

Your financial survival basket

By IMRF Documentation Specialist Sharon Merwin

Many of us can probably recall the memorable scene in the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy feverishly tries to open the storm cellar doors of her farm house to escape the oncoming tornado. On her arm is the basket with her beloved dog Toto. Did you ever wonder what else was in Dorothy's "survival basket" besides her pet?

This is a question we, too, must ask ourselves. In an emergency, what information – particularly financial information – should we put in our survival basket? We might be grabbing for that basket not only for a possible tornado, but also during a massive power outage, pandemic, or flood. We might also have to find and use the survival basket of family or loved ones in the case of a serious disability or even death. Also consider that if an emergency occurs, you may not be at home, but at work or on vacation, and will still need access to your information.

How do we go about identifying the financial information we need in an emergency or a catastrophic event? For example, what documents would be necessary if you had to prove your income or your assets? A number of sources are very useful in assisting you in not only identifying that information, but with storing and accessing that information. One of the most thorough resources is the Emergency Financial First Aid Kit (EFFAK), a document created by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Operation Hope.

Gathering the Information

Perhaps you have already gathered your important papers and have a method for keeping your financial house in order. (See the Winter 2005 and Spring 2007 copies of Fundamentals to review these tasks.) If so, preparing for a financial emergency is simply the next step in this process. The EFFAK, which serves as a personal inventory and document finder for your financial information and important papers, can be the most effective way to recover from an emergency or disaster. After a disaster, financial issues affect more people than personal injury or direct property damage. Along with the EFFAK, you may also want to complete the

companion document, the Personal Disaster Preparedness Guide (PDPG). The PDPG, created by Operation Hope, Hope Coalition America and FEMA, helps you assess other aspects of your life in a disaster, such as health care information and home evacuation plans.

The EFFAK is divided in four sections:

- Personal Household Information
- Professional Advisors
- Checklist of Important Legal Documents and financial Statements
- Private Security / Access Information. This last section of the EFFAK addresses concerns with online accounts, such as for banking and credit card. In our password-proliferated, identity-inundated lives, how would a family member or trusted advisor handle your financial concerns if they are unaware of or cannot access these accounts?

You can access the EFFAK at <http://operationhope.org/effak/> and the PDPG at <http://operationhope.org/pdpg/> . Both documents are available in English and Spanish.

Completing the Tool Kit

Complete the EFFAK tool kit by downloading the document, printing it out and writing the information manually. You can also complete the information on your personal computer in an enterable version of the document. (Note: The document pages display in another window and you simply tab from field to field down the pages to complete each section.

On some pages you must use the Tab key, as the window may have no scroll bar.)

The program allows you to save work in progress if you cannot complete it in one session.

When you are finished, you can print it out and save it to a file on your computer.

The contents of the file are encrypted for your security, so if you open the saved document illegible text and symbols will appear. You should also make a backup copy on a portable storage media/device, such as a disc, CD, or Flash Drive.

You should also make paper copies of the legal documents and important papers in the EFFAK checklists. It is also a good idea to have digital copies of them. Some experts in this field recommend scanning the papers and creating an image file or taking digital photos of the document at close range and saving the digital file.

Storing the Information

The next process is to store the information, which can be done in several formats. It is advisable to store the information in more than one way.

- Paper format – You can save and store the original and/or copies of your important papers and the print versions of any digitally-created files in a fireproof / waterproof metal box or safe. You might also want to store a set in your safe deposit box; and keep the key in a safe place. (Note: Most experts warn against storing the original copy of a will in the safety deposit box.) Another option is to give a copy of these important papers with a trusted family member or your attorney, if you have one.
- Online storage – You can save and store digitally-created files and image files of your important papers by uploading them to a secure email account where messages are not deleted after a certain time period. Or you can upload the files and images to the secure online storage space you may have with your ISP (Internet service provider). Do investigate the security of any of these methods with your particular resource.
- Offline storage – You can save and store digitally-created files and image files of your important papers to portable storage devices or media, such as CDs, diskettes, or Flash drives. Because these devices or media are easy prey for thieves, it is recommended that the files are password-protected. There are also personal recordkeeping software programs that allow you to save the information to a storage device or media, as well as make paper copies. Saving the information to your personal computer may not be helpful if you must evacuate your home or you have no power.

What about all those User IDs and Passwords you use to log into anything from your bank account to your credit card accounts to IMRF's Member Access? Some experts suggest that you keep a list of PINs, account numbers, and passwords on the portable storage device or media, again, as long as the file of that list is password protected. If you handwrite a list of your User IDs and Passwords, make sure the list is updated and in a safe place. The EFFAK guidelines stress that you should **not** include a list of passwords and PINs in the EFFAK documents.

The EFFAK guidelines recommend storing the completed EFFAK, all the original documents, photos and portable storage device in an off-site safety deposit box. Keep the key in a safe place, too.

In your home, you should also keep the paper format and digital copies of the EFFAK and documents at home in a fireproof/ waterproof metal box or safe. You may want to keep paper copies and digital files with a trusted family member.

Why bother?

While the probability of an emergency or a disaster might seem slim, keeping emergency financial information is extremely valuable if you truly need it. Think about stories you may have read about Katrina survivors reestablishing their lives. If you live alone or are a single parent, this project may be all the more necessary.

Completing a financial tool kit such as the EFFAK can also help you become more financially literate and better prepared for routine financial responsibilities as well. It might also be helpful for related tasks like filing income taxes, keeping medical records, or making an estate plan.

Consider your financial first aid project as a family project, where you or your spouse gather the information and complete the EFFAK and your children assist with producing digital files. For an elderly relative, helping them with the EFFAK and PDPG might be a wonderful gift.

What about my IMRF Information?

Your critical IMRF information is safely and securely stored at our offices and backed up at an alternate site. IMRF staff has been trained on continuing their business functions in the case of an emergency or lengthy office shutdown so we can continue to serve our members and employers. Include that you are an IMRF member in your EFFAK documents. This might also be a good time to review your IMRF beneficiary information and complete a new Form 6.11, if necessary (available at www.imrf.org).

One last note: You'll be able to breathe a sigh of relief once you complete the emergency financial first aid kit for you and your families. And if you have a pet like Dorothy did, read more about resources for your own Toto at http://www.hsus.org/web-files/PDF/DIST_DisasterPetBrochure.pdf

Tips

1. Organize your financial documents using the EFFAK tool kit.
2. Make Emergency Information Cards for Family members and Develop a household communications plan
3. Keep cash (\$10 and \$20 bills) in your EFFAK, as ATMs may not work during an emergency.
4. Learn the emergency policies/plans of our children's schools or your parent's eldercare and keep them updated with your family information.
5. Consider emergency information or plans for your pets or farm animals.
6. Learn about evacuation routes, keeps maps and learn about public transportation
7. Organize disaster supply kits for your home, workplace and vehicle.
8. Get involved in your community's preparedness, participate in drills and take training in first aid and emergency response skills.
9. Familiarize yourself and your family in advance with your utilities and their shutoff valves.
10. Keep at least $\frac{1}{2}$ tank of gas in your car in case you have to evacuate.
11. Get a battery powered radio and write down the designated emergency alert radio station. Listen and follow instructions.