

What is a disaster?

State and federal law generally define “disaster” as any catastrophe, including but not limited to a tornado, storm, high water, wind-driven water, earthquake, landslide, mudslide, snowstorm, drought or, regardless of cause, any fire, flood, or explosion.

What is the state’s role?

A flowchart on the following page identifies key steps and decisions in the disaster response process. When disaster strikes, local government employees and volunteers are typically the first to respond. Staff with the state Department of Public Safety may provide early technical support and assistance. If the scope or cost of the disaster overwhelms local resources, the local government may declare an emergency and formally request assistance from the state. In response, the governor may declare a state of emergency and direct state agencies and the Minnesota National Guard to provide assistance. If the event exceeds the state’s ability to respond, the governor may request assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the Department of Homeland Security. In coordination with the legislature, the governor may also convene a special legislative session to provide additional resources for disaster relief.

What is the effect of a state or local declaration?

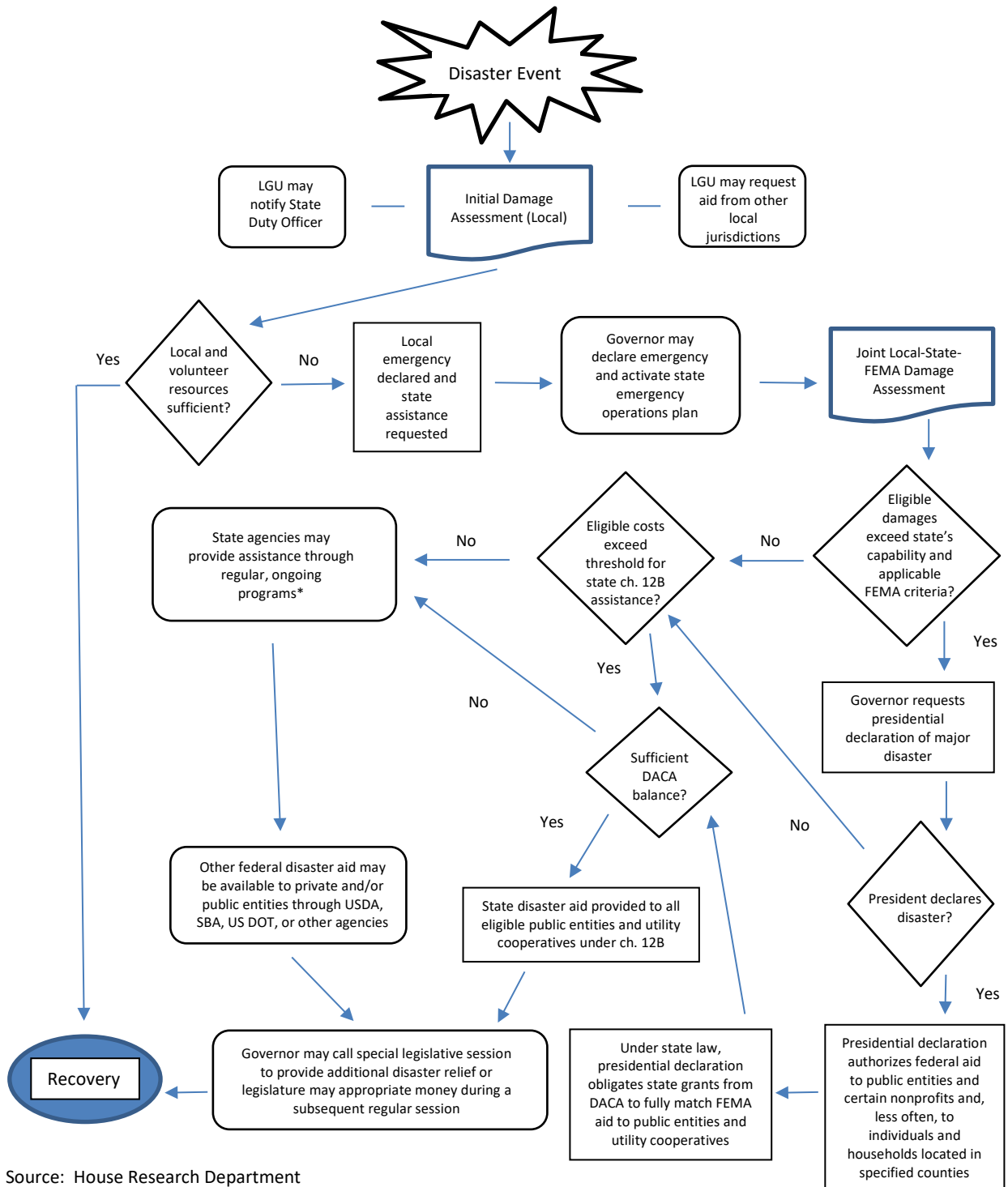
In addition to activating state and local disaster response and recovery plans, by law these formal declarations also activate certain statutory relief programs. Some programs may be activated, in part, by local declarations (e.g., state-paid property tax abatements for certain damaged property), while others are activated only by a state or federal declaration (e.g., state agencies may temporarily waive fees in those counties included in a presidential disaster declaration).

When is a special session warranted?

Whether to convene a special session for disaster relief is largely a subjective decision based on the scope and severity of the damage. Prior to 2014, if a significant disaster occurred when the legislature was not in session, the governor typically would call the legislature into special session. In 2014, the legislature established the Disaster Assistance Contingency Account (DACA) to proactively set aside money to pay for certain disaster relief activities without additional legislative action. There has not been a special session for natural disaster relief since the DACA was established. However, the governor and legislature could still determine that a special session is necessary, particularly if the DACA balance or eligible uses are not sufficient to provide adequate relief.

Are special sessions and DACA the only avenues for disaster relief funding?

No, the legislature could appropriate money for a specific disaster event when it next meets in regular session. For example, during the 2016 and 2017 regular sessions, the legislature appropriated money to help the city of Madelia recover from a downtown fire that occurred in February 2016.



Source: House Research Department

Note: This sequence not applicable to all disaster events; “LGU” stands for Local Governmental Unit

*For example, farmers affected by a natural disaster may receive help through the Minnesota Farm Advocates Program.

For more information: See the House Research publications *Contingent Funding for Disaster Relief* (December 2022). For more on the [chapter 12B](#) relief program, see [State Disaster Aid for Public Entities and Utility Cooperatives](#) (December 2022). For legislative issues, contact Colbey Sullivan at 651-296-5047.



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