

# Hurricane Preparedness for Texans with Disabilities



# Hurricane Preparedness for Texans with Disabilities

Hurricane season officially runs from June 1 through November 30. As a coastal state, Texas is no stranger to the destructive forces and potential impact of a hurricane.

While no one can predict the exact path and severity of a hurricane, it is important for everyone, including people with disabilities, to be prepared. Preparedness is about being ready for the impact of the event, understanding the risks, and also being aware of what resources might become available to help you respond and recover.

## Hazards and impacts of hurricanes

Hurricanes can cause a wide range of hazards, including strong winds and tornados, storm surges, and flooding. These hazards can cause damage to things like roads, bridges, and utility lines, which can disrupt access to:

- transportation,
- housing/sheltering,
- communications (cell phones and radio),
- the internet,
- food, water and supplies, and
- power.

Critical services and supports can be disrupted, delayed or damaged by a hurricane, which means people with disabilities could be impacted more than others because these supports and services afford continuity of independence and autonomy. Whether it is access to healthcare, community integration or timely supply chain for delivery, disruptions will happen in and after an event. Broader awareness and education on resources, options and how to advocate for your needs, creates better planning and increases preparedness.

## Communication access

People with disabilities may experience barriers accessing emergency information before, during, and after a hurricane. Consider:

- How you'll get emergency alerts if power or the internet goes out

- How to get emergency information that is accessible to you
- An alternative way to communicate with people if you lose cell service
- Alternative charging options for your communication devices

Ask your local emergency management officials how emergency alerts and updates are made accessible to people with disabilities.

## **Transportation and evacuation**

It is critical to plan ahead and have transportation options that will work for you.

### **Public transportation**

If you use public transportation, find out what it looks like when services stop. For example, is there a point where the local public transit authority will stop operating due to safety concerns? And how will the public be notified if services do stop? When do services resume?

### **Private transportation**

Your plan could include arranging for accessible transportation with a private transportation provider, or you could coordinate to get a ride from friends, family, or caregivers.

### **Congregate settings and facilities**

If you live in a place like a group home, institution, assisted living or nursing facility, or even an apartment complex, find out what the plan is for when and where evacuations will occur. Sometimes, staying in place is the safer option, but an evacuation might be necessary depending on how dangerous the conditions are. Ask about these plans, as well as how updates will be communicated to you and your family or guardian.

Some settings and facilities require disaster or emergency plans – for example, places regulated by the state, like State hospitals, nursing facilities, and assisted living facilities – so make sure to ask about these plans ahead of time, in blue sky times.

Ask the right questions to the right person or entity about prolonged power outages. With no electricity, how do you access heating/cooling systems? If a building is multiple stories, are there ways to get in and get out?

## Evacuating

Get familiar with [evacuation routes, evacuation zones](#), and lodging options. Find out how local emergency shelters will be announced, or find hotels or other places to stay in advance if you will likely have to leave your home.

Have a **Go Bag** packed with important items, like medications, any other necessities, and [certain documents](#). If you use durable medical equipment (DME) or assistive technology (AT) devices, talk to your providers about how to plan, and what options or alternatives are available if devices are damaged, inaccessible, or left behind.

## Housing

### Prepare

If you live in an area that floods or gets storm surges, find an alternative place to live temporarily so you can stay safe. If emergency shelters are available, they will be time-limited, so learn about potential transitional (short- and mid-term) housing options and resources. For example, learn about how FEMA resources or Small Business Administration programs might be able help.

If you need to stay in your home, make sure it is structurally sound and secure, and take steps to [protect your home](#) from flood or wind damage.

### Recover

If your home is damaged by a hurricane, flood waters, or wind damage be aware of the terms of your [insurance coverage and mortgage or lease agreements](#) so you know what you're responsible for and what protections and options you might have. Understand how "habitability" is defined (what is considered livable vs. not livable) and what it means for you as a renter or tenant.

Also, disaster-related hazards can create environmental issues that make a home unsafe to live in. Individuals with disabilities, especially those with underlying health conditions, may be more susceptible to these hazards. There might be terms in your lease agreements which protect you from having to live in an unsafe situation. Or, if you're receiving subsidized housing, the local housing authority may be obligated to ensure you have access to safe housing. If you are a homeowner, insurance can cover potential remediation efforts.

## **Mold**

In hurricanes, flooding and wind driven rain can cause water damage and result in mold. Mold is a fungus that feeds off water and can live on a variety of surfaces, which creates unsafe living conditions. Mold can start growing within 24 to 48 hours, so it's important to address it quickly. People with respiratory conditions, compromised immune systems, or other underlying health conditions may face heightened health risks from mold exposure.

If there was rising floodwater in your home, wet drywall will create an opportunity for mold to grow, and wind driven rain will make structural leaks worse, allowing water to come in where it shouldn't.

To be better prepared, educate yourself on ways to identify or check for the presence of mold. Learn how to [prevent mold growth](#) and how to [clean up mold](#).

## **Food and water**

During a hurricane, it is important to have an adequate supply of food and water. The current recommendation is to have a three-day supply on hand. While three days is often the minimum recommendation, individuals should consider planning for at least five to seven days when possible due to prolonged power outages and supply chain disruptions after major hurricanes.

### **Stock your own**

Make sure to stock up on food and water in advance. This is particularly important if you require a special diet because some items could be hard to find in the wake of a hurricane. Consider purchasing shelf-stable food or non-perishable items that can be easily stored and prepared without electricity.

### **Distribution**

Ask your local emergency management or city services the plan for food, water and ice distribution for the community. Also ask how they'll make sure you have access to the supplies if you can't get to the place where it will be handed out.

Learn more about how to get [food and water during a disaster](#).

## **Power options**

Sustained power outages are common during hurricanes, and they will disrupt critical services for power-dependent DME and AT consumers. Whether you have

to evacuate or shelter in place, it is important to understand your power needs and have backup power options, such as possible charging locations, battery backup, portable power sources, or whole home generators.

### **Power supply**

Make sure your backup power source will support your power needs for at least 72 hours. Better yet, if you can, find a “power calculator” tool to accurately identify your energy needs. And discuss your backup power plan with your providers.

Once you have your backup power supply, learn as much as you can about it. Understand how to maintain and store it, and test it – before you need it – to make sure it works properly.

### **Critical Care registry**

If you live in the community and rely on power-dependent medical equipment, ask your utility provider about their Critical Care registry and get registered. Understand what the registry does and does not provide. You can get started with the Public Utility Commission of Texas’ [Application for Chronic Condition or Critical Care Residential Customer Status](#).

### **Long power outages**

Ask your local emergency management department what will happen if there’s a long power outage. Some questions to ask include:

- Will there be efforts to check on people who sheltered in place? Or is there a phone number to call and request assistance after the event?
- Will mobile power stations be available?
- What back up power options will emergency shelters have?

### **Healthcare**

If you have medical needs or have supports in your home, make sure to have a plan in place for continued care during and after a hurricane.

If you live in the community, have a plan in place so you can continue to access your care, like nursing, attendant, or mental health services. Access to providers and services could be disrupted, so have a plan in case you evacuate and are

displaced, or if you have to shelter in place for an extended amount of time, or if your provider/services become available. What is the next step? These questions must be considered beforehand. If displaced, will telehealth services be an option? Or if you receive services in your home, talk to your provider and see if supports can remain with you.

If you live in a long-term care facility, make sure that both you and your family or guardian understand the facility's disaster and emergency plan. Some things to know would be:

- how and when evacuations will occur;
- how the facility will continue to serve and provide for its residents, which includes resources for backup power and potable water; and
- how the facility will communicate with your family.

Learn more about [maintaining healthcare when a disaster strikes](#).

## **Service animals and pets**

If you have a service animal, emotional support animal, or household pet, include them in your preparedness planning.

Prepare:

- food and water
- medications
- vaccination records
- identification tags
- leashes, harnesses, or carriers
- evacuation supplies

Learn ahead of time what sheltering options are available and what policies apply to service animals and pets.

## **Recovery from a hurricane**

Recovering from a hurricane can be a long and difficult process. Whether you've been affected by major declared disasters or not, help may be available.

## **Major declared disasters**

If a hurricane is declared a major disaster, a wide range of programs and assistance could become available.

If you have been affected by a major declared disaster (a Presidential Declaration), short-term assistance may be available via the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) [Individual Assistance program](#) or the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) [Disaster Loan Assistance program](#). SBA assistance does not require a major declared disaster.

It is important to keep track of all expenses related to the disaster, and to document any damage to your property or belongings. Take pictures before of real and personal property and keep all documentation related to recovery.

For long-term recovery assistance, the Texas General Land Office (GLO) administers [disaster recovery programs](#) that may provide grants to help with long-term recovery housing needs. Another potential resource, if you are eligible and grants are available, is through the United States Department of Agriculture's [Single Family Housing Rural Disaster Home Repair Grants](#).

There also might be waivers, extensions or credits to help with tax liability and recovery. See the IRS's [Tax relief in disaster situations](#) to learn more.

## **Non-major declared disasters**

For a non-major declared disaster, unfortunately some federal resources and supports do not become available, but there may be assistance that can help with recovery efforts at the local level.

Short-term and long-term recovery assistance may be available from local organizations, non-profits, or faith-based groups. Thus, it is important to know, ahead of time (i.e., during "blue-sky times") what community-based organizations are established in your area and identify ways to get information from them.

## **Additional resources**

See the resources below for additional information to help you prepare for hurricanes.

- [Emergency Ready Sheet](#)
- [Hurricane Preparedness – TexasLawHelp.org](#)
- [Hurricane Safety – American Red Cross](#)
- [Hurricanes – Texas Extension Disaster Education Network](#)
- [Hurricanes – Texas Ready](#)
- [Texas Hurricane Center – Office of the Texas Governor](#)