



**DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
OFFICE OF HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
OFFICE OF TALENT SERVICES**

Surge Capacity Force Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is the Surge Capacity Force?

The [Surge Capacity Force \(SCF\)](#) was established under the [2006 Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act](#) to strengthen the Federal Government's ability to respond to catastrophic disasters. The Act authorizes the **Department of Homeland Security (DHS)** to create and maintain a deployable workforce composed of Federal employees from various agencies to assist in the response to large-scale disasters and emergencies. SCF serves as a critical tool to enhance FEMA's capacity during large-scale disasters or emergencies, such as a Hurricane Katrina-level event. The **Secretary of Homeland Security** has the authority to activate the SCF when a catastrophic incident, such as a hurricane Katrina event, exceeds the capacity of FEMA's existing disaster workforce to respond.

Who can volunteer?

Permanent, full-time or temporary full-time Federal employees serving in the grades of GS-15 and below. (Contractors cannot participate in SCF).

What kind of work does an SCF volunteer perform?

Volunteers may work in one of three program areas: Public Assistance (debris monitoring), Individual Assistance (working in a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) providing aid to survivors), and Community Relations (providing outreach to the public about available disaster assistance programs).

How long are deployments?

Deployments will be up to a maximum of 45 days and volunteers may be released sooner for personal reasons or if the assignment is complete.

Is volunteering for SCF a requirement of my position?

No, it is strictly voluntary, and one may withdraw at any time.

Is supervisory approval required?

Yes. Employees must receive supervisor's approval on the application prior to submission. This applies both when employees initially sign to volunteer and again as a reassessment of the current organizational mission requirements at the time of an actual call up.

Who administers the SCF program?

The executive agent for this program is FEMA. Each Federal Agency has a designated Surge Capacity Force POC who manages the program and their own application processes/procedures. Additionally, each Commerce bureau has a designated SCF POC and Financial POC.

How do I apply?

Commerce employees are invited to apply during the "open season" as announced in the agency's Broadcast message. A link to the "application" will be provided in the body of the message for your convenience.

What kind of training will I receive for SCF?

Employees can begin on-line training anytime, with their supervisors' approval. In addition, employees will receive enhanced training at the initial deployment site prior to reporting to a disaster area.

What are conditions like in the field?

Conditions can be challenging and unpredictable. Volunteers are encouraged to manage expectations and be flexible. Please keep in mind, volunteer periods are not a vacation with paid time off, because the SCF is only activated when an incident is catastrophic. Living conditions are often austere during deployments to include but not limited to no running water, no electricity, sleeping in tents and weather extremes.

Are there any medical or health requirements?

The application process requires that volunteers must self-certify regarding their medical fitness to perform the SCF duties. The application process and the website contain a checklist of medical/health conditions that can be printed out and discussed with the employee's physician if any items are applicable.

How are travel cards obtained?

Employees who are interested in volunteering and have met all conditions except possessing a travel card should contact their local travel managers to request assistance in acquiring a travel card for SCF volunteers. It is recommended that you request a credit limit of \$15,000 to cover reimbursable expenses.

Who pays for travel if the SCF is activated, and volunteers are called to report?

The volunteer's unit will initially pay the travel costs. Those costs will be reimbursed by FEMA.

How do volunteers know when to deploy?

Once your application is fully processed, you will receive an automatic email from FEMA's Defense Tracking System (DTS), which will provide volunteers with all the information they need to begin their deployment.

If I served last year and expressed an interest in serving again, what actions should I take?

Ensure your email and contact information always remains current in the DTS system, to include "Availability Status". In addition, each year at the end of July, you will receive an email from Commerce's SCF Program Manager reminding you to log into the DTS to check your information. This ensures we have the most up to date contact information for you.

If I have already completed the training required for deployment, will I be required to take them again? How long will they remain valid?

Yes, you would be required to take the training prior to each deployment. Trainings are valid for the calendar only and must be completed prior to deployment.

I volunteered to deploy last year, but I was never contacted to deploy. If I volunteer, will I be called upon to deploy this year?

More than likely, you will have the opportunity to deploy. Whether or not you are called upon to serve depends on the need for the number of volunteers, which will depend on the severity and frequency of natural disasters this year.

Will I receive any updates from FEMA about the potential needs for volunteers?

FEMA will communicate requirements to the Commerce SCF POC who will communicate regularly with volunteers, based on their respective availability about potential upcoming needs.

If selected, do I have to worry about the release of my PII (Personal Identifying Information) to other agencies or to the public?

No, a database of potential volunteers will be maintained solely by cleared agency POCs. PII will be safeguarded with appropriate IT security measures in accordance with the Privacy Act of 1990.

What if I would like to volunteer but my supervisor or Director does not approve my request?

Supervisor approval is required, no exceptions. However, given the urgency of the need, supervisors are strongly encouraged to allow their employees to participate.

What if I would like to volunteer and my supervisor has concerns about covering my position duties during my absence?

As with any absence, employees are encouraged to provide their supervisors with options that may alleviate any staffing gaps to include planning for back-up coverage and cross training. Supervisors should be encouraged to contact the agency POC and/or refer to agency guidance provided by FEMA for recommendations on how to cover staffing deficits. Most importantly, supervisors should consult with their Human Resources office for agency options.

Who is my point of contact while deployed?

Your bureau POC/Commerce SCF Program Manager will serve as your POCs for application purposes and pre-deployment processing. If you have questions **during** your deployment, FEMA will assign you a mentor to assist and coordinate resolution of concerns, when needed. Please keep a record of your mentor's contact information for future use. As always, you may also reach out to the FEMA Surge Capacity Force management team at:

surgecapacityforce@fema.dhs.gov.

When I travel as a Surge Capacity Force volunteer, do I need to pay for any travel related costs out of pocket?

No. Agency travel rules apply to all Surge Capacity Force members selected to deploy. Each member is required to possess a government-issued travel card and adhere to agency travel policies, procedures, and guidance. Your department or agency is responsible for ensuring members are aware of travel guidelines and reimbursement policy.

Will my healthcare coverage cover me should I get sick or injured while deployed? What about workers' compensation?

As a Federal employee, both your FEHB or private health care coverage and Department of Labor's workers' compensation eligibility, if injured while performing your volunteer duties, will remain with you during deployment.

Who pays my salary while deployed?

Employees volunteering for the Surge Capacity Force remain in a paid regular duty status and continue to be paid by their department/agency for a normal 80 hour pay period. Employees are responsible for adhering to standard time and attendance reporting requirements to include reporting use of leave, if applicable.

- Departments/agencies will be reimbursed by FEMA for overtime pay, travel and lodging upon request by the agency POC, through the Disaster Relief Fund, to eligible employees consistent with applicable law and regulations. Overtime will be approved by Joint Field Office supervisors. Employees receiving overtime pay under Title 5, United States Code, are subject to biweekly and annual premium pay limitations (see <http://www.opm.gov/oca/pay/HTML/FACTOT.asp>). FEMA does not pay hazard pay.

How will I account for my time?

Timesheets will be approved by Field Team Leads and transmitted in batches from the field back to your Department and Agency/Bureaus POCs for input into the appropriate timekeeping system. Every member has a responsibility for adhering to rules and procedures established by FEMA, and for ensuring that time spent during deployment relates to the SCF. Employees are reminded that they are volunteering as a Federal employee in support of the U.S. Government's efforts to support and provide relief to communities and areas in need, and as such, must adhere to agency standards of conduct.

Will travel expenses be reimbursed?

Yes. Employees are required to use their government travel cards for all expenses incurred while deployed. Agencies maintain responsibility to process travel authorizations and vouchers. FEMA will issue mission assignments to agencies to reimburse costs associated with deployment, to include pre-approved overtime by FEMA representatives.

How do I know when to deploy?

All deployments are issued using FEMA's Deployment Tracking System (DTS). Once you become a registered Surge Capacity Force volunteer, you will activate your DTS account and can identify the email or phone numbers through which you want to receive deployment notifications. These can include work and personal emails and phone numbers.

Can I just show up at a major disaster and help?

No. All personnel interested in volunteering must have the consent of their employing agency and adhere to FEMA's registration and training procedures. The volunteers selected should wait for their deployment orders to ensure they arrive where and when they are most needed and inform their agency supervisor and

***FEMA POC. Self-deployment is against U.S government policy and travel expenses will not be reimbursed.**

Can I make travel arrangements before I am officially deployed?

No, you must wait until you receive and accept your deployment. At that point, you can make travel arrangements according to your agency's policy.

Can FEMA use my other professional skills, such as attorney, security specialist, safety officer, etc.?

The greatest need is Disaster Survivor Assistance, which does not require specialized experience. Volunteers will be trained on how to perform this mission immediately upon deployment at the Personnel Mobilization Center (PMC). At that time, they will work with you to identify any potentially relevant skills. The Surge Capacity Force offers specialty training in 10 areas based on carefully identified needs during the critical response period when the Surge Capacity Force is activated. Volunteers should be prepared to serve within their specialty and inform their FEMA mentor of any special qualifications they have that might come in handy. The ten areas are: Logistics, Public Assistance (debris monitoring), Individual Assistance (aid to survivors), Disaster Survivor Assistance (outreach to the public about available disaster assistance programs), Information Technology, Human Resources, Finance, External Affairs, Acquisition, and Planning.

What kind of training will I receive for SCF?

Due to the extraordinary nature of these disasters, measures are being taken to expedite deployment and consolidate initial training with just-in-time orientations in the field. Upon arrival at the personnel mobilization center in Grapevine, Texas, you will receive all relevant training and guidance for your specific assignments.

I am a GS-15 who has volunteered to deploy. If I reach my Premium Pay Cap, how will that be handled?

Based on Commerce's guidance, the deployed employees will coordinate with their respective HR departments to address this issue.

Based on my deployment, what actions should be taken in the event my FLSA status changes?

Consult your respective HR department to initiate a data element change.