4506-T, Request for Transcript of Tax Return. Clearly indicate the official name of the disaster in red at the top of the form, to expedite processing and waive the usual fee for tax return copies.

For more information type "Preparing for a Disaster" in the search box at www.irs.gov.