

Riding Out Hurricane Ike

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I don't know what I was thinking. Throwing caution to the wind, I made the decision that my family, including my two helpers, three small children and me; my power wheelchair; and my ventilator could withstand a direct hit by a Category Two hurricane with a gasoline-powered generator, plenty of canned food, water and batteries, and a good supply of chocolate. We rode out the storm, completely prepared and dutifully following instructions to shelter in place. It was terrifying, but, luckily, we had no damage to the house, only a lot of fallen tree limbs. Here are six lessons I learned:

1. The decision about whether or not to evacuate should be made out of consideration for the people who are my life support, not just me. I was completely confident we would be all right, and my house would hold up. My attendants, however, were terrified. They didn't sleep the whole night, just huddled in the next bedroom with the children. They came to my bedroom around four o'clock in the morning to move my bed away from the window. The wind was howling, and there was a constant rumble like a freight train, with trees swirling as if they were lassos and limbs snapping all over. By the morning, we all agreed, "Never again!"

2. Generators smell really bad. Several of our neighbors came over the next morning to check on me and to help set up the generator. Everything worked, and we plugged in the refrigerator and battery chargers for my ventilator and wheelchair. It was still raining, and the wind was still blowing hard, making all the fumes from the generator surround the whole house. The combination of fumes, heat and humidity really started to bother me by the afternoon, and I was having a lot of trouble breathing. This was the main reason, plus other reasons listed below, that I made the quick decision that we had to leave.

3. Even shelters can't help. I had registered with 2-1-1 Texas (a service of the Health and Human Service Commission's Texas Information and Referral Network where people with disabilities can register for special assistance in evacuating before a natural disaster), but found it impossible to get through to them after the storm.

I called the Red Cross to ask about emergency shelters and found out that there was no guarantee I would have access to electricity even there. With all of my extraordinary care needs, I decided that it would be best to use my own resources and to look for somewhere to stay outside of the city, hoping that FEMA would eventually help me cover the costs.

4. Sprint cell phones don't work in a crisis. Apparently they don't build their towers as robust as Verizon. Due to my helper's Verizon cell phone, I was able to connect with my nephew in Atlanta. He searched the Internet and booked what was probably the last available hotel room in Austin.

5. When electricity goes out, you don't just lose your lights. In my naïveté about how the world works, I never realized that without electricity, gasoline pumps won't work and water

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Peg presented the following testimony before the Texas Legislature's Select Committee on Hurricane Ike Storm Devastation to the Texas Gulf Coast, November 10, 2008.

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purification plants shut down. Generators only run about 10 hours before you have to put in more gas. No gas-line stations were open or functioning. The fact that our water was contaminated was the final straw propelling us down the road to Austin. We finally reached the hotel in Austin by midnight. It was really eerie driving the first hour through a totally dark city. Only the car dealerships were lit up. Once I was able to get a cell phone signal, I kept in constant touch with my nephew and my neighbors. My neighbors called me when the electricity came back on my side of the street, and we came home the next day.

6. Hurricanes stir up a lot more toxins than they clear out. Driving around town the week after returning deeply saddened me, mostly for the utter devastation in low income and older neighborhoods. Being out and about, however, had another negative effect, because it exposed me to larger than normal doses of pollen and mold. The combined effect of these physical and mental stresses made my lungs more vulnerable, and I began to feel the symptoms of what promised to be a life-threatening respiratory infection. Luckily, I have good health insurance and good doctors, so I was promptly able to get a strong antibiotic that helped turn a potential hospital stay into just a couple weeks of misery.

Although I was quite well prepared for the storm itself, I really had no concept of what the aftermath would be like. After attending several city-wide emergency management meetings and pondering strategies that might have made coping with this disaster a little more reasonable for people

like me, I came up with the following recommendations:

- Advance information about an oncoming potentially disastrous weather event should include realistic assessments of risks for people with disabilities, significant respiratory limitations, or other conditions that cause life-sustaining dependence on electrical equipment.
- Zip code-related advice about sheltering in place versus evacuation should include exception statements about people with extraordinary health care needs.
- A system is needed to enable individuals with extraordinary health care needs and life-sustaining dependence on electrical equipment to register with electricity providers for priority consideration in efforts to restore service.
- A similar system should be in place to enable people to visit or otherwise contact their closest fire station to discuss their emergency needs and register for rescue or follow-up visits after a disaster.
- The network of Neighborhood Centers should be established as emergency electricity resources during disasters. This resource could be used for charging equipment batteries, accessing air-conditioning, and using refrigerators for storing medications. Emergency preparedness literature should include information about their availability and what people must do to be eligible to use these emergency resources.
- The 2-1-1 registry system must be extensively revised and expanded. In addition to assisting with evacuation, a mechanism should be in place that will contact registered individuals in the aftermath to ask about their extra-

Energy Backup

Carol Purington, Colrain, Massachusetts, carpur@localnet.com

I use a ventilator 24/7 and live in a rural section of Western Massachusetts that recently experienced major power outages due to an ice storm. My home was without electricity for 63 hours. How did I manage?

I contracted polio in 1955. When I was approaching readiness to leave the rehabilitation center near Boston, my parents were told that they couldn't take me home until they had a generator. They owned a dairy farm and bought a generator that could be powered by a tractor. It could keep my iron lung or chestpiece motor operating. It could also run the barn's milking machines, which proved to be much nicer than hand-milking 20 to 30 cows.

After a couple of decades, we got a bigger tractor that could operate a bigger generator, meaning there was power not only for the necessities – my ventilator and the cows – but also most household appliances. More decades passed, and family circumstances changed. Someone who could drive the rather complicated tractor to the generator wasn't always immediately available. Now we have a Honda portable generator that can be put into operation in just a few minutes by almost anyone.

The large generator and the portable generator were what we used during the recent ice storm. For another level of backup, my name is on the list of people to be contacted during power outages by the town's emergency coordinator. This is a tiny community,

and he is a relative of a relative, so I'm not likely to be forgotten.

At present, I use a PLV®-100 several hours a day with mouthpiece ventilation. This unit has a built-in battery good for up to 90 minutes and is also permanently connected to a car battery that should last 12-24 hours. The rest of the day I use the NEV®-100 to run either my chestpiece or the Porta-Lung™ in which I sleep. Unfortunately, the NEV®-100 can't be run by battery.

Power outages are more common in the country where we live than in the cities or the suburbs. The nearest hospital is 30 minutes away during good weather, but a severe storm could leave roads blocked by snow, ice or fallen trees for days. My family and I like to be prepared. ▲

ordinary disaster-related needs and to refer them to existing resources. This should include assistance with debris removal and prompt access to repair services.

I am also a survivor of the Hurricane Rita evacuation experience, so I can say with some authority that the city

of Houston handled Hurricane Ike evacuation much more efficiently. However, more information should be provided about the extraordinary risks during disaster aftermath, as well as post-disaster resources to assist people with disabilities in returning to their normal independent lifestyles. ▲



Carol in 1958-59.