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PREPARING YOUR PRACTICE FOR A DISASTER

As a physician in the Greater Houston area, you need to have an emergency plan in place to deal with crises, such as natural disasters. June 1 is the beginning of hurricane season. In the Greater Houston area we have experienced and learned from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike, and Tropical Storm Allison. Each of these has brought on new challenges that have shown us better ways to prepare for and recover from a disaster. Print this out and keep it handy. It is the combined wisdom of those who have weathered many and various storms.

Be Prepared: Develop a Disaster Plan

There is a lot to be said for John F. Kennedy's quote, "The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining." Developing a disaster plan during a calm time, when there is no threat, is essential for the health of your practice. Conduct a risk assessment of all potential emergencies; include procedures on emergency escapes, how to account for all employees and visitors, and where to report emergencies to local authorities. Practice the plan with your office staff. Here are some key areas to consider as you build your plan:

Alternate location — Select an emergency office location in advance. Consider identifying an alternate site in a neighboring community where you can set up emergency operations, if needed.

- Even if you cannot be completely operational, plan for at minimum, a receptionist and basic supplies and equipment to manage emergency cases.
- Know your local hospital's disaster plan and where you will fit in. Know your area's evacuation routes, shelters and emergency numbers, including FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Shelter — Have a plan of where to find shelter.

- In an office building, skyscraper, hospital, or nursing home, go directly to an enclosed, windowless area in the center of the building away from the glass.
- Interior stairwells are usually good places to take shelter.

Disaster Prevention should include:

- ✓ **Disaster plan for practice**
- ✓ **Disaster supply kit**
- ✓ **Securing your practice**
- ✓ **Evacuation plan**

Insurance coverage — Ensure that you have adequate insurance coverage for disasters.

- Check your policies to make sure you have business interruption coverage in a sufficient amount and understand all provisions surrounding it.
- Have adequate replacement insurance covering fire, flooding and catastrophic damage from natural disasters.
- Have your insurance agent's numbers handy.
- Inventory your practice's equipment for insurance purposes.

Employee communication — Communicate to staff as soon as possible about a possible office closure.

- If payday is approaching, include information on how direct deposit and live paychecks will be handled. Consider advance transmission, if storm is approaching. Ensure payroll processing organization has off-site data sites. Plan for payroll continuity.
- If possible, include in staff communications: evacuation details, storm surge zones, predicted strength, and track the storm.
- Collect staff evacuation information.
- Keep a list (offsite) of employees home phone numbers, cell phone numbers, e-mails, etc. Indicate on the list who has text message capabilities. Text messaging is more reliable in disaster situations.
- Update the list regularly as contact data change frequently.
- Include a likely contact location for each employee and a phone number for someone else who could serve as an alternate contact.

Develop a Disaster Plan

continued

Patient communication — Be proactive in educating your patients on the proper way to contact your office in the face of a disaster.

- Post an alternate telephone number and e-mail address on your Web site and patient literature.
- Consider using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), which is a phone service that uses broadband Internet connectivity, as it is more likely to stay in service in the face of a natural disaster.
- Many answering services are down during a major disaster.
- Keep an old-fashioned phone in your office that does not require electricity.
- During disaster events, 2-1-1 Texas/United Way HELPLINE is activated by local and state emergency management officials to disseminate official information on shelter availability, evacuation routes, road closures and other important information.

Special needs patients — Talk to your special needs patients about making a disaster plan for themselves. Include the following:

- Special needs patients can pre-register for evacuation transportation by calling 2-1-1 Texas/United Way HELPLINE. A trained specialist will take personal contact information and ask additional questions about any special medical needs that may affect the type of transportation needed. The Special Transportation Registry is open year-round for registration. Specialists have access to language interpreters in more than 150 languages.
- 2-1-1 Texas/United Way HELPLINE can assist with many daily needs before, during and after a disaster.
- Remind patients to wear medical alert tags or bracelets to identify their disability.
- Tell patients to locate more than one facility if they are dependent on a dialysis machine or other life-sustaining equipment or treatment.
- Have patients compile a list of physicians, relatives or friends who should be notified if they are hurt and ask them to provide the list to others.
- Have patients compile a medical information list that contains the names and numbers of physicians, medications, dosage instructions, and any existing conditions. Patients should make note of their adaptive equipment, allergies and any communication difficulties they have.
- Tell patients to keep their medical insurance and/or Medicare cards handy.

- Tell patients to keep specialized items ready, including extra wheelchair batteries, extra hearing aid batteries, oxygen, catheters, medication, prescriptions, food for service animals, etc.
- Remind them to make provisions for medications that require refrigeration.
- Patients with dementia should be registered in the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return Program at 1-888-572-8566.

Information systems — Take steps to protect your EMR, billing and financial data.

- Make sure that your data are backed up regularly, either to media or to an off-site server.
- Investigate automated back-up services and weigh the pros and cons of signing on with one against making your own back-up.
- If you do your own back-up, remove it from the office each night to a secure location.
- Have a plan for restoring your data, once your office is operational again or you have set up an alternate location.

Documentation — If your patient charts are paper-only, devise a plan for protecting your patient records and other paper-based information as best as possible.

Generator support — Consider having a generator handy to help ensure your vaccines are safe and to help your office continue to operate. Also, consider moving vaccines to a location (e.g., hospital) that has generator power.

Vendor support — Set up a protocol for contacting your tech support and suppliers in the event of a wide-spread disaster.

- Keep a list (offsite) of all key vendors, which includes addresses, telephone numbers and Web sites.
- Update the list regularly. This kind of information can become obsolete quickly.
- In the event you need to establish operations at an alternate site, find out what emergency services your vendors provide and how to contact them.



Be Prepared: Secure Your Practice

When you hear you are in a hurricane's path, you should begin moving computers and delicate equipment to secure windowless places off the floor.

- Require all employees to back-up computers.
- Remove office computer back-up to an offsite secure location.
- Disconnect computer power. Move computers to secure non-window location. Tape employee's name to his/her equipment.
- Know how to turn off electricity, water and gas. Have appropriate tools. Remember, you will need a professional to turn back on your gas.
- Cover file cabinets with plastic sheets and make sure desk surfaces are empty, in case windows are broken.
- Bring outdoor furniture inside.
- Stay out of elevators during disasters. You could become trapped if power is lost.
- Keep windows closed to avoid debris. It is a myth that you should open two windows to avoid a negative pressure build-up.
- Have a similar plan for your home, family and pets.
- Make sure HCMS has your current fax and/or e-mail so you can receive emergency notices from HCMS, which are helpful before, during and after disasters.

Be Prepared: Evacuation Plan

If you are asked to evacuate, you should do so without delay.

- Select an evacuation destination that is nearest to you, to minimize your travel time. Be prepared to wait in traffic.
- If a hotel or motel is your final destination, make reservations before you leave. Keep in mind that hotels and other sheltering options in most inland metropolitan areas are likely to be filled very quickly.
- Make sure your car is filled with fuel. Know your gas mileage. If you cannot make it to your destination on one tank of gas, you will need to rethink your destination.
- Make sure you have your cell phone and car/home chargers.
- Grab your map of evacuation routes.
- Make sure you have flashlights, batteries, a battery-operated radio, and emergency flares in your backseat.
- Bring towels, water and nonperishable food.
- Bring your insurance papers, bank records and cash.
- Make sure you have a vehicle emergency road kit: canned tire patches, coolant, tire jack, and a spare tire.



Don't Drive in High Water



According to the Red Cross, NOAA and FEMA, vehicles are involved in half of all flood-related deaths.

- If you are driving through high water, assume that at some point during your journey there will be impassable water.
- Consider pulling over to a gas station or parking lot that sits higher than the street until the rain slows or stops.
- If you find yourself in increasingly deep water, roll down your window, in case you need to swim out of your vehicle.
- If your car stalls in high water, abandon your car immediately. Two feet of water can sweep a car or SUV away. Climb to higher ground.

During a tornado, vehicles are extremely dangerous. Park your car and seek shelter.

Be Prepared: Disaster Supply Kit

Basic Emergency Kit:

- Water—at least 1 gallon daily per person for 5-7 days
- Food—enough for 5-7 days of non-perishable packaged or canned food and juices
- Manual can opener and mess kit (paper towels, plates, cups, and plasticware)
- Telephone—Fully-charged cell phone with extra battery and car charger and a traditional (non-cordless) telephone
- Battery-operated weather radio
- Flashlights and extra batteries
- First-aid kit and wound supplies
- In case of an epidemic or communicable disease outbreak, you should have plenty of personal protective equipment, such as masks, gloves and goggles, to minimize exposure.
- Cash (small bills) because banks and ATMs may not be available for an extended period
- Duct tape and garbage bags are handy for many things
- Personal hygiene items, toilet paper and antibacterial wipes
- Tools (wrench, hammer and screw driver)
- Fire extinguisher that has been recently checked
- Home and cell numbers of all employees
- Important documents placed in a waterproof container or in a waterproof bag (such as insurance, bank accounts, office lease, etc.)
- Matches

Additional items to consider:

- Non-electric cooking tools and fuel
- Maps of local area
- Rain gear, long shirts, long pants, work gloves, and sturdy boots
- Change of clothes
- Blankets
- Games, cards, puzzles, and books to help with boredom and morale



Helpful Links and Numbers

Centers for Disease Control (CDC):
www.emergency.cdc.gov

City of Houston Office of Emergency Management:
www.houstonoem.net

FEMA:
www.fema.gov/hazard/index.shtm
1-800-621-FEMA

Galveston County Office of Emergency Management:
www.gcoem.org

Harris County Medical Society:
www.hcms.org
713-524-4267

Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management:
www.hcoem.org

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA):
www.nhc.noaa.gov

Red Cross:
www2.redcross.org

Routes from Texas Department of Transportation:
www.txdot.gov/travel/contraflow_publications.htm

Texas Medical Association:
www.texmed.org
1-800-880-1300

Texas/United Way HELPLINE:
2-1-1