OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

TEXAS TOWN & CITY

June 2025
VOLUME CXII
NUMBER 5

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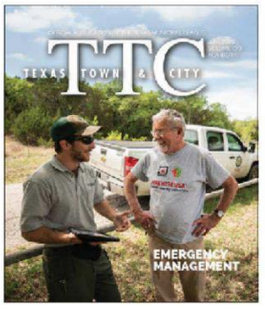

ABOUT THE COVER

The Firewise USA® program encourages neighbors to work together to reduce wildfire risks at the community level. Learn about this and other emergency preparedness resources in this issue.

ABOUT ★ TML

The Texas Municipal League exists solely to provide services to Texas cities. Since its formation in 1913, the League's mission has remained the same: to serve the needs and advocate the interests of its members. Membership in the League is voluntary and is open to any city in Texas. From the original 14 members, TML's membership has grown to more than 1,150 cities. Over 16,000 mayors, councilmembers, city managers, city attorneys, and department heads are member officials of the League by virtue of their cities'participation.

The League provides a variety of services to its member cities. One of the principal purposes of the League is to advocate municipal interests at the state and federal levels. Among the thousands of bills introduced during each session of the Texas Legislature are hundreds of bills that would affect cities. The League, working through its Legislative Services Department, attempts to defeat detrimental city-related bills and to facilitate the passage of legislation designed to improve the ability of municipal governments to operate effectively.

The League employs full-time attorneys who are available to provide member cities with information on municipal legal matters. On a daily basis, the legal staff responds to member cities' written and oral questions on a wide variety of legal matters. The League annually conducts a variety of conferences and training seminars to enhance the knowledge and skills of municipal officials in the state. In addition, the League also publishes a variety of printed materials to assist member cities in performing their duties. The best known of these is the League's magazine, *Texas Town & City*. Each issue focuses on a variety of contemporary municipal issues, including survey results to respond to member inquiries.

For additional information on any of these services, contact the **Texas Municipal League** at 512-231-7400 or visit our website, www.tml.org.

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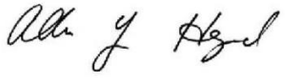
MESSAGE ★ FROM THE PRESIDENT

ALLISON HEYWARD, CMO
Mayor Pro Tem, Schertz
TML President

Dear Texas City Official,

Texas cities are on the front lines of emergency management, and in recent years, that's been a reality. From the pandemic to ice storms, floods, and wildfires, we've faced one challenge after another. As Texans, we are resilient, but even the strongest of us can always use extra help. This month's magazine provides valuable resources to help your city prepare for and navigate emergency situations and highlights innovative ways cities have responded to those crises. I think it's safe to say that, as city officials, we can never learn enough about assisting our residents during times of serious need.

Now that the 2025 regular session has drawn to a close, it's time to get up to speed on what bills passed and how they affect us as community leaders. I encourage you to register for the TML Legislative Wrap-Up Workshop on June 27 in Georgetown. At that workshop, League staff will walk us through in detail every city-related bill that passed. A number of those bills will also affect your city's approach to emergency management, making this issue very important! I hope to see you in Georgetown



Allison Heyward, CMO
Mayor Pro Tem, Schertz
TML President

Fort Worth Is Ready to Host the 2025 TML Annual Conference

Get ready for an unforgettable experience in the heart of Texas! This year, Fort Worth joins the Texas Municipal League as proud hosts of the TML Annual Conference and Exhibition, October 29-31, at the Fort Worth Convention Center. Mark your calendar and join us for three action-packed days of learning, networking, and exploring new products and services to help your city. While you're in Fort Worth, you'll have the chance to explore the City's vibrant culture, from the world-class museums in the Cultural District to the famous Stockyards and delicious Texas barbecue. Don't miss out on this exciting opportunity to connect and experience all that Fort Worth has to offer!

Attendee registration and housing will open on **Tuesday, July 29, at 10:00 a.m.** at www.tmlconference.org.

Follow these simple steps to register for the conference and reserve your sleeping room:

- You will need your TML member ID to register.
- Visit https://tmlconference.org and go to the registration tab.
- On the conference registration page, register as a conference attendee using your member ID.
- Once you register, you will be directed from the conference registration page to the hotel reservation system. (Only registered conference attendees will receive a link to the housing reservation system.)
- Select a hotel from the available options and reserve your room.
- You may register multiple delegates at one time and reserve a sleeping room for each.
- If you cancel your conference registration, you must also cancel your room reservation separately.

TML and the City of Fort Worth are excited to welcome you in October!

TML Summer Training for Newly Elected Officials

Encourage your city's first-time mayors and councilmembers to sign up for the TML Newly Elected City Officials' Orientation this summer! Join us on July 17-18 in San Antonio or August 7-8 in Waco for this engaging, one-and-a-half-day training. This program will equip newly elected officials with the essential skills and knowledge needed for a successful term.

The orientation will cover vital topics such as ethics, parliamentary procedure, city regulations, open meetings, budget and tax rate, revenue sources, land use, zoning, and more. Even seasoned officials consider it an invaluable refresher. Secure your spot early! Register at https://newlyelectedofficials.org.

TML Training On Demand

View recorded webinars and workshops at your convenience through TML On Demand. With a variety of city-related topics including ethics, employment law, media relations, social media, and grant writing, you'll advance your professional development from the comfort of your home or office. New webinars are being added monthly at www.tml.org/218.

List Your City's Festival in TTC

Texas towns and cities hold festivals to celebrate everything from cheeseburgers to crawfish and red poppies to whooping cranes. In the August 2025 issue of *Texas Town & City*, we'll feature select city-hosted events happening throughout the state. If your city is planning an event that takes place in the August 1, 2025 through February 28, 2026 timeframe, we'd like to feature it. **The deadline for submitting your event is June 13**. Learn more and submit your festival online at tml.org/formcenter/business-development-4/festival-listing-form-46. ★

TML Training Calendar

June-July 2025

June 4-6
TAMIO Annual Conference
San Antonio

June 5
Engaging with Civility: A Conversation Model
Webinar

June 18-20
TCAA Summer Conference
Horseshoe Bay

June 19-22
TCMA Annual Conference
San Antonio

June 27
Legislative Wrap-Up Workshop: An Insider's Perspective
Georgetown

July 17-18
TML Newly Elected City Officials' Orientation
San Antonio

July 17
Basic Legal Requirements for Budget and Tax Rate Setting
Webinar

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Strong Foundations: Preparing Your City for Natural Disasters and Emergencies

By **Scott Houston**, Intergovernmental Relations Manager, TML Risk Pool

Each year, Texas cities are battered by natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes. The consequences can be severe with damaged infrastructure, disrupted services, and risks to human life. In today's environment, emergency preparedness isn't just a best practice – it's a necessity. The TML Risk Pool has developed comprehensive guidance to help cities enhance resilience, minimize losses, and accelerate recovery.

This article outlines the key elements of the TML Risk Pool's emergency preparedness framework, focusing on pre-disaster planning, seasonal readiness, event response, post-disaster recovery, and the support services available to Pool members.

The Importance of Ongoing Planning

Emergency planning is not a one-time task. It's a continuous cycle of preparation, testing, and improvement. Planning should be ongoing throughout the year to reduce the risks of injury, property damage, and service disruption. Key components of ongoing planning include:

- Developing and submitting emergency management plans to the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM), ensuring compliance with the National Incident Management System (NIMS)
- Conducting regular training exercises and simulations in collaboration with local emergency response agencies
- Formalizing mutual aid agreements with neighboring jurisdictions to clarify legal and procedural responsibilities during shared emergency responses
- Pre-qualifying vendors and establishing agreements for essential services, such as water restoration, fuel supply, and temporary housing

Seasonal Preparedness and Pre-Event Measures

As storm seasons approach, cities should ramp up readiness through a series of proactive steps. The "Loss Control Checklist" in the Risk Pool's "Preparing for Natural Disasters and Emergencies" booklet (available at www.tmlirp.org under the Risk Management drop down by clicking on "Publications") serves as a guide for city officials to follow before disaster strikes. Key steps include:

- Identifying essential personnel, assigning specific roles, and training backups to ensure redundancy
- Creating and maintaining detailed inventories of fixed assets and storing vital records offsite
- Reinforcing vulnerable structures, such as fastening roofs securely to frames and trimming trees to prevent storm damage
- Cleaning out gutters and storm drains to improve water flow
- Relocating vehicles and mobile assets to elevated areas, especially those needed for emergency operations
- Reviewing contracts with external vendors for rapid delivery of critical supplies
- Ensuring backup generators are operational, securely installed, and connected to reliable fuel sources

City officials are also encouraged to maintain a list of emergency contacts, including key Risk Pool personnel, to streamline communication in a crisis.

Emergency Supplies and Team Readiness

When a disaster is imminent, protecting personnel and equipment becomes a top priority. The Risk Pool recommends assembling emergency kits for all members of a city's emergency response team. Recommended supplies include:

- Water (one gallon per person per day)
- Non-perishable food (three-to-five-day supply)
- First aid supplies and personal medications
- NOAA weather radios, flashlights, and spare batteries
- Protective gear, such as hard hats, boots, gloves, and eyewear
- Cell phones with portable chargers
- Maps, identification documents, and emergency contact lists
- Personal hygiene supplies and sanitation items

Pre-staging these supplies and ensuring all city staff understand their use can help reduce delays and confusion during an actual emergency.

Response and Immediate Recovery Actions

After an event, cities should shift into response mode. The Risk Pool provides detailed guidance for maintaining employee safety, preserving assets, and initiating recovery. Key post-disaster actions include:

- Conducting building assessments to confirm structural integrity before entry
- Equipping teams with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Marking dangerous structures to prevent collapse-related injuries
- Restoring utilities and reestablishing fire protection systems
- Documenting all property damage and photographing affected areas
- Initiating cleanup by separating damaged materials from undamaged materials and removing moisture-retaining items to prevent mold

Maintaining detailed records of expenditures, including receipts, vendor contracts, and labor hours, is crucial for reimbursement from the Risk Pool or federal agencies.

Volunteer Coordination and Worker Safety

Volunteer involvement can be vital in disaster recovery, but volunteers must be properly managed. The Risk Pool advises cities to distinguish between official volunteers and spontaneous citizen responders. Cities should:

- Provide safety briefings and task-specific training to all volunteers
- Assign experienced workers to supervise newcomers
- Monitor volunteer performance and provide adequate rest and nourishment
- Equip volunteers with the necessary safety gear and tools

Safety oversight is critical, as disaster cleanup often involves unfamiliar tasks, such as operating chainsaws or heavy machinery, which can present significant risks.

Mitigation and Long-Term Resilience

Mitigation efforts help reduce the likelihood of future damage. These efforts begin as soon as conditions allow and may include:

- Securing damaged sites to prevent unauthorized access
- Making temporary repairs to roofs and windows
- Removing spoiled food and separating water-damaged equipment
- Safeguarding important documents and data backups

Cities are also encouraged to begin long-term planning based on lessons learned. This includes updating emergency plans, investing in infrastructure improvements, and ensuring all recovery actions are documented for potential Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reimbursement.

Federal Assistance and Compliance

When disaster declarations are issued, FEMA and other federal agencies become involved. However, to qualify for federal assistance, cities must:

- Follow FEMA's strict procurement and documentation requirements
- Track all debris removal and labor expenses
- Submit claims with complete supporting records
- Understand that FEMA is a payer of last resort, reimbursing only after other sources are exhausted

The Risk Pool can help cities navigate these complex requirements and assist in submitting properly documented claims.

Community Partners and Additional Resources

Cities don't have to "go it alone." Organizations like the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and local nonprofit agencies provide food, shelter, cleanup help, and essential supplies. Establishing relationships with these organizations in advance can facilitate faster community recovery.

City officials can check out the Risk Pool's website at www.tmlirp.org for training, videos, checklists, sample policies, and contact lists to support preparedness and response efforts. They can also contact their designated Risk Management Advisor to review coverage needs and their Safety and Loss Control Consultant for assistance in safety planning and disaster preparedness.

Preparedness Is a Shared Responsibility

Disasters may be inevitable, but the extent of their impact is not. With proactive planning, practical mitigation strategies, and strong partnerships, cities can significantly improve their ability to respond and recover. By incorporating these practices, cities not only protect infrastructure and financial assets, but also reinforce public trust and ensure continuity of service when residents need it most. ★

CITY★ LIGHTS

Denton Fire Department Introduces Texas' First Electric Fire Truck

The Denton Fire Department (DFD) is making history with the arrival of Texas' first electric fire truck, a groundbreaking addition that highlights the City of Denton's commitment to innovation and sustainability in emergency response. In celebration of this milestone, DFD hosted a 'push-in' ceremony in April at Fire Station 1 located at 332 East Hickory Street in Denton.

The push-in ceremony was open to the public. Community members were invited to take part in a longstanding fire service tradition -wiping down the new fire engine and helping to push it into its place at the fire station. This symbolic act officially placed this new unit into frontline service.

Adding to the significance of this milestone, Fire Station 1 – the new home of the electric firetruck – sits on the site of the historic Hickory Street Diesel Plant, Denton's first electric plant built in 1935. Firefighters fittingly refer to the station as the "Powerhouse," making it the ideal location for Texas' first electric fire truck.

The City of Denton Fire Department's new Pierce Volterra electric pumper has state-of-the-art features, including its revolutionary parallel-electric drivetrain which allows for zero-emission pumping and driving in EV mode, with the ability to provide continuous and uninterrupted power to the pumping system or drive system through the backup internal combustion engine.

League City's Elevate Academy Is Improving Government Efficiency

Long before the federal Department of Government Efficiency was created, League City launched the Elevate Academy—an internal program that empowers City employees to make government better by applying the principles of continuous improvement. The goal of the program is to save and/or maximize City resources by streamlining processes and improving customer service. Following a format similar to Lean Six Sigma, employees enrolled in the Elevate Academy are awarded four colors

of belts – much like those associated with the martial arts – recognizing them for submitting proposals that involve a process improvement or innovation. The Black Belt is awarded to employees who complete a rigorous two-day training, submit three innovations, and make a final presentation before their peers and management.

Since the program started in March of 2024, over 300 "belts" have been awarded, and employees have submitted innovations with a projected annual savings of nearly $2 million. One proposed innovation would transfer the ownership and operation of streetlights from Texas-New Mexico Power to the City. City council was presented with the idea at a recent work session and instructed staff to move forward with the plan, which when implemented will save close to $14 million over 20 years.

Other innovations that have surfaced because of the Elevate Academy include a program that would change the way League City purchases emergency apparatus. Instead of purchasing custom-built firetrucks and ambulances, the City would purchase "spec" models at a huge savings. Yet another employee proposal involves changing to a new type of water meter that landscapers and homeowners will not damage while mowing their yards. This proposed change will result in reducing the number of City manpower hours spent replacing broken meters and provide a savings for homeowners who must pay for a replacement meter.

The Elevate Academy is gaining so much momentum that additional training sessions and black belt cohorts are being added throughout the year. The result is a more efficient and streamlined municipal government that challenges the status quo as well as employees who are continuously determined to increase the return on investment of taxpayer dollars.

Texas City Offers SHIP Internship Program

The City of Texas City hosts an annual Summer Hire Internship Program (SHIP) for college students. This eight-week summer internship allows students to get hands-on, real-world experience in the field of their choice. All SHIP interns receive a $50 per week meal stipend with participation in career coaching and, upon successful completion of the full eight-week internship, a $5,000 scholarship paid to their college or university.

To be eligible, students must be a junior or senior in college, or a graduate student. They must also be a Texas City resident or a graduate of the Texas City ISD. The 2025 internship program runs from June 2 through August 1.

Positions are available in economic development, emergency management, emergency medical services, finance, marketing, museum curatorial, fitness and recreation, building and inspections, planning and zoning, police, and public works. Job descriptions are available online for each internship position. ★

Ten Ways to Get More from TML

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9. Find RESOURCES www.tml.org
10. ASK questions 512-231-7400

TML

SMALL CITIES' ★ CORNER

Consolidating for Impact: How Two Texas Cities Built a Smarter Emergency Communications System

By **J.T. Manoushagian,** Executive Director, Northwest Emergency Communications Center

With public safety at the forefront of municipal responsibility, cities across Texas are seeking ways to deliver services more efficiently, sustainably, and collaboratively. In 2023, the Cities of Lake Worth and Saginaw answered that call by forming the Northwest Emergency Communications Center (NWECC) – a consolidated 9-1-1 dispatch center designed to improve emergency response, reduce operational risk, and provide long-term cost savings to both cities.

Born out of necessity and implemented through local initiative, NWECC stands as a practical, evidence-based, and scalable model for cities facing similar challenges in emergency communications.

In late 2022, the Tarrant County 9-1-1 District (TC911) commissioned a regional consolidation study to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of its 37 public safety answering points (PSAPs). The study found that while each city operated its own emergency communications system, the lack of integration led to duplicated effort, increased risk, and inefficiencies in service delivery especially in densely populated areas.

The report recommended several paths forward, including a specific call for Lake Worth and Saginaw to explore a physical consolidation. Both cities recognized the opportunity to improve service quality while using taxpayer resources more effectively and began planning a shared solution outside of any district mandate.

Establishing NWECC required cross-functional collaboration from both cities. A unified stakeholder group was formed, including elected officials, city managers, police leadership, IT staff (internal and contracted), financial managers, and most importantly emergency communication professionals from both agencies.

The group coordinated extensively to address complex technical, operational, and personnel issues. Through this cooperation, the group developed the kind of authentic grassroots buy-in that would ultimately make it successful. The group's collaboration was grounded in three guiding principles:

1. Enhance the quality of emergency communications
2. Reduce risk and points of failure in the system
3. Increase cost efficiency through shared resources

Public trust is essential in any major municipal transformation, particularly when it involves emergency services. The Cities of Lake Worth and Saginaw recognized early on that no amount of operational efficiency would matter if residents didn't understand or support what was changing. With that in mind, the NWECC project team prioritized communication as a core component of the consolidation effort.

Rather than rely solely on traditional public information channels, stakeholders took an innovative approach: they partnered with ROXO, a student-led advertising and public relations agency affiliated with Texas Christian University. Comprised of upper-level strategic communication majors, ROXO operates like a professional firm, offering real-world campaign development to clients while providing valuable hands-on experience to students.

NWECC became ROXO's first government-sector client, marking a new direction for the agency and creating a

mutually beneficial collaboration. Working alongside city stakeholders, ROXO developed a comprehensive strategic communications plan tailored to diverse audiences – residents, elected officials, public safety personnel, and the broader regional community.

Deliverables included:

1. Visual identity development: logo, color palette, and typography to create a consistent brand across platforms.
2. Messaging strategy: clear language that articulated the purpose, benefits, and long-term value of the consolidation.
3. Public outreach materials: press releases, frequently asked questions, and speaking points for city leaders.
4. Digital and social media content: including graphics and short-form video for Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter).
5. Internal communications support: templates and talking points to assist city staff in discussing the change with peers and the public.

The goal was to help residents feel informed, reassured, and confident in the decision to consolidate. Just as importantly, the effort fostered buy-in from city employees – especially those working in public safety – by ensuring they had the tools and information needed to explain the "why" behind the change.

This partnership gave NWECC a polished and credible public face and demonstrated how cities can successfully partner with educational institutions to solve real-world challenges. In doing so, the project helped inspire future city-academic collaborations across Texas.

From its inception, NWECC was designed to be data-driven and performance-focused. The center tracks four primary key performance areas (KPAs): 1) emergency call answering and response time; 2) administrative call answering and response time; 3) customer satisfaction; and 4) quality assurance.

Supporting these are more than 1,300 key performance indicators (KPIs), both organizational and individual. These metrics inform a monthly performance report shared with stakeholders and used to guide operational decisions.

An innovative text-based survey tool enables NWECC to collect real-time feedback from callers. Since launching, 97.92 percent of nearly 400 survey respondents indicated satisfaction or high satisfaction with the service they received. The feedback is also shared with individual staff members, reinforcing a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

Initial investments in facilities, equipment, and staff integration were offset by the operational efficiencies gained through consolidation. By streamlining infrastructure and reducing administrative duplication, the cities created a leaner and more responsive communications operation.

Procurement, staffing, and maintenance processes have all benefited from scale—demonstrating how consolidation, when done thoughtfully, can enhance both effectiveness and sustainability.

NWECC was intentionally designed to support future regional expansion. Its infrastructure and operating model allows for additional cities or agencies to join without significant reengineering. As the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex continues to grow, this scalability offers a compelling option for municipalities seeking to modernize their emergency communications capabilities.

The partnership between Lake Worth and Saginaw shows what's possible when cities take initiative and collaborate toward a shared vision. Through careful planning, strong stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to accountability, they created an emergency communications center that improves public safety outcomes and prepares for future growth.

NWECC demonstrates that effective regionalization doesn't require mandates or large-scale bureaucracy—it just requires local leaders willing to work together. For other cities facing similar operational challenges, this model offers a clear, proven path forward. ★

TURNING CRISIS INTO CAPACITY: BUILDING WATER RESILIENCE FOR TEXAS COMMUNITIES

Texas is no stranger to water stress. From prolonged droughts and population growth to extreme weather events that disrupt essential services, many communities are facing a new reality: water scarcity isn't a future concern—it's happening now.

Amid these challenges lies an opportunity to rethink how we secure water for the long term. One increasingly important strategy is tapping into brackish groundwater—a saline, underutilized resource that exists in abundance across Texas. With the right treatment technologies, this drought-resistant source can help close the gap between demand and supply—especially in regions where traditional sources are drying up or overcommitted.

Rethinking Water Security

Texas has one of the fastest-growing populations in the U.S., yet much of its water infrastructure remains centralized, aging, and ill-equipped for disruption. A single system failure—from a flood, freeze, or equipment malfunction—can leave thousands without access to clean water for days or longer. And for small towns or rural utilities with limited resources, bouncing back can be slow and costly.

What's needed isn't just emergency response—it's infrastructure that can withstand the next crisis, whatever form it takes.

A Decentralized, Drought-Resistant Approach

Decentralized water systems are proving to be a powerful complement to traditional infrastructure. By placing treatment closer to the point of use, these systems reduce reliance on vulnerable regional pipelines and reservoirs. They also scale more easily, responding to the needs of a specific community, industry, or service area.

Crucially, decentralized solutions can be designed to treat nontraditional sources like brackish groundwater, which is more plentiful and less dependent on rainfall. According to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Texas has an estimated 2.7 billion acre-feet of brackish groundwater—an untapped resource with the potential to bolster local water resilience for decades to come (Treating Brackish Groundwater in Texas, 2016).

Case Study: City of Alice – Brackish Groundwater for Sustainable Supply

One community already putting this approach into action is the City of Alice, Texas. Faced with recurring drought conditions and declining freshwater availability, the city turned to an alternative resource that was previously overlooked: brackish groundwater.

In partnership with Seven Seas Water Group, a multinational provider of Water-as-a-Service® - a model in which a private company designs, finances, builds, and operates water treatment systems with no upfront cost to the customer, Alice implemented a decentralized water treatment solution that draws on local brackish wells to supplement the city's water supply. The system includes a state-of-the-art brackish water reverse osmosis (BWRO) treatment facility, engineered to treat high-salinity water reliably and efficiently, even under fluctuating conditions.

Through Texas's first public-private partnership for brackish water treatment, this facility was deployed with minimal disruption to existing infrastructure and was fully financed by Seven Seas. Having financing partially covered by Seven Seas allowed the city to bypass larger upfront capital costs and expedite this critical project. Operations and maintenance are also handled by Seven Seas, easing the burden on local utilities and ensuring consistent compliance with state and federal water quality standards.

Today, Alice's brackish water treatment facility provides drought-resistant capacity that supports both current needs and future growth. It stands as a model for other Texas communities seeking sustainable, scalable water solutions that build resilience against climate stress and infrastructure limitations.

Case Study: South Texas Water Authority – Expanding Capacity Through Brackish Groundwater Treatment

Another example of innovation in action is the ongoing construction of a BWRO plant for the South Texas Water Authority (STWA). This regional utility provides water to multiple communities across South Texas, many of which are vulnerable to drought and the resulting water supply constraints.

To enhance water security, STWA partnered with Seven Seas to design and construct a BWRO facility that will tap into local brackish groundwater resources. The facility is being built to accommodate long-term growth while ensuring reliability, even during periods of extreme heat or limited rainfall.

As with the City of Alice, Seven Seas is delivering a financed and operated solution, minimizing financial strain on STWA and enabling swift progress from planning to implementation. The plant will add critical capacity to the region's water system and serve as a blueprint for other utilities seeking flexible, drought-resistant infrastructure.

By converting previously unusable water into a dependable resource, this project demonstrates the power of decentralized solutions to address regional water challenges head-on.

Building Resilience, One Community at a Time

Fully financed and engineered for reliability, treatment systems utilized by Seven Seas offer rapid deployment, turnkey operation, and long-term scalability. They allow communities to act now and plan for a more resilient future—without waiting on multiyear funding cycles or major construction efforts.

As Texas continues to grapple with water scarcity, decentralized infrastructure built around alternative sources like brackish groundwater can help communities turn crisis into capacity.

Let's Secure Texas Water Together

Learn more about how Seven Seas Water Group is supporting Texas communities with drought-resistant, fully financed water infrastructure at www.sevenseaswater.com.

Because in Texas, water isn't just infrastructure—it's resilience.

LEGAL ★ Q&A

By **Stephanie Huser**,
TML Legal Counsel

City Operations During and Following a Disaster

Each year, Texas cities encounter distinct challenges in preparing for and responding to various catastrophic events like natural disasters and public health emergencies. And in the aftermath of these challenging events, cities oftentimes reach out to the TML Legal Department to ask questions about city operations during and after such emergencies. In many cases, the answers are applicable to a variety of scenarios. Below are some of the answers to these common questions. More information and resources on emergency management can be found on TML's website www.tml.org.

Local Authority

Q **Who can declare a local state of disaster?**

A The mayor is authorized to declare a local state of disaster if a disaster has occurred or is imminent. Tex. Gov't Code §418.108(a). The declaration of a local disaster immediately activates applicable provisions of local or interjurisdictional emergency management plans and authorizes the furnishing of aid and assistance under the declaration. *Id.* §418.108(d). However, the chief administrative officer of a joint board has exclusive authority to declare that a state of disaster exists within the boundaries of an airport operated or controlled by a joint board, regardless of whether the airport is located in or outside the boundaries of a city. *Id.* §418.108(e). Unless continued or renewed by the city council or a joint board, as applicable, a disaster declaration lasts for no more than seven days. *Id.* §418.108(b). An order or proclamation declaring, continuing, or terminating a local disaster must be given prompt and general publicity and must be promptly filed with the city secretary. *Id.* §418.108(c).

Additionally, the chief executive officer or the city council may request, during an emergency, that the governor proclaim a state of disaster and designate the area involved. *Id.* §433.001. For purposes of a request to the governor, an emergency exists in the following situations: (a) a riot or unlawful assembly by three or more persons acting together by force or by violence; (b) if a clear and present danger of the use of violence exists; or (c) a natural or man-made disaster. *Id.*

Q **What authority does a mayor or city council have during a declared state of disaster?**

A The mayor may order the evacuation of all or part of the population from a stricken or threatened area within the city limits if the mayor believes it is necessary for the preservation of life or other disaster mitigation, response, or recovery. *Id.* §418.108(f). The mayor may also compel persons who remain in the evacuated area to leave and is authorized to use reasonable force to remove persons from the area. *Id.* §418.185(b). A person who knowingly disobeys a mandatory evacuation order, and who engages in action that a reasonable person would not have engaged in or fails to take action that a reasonable person would have taken and that results in the undertaking of a governmental rescue effort is civilly liable for the cost of the rescue to a governmental entity that conducts the rescue. *Id.* §418.185(d). The mayor is also authorized to control access to and from a disaster area that is under the mayor's jurisdiction and to control movement of persons and occupancy of premises in such an area. *Id.* §418.108(g).

The chief executive officer or city council may request the governor to provide state military forces to aid in controlling conditions in the city that the officer or council believes cannot be controlled by local law enforcement agencies alone. *Id.* §433.005(a).

Additionally, a city may temporarily or permanently acquire, by lease, purchase, or other means, sites required for installation of temporary housing units or emergency shelters for disaster victims. *Id.* §418.020(d). A city may also enter into arrangements necessary to prepare or equip the sites to use the housing units or shelters, including arrangements for the purchase of temporary housing units or shelters and the payment of transportation charges. *Id.*

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With respect to disease management, a city can take any action that is necessary to promote health and suppress disease, including quarantine, examining and regulating hospitals, regulating ingress and egress from the city, and fining those who do not comply with the city's rules. *See* Tex. Health & Safety Code §122.005 (Type A general law cities) and §122.006 (home rule cities).

The mayor also serves as the governor's designated agent in the administration and supervision of disaster management duties set out in state law and may exercise the same powers granted to the governor under the Texas Disaster Act (Chapter 418 of the Government Code) on an appropriate local level. Tex. Gov't Code §418.1015(b). Note that the attorney general has opined that authorization by the governor would be necessary before a mayor may exercise these powers. *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. KP-0304 (concluding that the Texas Disaster Act does not authorize local officials to commandeer private property to respond to a disaster, but that the governor may grant this authority to a mayor through a disaster declaration.) The mayor, as the governor's designated agent, may also suspend or limit the sale, dispensing, or transportation of alcoholic beverages, firearms, explosives, and combustibles. *Id.* §418.019. Before exercising this authority, the city should consult with its city attorney.

During a declared state of disaster and the 90-day period following the expiration or termination of the disaster declaration, the mayor of a city subject to the declaration may request the attorney general to provide legal counsel to the city on issues related to disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery applicable to the area subject to the disaster declaration. *Id.* §418.195.

Q Are there limitations to a city's authority during a declared disaster?

A Cities should be aware that recent legislation has limited city authority in certain instances. A mayor may not issue an order during a declared state of disaster or local disaster to address a pandemic that would limit or prohibit: (1) housing and commercial construction activities, including related activities involving the sale, transportation, and installation of manufactured homes; (2) the provision of governmental services for title searches, notary services, and recording services in support of mortgages and real estate services and transactions; (3) residential and commercial real estate services, including settlement services; or (4) essential maintenance, manufacturing, design, operation, inspection, security, and construction services for essential products, services, and supply chain relief efforts. *See id.* §418.1085.

In addition, cities may not implement, order, or otherwise impose a mandate requiring: (1) a person to wear a mask or other face covering to prevent the spread of COVID-19; (2) a person to be vaccinated against COVID-19; and (3) the closure of a private business, public school, open enrollment charter school, or private school to prevent the spread of COVID-19. *See* Tex. Health & Safety Code §§81B.002-81B.004. Cities may not issue a vaccine passport, vaccine pass, or other standardized documentation to certify an individual's COVID-19 vaccination status to a third party for a purpose other than health care or otherwise publish or share any individual's COVID-19 immunization record or similar health information for a purpose other than health care. *Id.* §161.0085.

Council Meetings

Q When can a city hold an emergency meeting?

A In an emergency or when there is an urgent public necessity, the city council may conduct a meeting without providing the 72-hour notice that is generally required to conduct a meeting under the Open Meetings Act. Tex. Gov't Code §551.045(a). An emergency or urgent public necessity exists only if immediate action is required of a governmental body because of: (1) an imminent threat to public health and safety; or (2) a reasonably unforeseeable situation including: (a) fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain, or snow storm; (b) power failure, transportation failure, or interruptions of communication facilities; (c) an epidemic; or (d) a riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence. *See id.* §551.045(b). The sudden relocation of a large number of residents from the area of a declared disaster to a city council's jurisdiction is also considered to be a reasonably unforeseeable situation for a reasonable period immediately following the relocation. *Id.* §551.045(e).

Q **What notice must the city provide for an emergency meeting?**

A A city must post notice of an emergency meeting, or the supplemental notice to add an emergency item to an already existing agenda of a properly posted meeting, at least one hour before the meeting is convened. *Id.* §551.045(a). The notice must clearly identify the emergency or urgent public necessity justifying the emergency meeting. *Id.* §551.045(c).

Special notice to the news media may also be required. The presiding officer or member of the city council who calls an emergency meeting or adds an emergency item to an existing agenda of a properly posted meeting must provide notice of the emergency meeting or emergency item to members of the news media who have: (1) filed a request with the city to receive the notice; and (2) agreed to reimburse the city for the cost of providing the notice. *Id.* §§551.047(a), (b). Such notice must be provided by telephone, fax, or e-mail, at least one hour before the meeting is convened. *Id.* §551.047(c).

Q **Where must notice of an emergency meeting be posted?**

A Notice for an emergency meeting must be posted on a physical or electronic bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in city hall. *Id.* §551.050(b). A city that maintains an internet website must also concurrently post notice of the emergency meeting and the agenda for the meeting on the city's website. *Id.* §§551.043(b), 551.056(a)-(b).

Q **What action or deliberation may take place at a properly posted emergency meeting?**

A City council may only deliberate or take action on a matter at an emergency meeting that: (1) directly relates to responding to the emergency or public necessity identified in the notice of the meeting; or (2) an agenda item listed on a notice of the meeting before the supplemental notice was posted. *Id.* §551.045(a-1).

Q **Is a quorum needed to conduct an emergency meeting?**

A A quorum is generally required at an emergency meeting before the city council can conduct any city business. However, a quorum is not required if: (1) the city is wholly or partly located in the area of a disaster declared by the president of the United States or the governor; and (2) a majority of the members of city council are unable to be present at the meeting as a result of the disaster. *See id.* §418.1102.

Q **Can an emergency meeting be conducted via telephone conference?**

A A city council may hold a meeting via telephone conference if an emergency or public necessity exists and it is impossible or difficult for a quorum of the city council to meet at one location. *See id.* §551.125(b). If the meeting will be held via telephone conference call, the notice must specify as the location of the meeting the location where meetings of the city council are usually held. *Id.* §551.125(d). However, the notice of the emergency meeting need not specify that the meeting will be held by telephone conference. *See* Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. No. JC-352 (2001). The meeting must be set up to provide two-way communication during the entire meeting, and the identity of each speaker must be clearly stated prior to the speaker speaking. *Id.* §551.125(f). Additionally, all portions of the meeting, other than closed executive sessions, must be audible to the public at the location of the meeting and recorded, and the recording must be made available to the public. *Id.* §551.125(e).

Q **What if a disaster prevents a city council from holding a meeting that was otherwise properly posted?**

A If a catastrophe prevents a city council from holding an otherwise properly posted meeting, the council may convene at a convenient location within 72 hours of the originally scheduled posted meeting date if the action is taken in good faith and not done to circumvent the Open Meetings Act. *See id.* §551.0411(b). A catastrophe is defined as a condition or occurrence that interferes physically with

the ability of a governmental body to conduct a meeting, including: a fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, wind, rain, snowstorm, power failure, transportation failure, interruption of communication facilities, epidemic, riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence. *Id*. §551.0411(c). Notice must still be provided at least one hour before the meeting convenes and it must clearly identify the emergency. *Id*. §§551.0411(b), 551.045. If the city council is unable to convene the meeting within those 72 hours, it may only subsequently convene the meeting if it provides 72-hour notice of the meeting. *Id.* §551.0411(b).

Public Information Requests

Q **May a city temporarily suspend the requirements of the Texas Public Information Act during a disaster?**

A A city council currently and significantly impacted by a catastrophe may elect to suspend the applicability of the Public Information Act (PIA) requirements. Tex. Gov't Code §552.2325. For purposes of the suspension, a catastrophe is defined as a condition or occurrence that directly interferes with the ability of a governmental body to comply with the PIA requirements, including: (1) a fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or wind, rain or snow storm; (2) power failure, transportation failure, or interruption of communication facilities; (3) epidemic; or (4) riot, civil disturbance, enemy attack, or other actual or threatened act of lawlessness or violence. *Id*. §552.2325(a). A catastrophe does not include a period when staff is required to work remotely and can access information responsive to a request for information electronically, but the physical office of the governmental body is closed. *Id*.

A city council that elects to suspend the requirements of the PIA must provide notice to the office of the attorney general that it is currently impacted by a catastrophe and has elected to suspend the applicability of the PIA during the initial suspension period or the extension period. *Id*. §552.2325(c). Notice must be provided in a form prescribed by the attorney general. *Id*.

Q **For how long can the requirements of the Act be suspended?**

A The city council may suspend the applicability of the requirements of the PIA for an initial suspension period that does not exceed seven consecutive days. Tex. Gov't Code 552.2325(d). The initial suspension period must occur during the period that: (a) begins not earlier than the second day before the date the city council submits the notice to the office of the attorney general; and (b) ends not later than the seventh day after the city council submits the notice. *Id*.

The city council may extend an initial suspension period, one time, if the council determines that it is still impacted by the catastrophe on which the initial suspension period was based. *Id*. §552.2325(e). The initial suspension period may be extended for not more than seven consecutive days that begin on the day following the day the initial suspension period ends. *Id*. The combined suspension period may not exceed a total of 14 consecutive days with respect to any single catastrophe.

Q **Where and for how long must a suspension notice be posted?**

A A city that suspends the applicability of the PIA requirements must provide notice to the public of the suspension in a place that is readily accessible to the public and in each location the city council is required to post notice of a meeting under the Open Meetings Act. Tex. Gov't Code §552.2325(h). This means that the notice must be posted on a physical or electronic bulletin board at a place convenient to the public in city hall and on a city's website if the city maintains an internet website. *Id*. §§551.050(b), 551.043(b), 551.056(b). The notice of suspension must be maintained during the suspension period. *Id*. §552.2325(h).

Q **What happens to requests for public information that are received before or during a suspension period(s)?**

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A The PIA requirements, as they relate to a public information request that was received before the initial suspension period began, are tolled until the first business day after the date the suspension period ends. Tex. Gov't Code §552.2325(j). A request that is received during a suspension period is considered to have been received by the city on the first business day after the date the suspension period ends. *Id.* §552.2325(i).

Purchasing Procedure

Q **What is the process for procuring goods or services during or after a disaster?**

A Generally, a city must competitively procure goods or services that require an expenditure of more than $50,000. *See* Tex. Local Gov't Code §252.021(a). However, state law allows a city to procure goods or services without following a competitive procurement process if: (1) the procurement is made because of a public calamity that requires the immediate appropriation of money to relieve the necessity of the city's residents or to preserve the property of the city; (2) the procurement is necessary to preserve or protect the public health or safety or the city's residents; or (3) the procurement is necessary because of unforeseen damage to public machinery, equipment, or other property. *Id.* §252.022(a)(1)-(3).

Although Section 252.022 of the Local Government Code relieves the city from complying with the regular competitive procurement process, it does not exempt the city from complying with the requirements related to performance and payment bonds. Performance bonds are required for construction projects that exceed $100,000, and payment bonds are required for construction projects that exceed $50,000. *See* Tex. Gov't Code §2253.021.

Q **Are purchases made in response to a disaster eligible for reimbursement?**

A To be eligible for reimbursement by the federal government, purchases made by a city must comply with federal procurement laws. Although a city may procure goods and services without competitive bidding as an emergency under state law, this exception does not necessarily result in compliance with federal procurement rules. Federal law may be more stringent than state law with respect to procurement and emergency exceptions. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Procurement Disaster Assistance Team (https://www.fema.gov/grants/procurement) (PDAT) provides assistance with adhering to federal procurement standards and FEMA policies and guidance associated with FEMA's Public Assistance grants. If a city plans on filing a reimbursement claim with FEMA, the city should work with FEMA and its city attorney to competitively procure goods and services in accordance with federal regulations to reduce the likelihood of disallowance of such claims.

Personnel

Q **Is the city required to pay employees while the city is closed due to a disaster?**

A The answer depends on whether the employee is an exempt employee or nonexempt employee under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Generally, the FLSA does not require employers to pay nonexempt employees for hours they did not work. As a result, whether the city is closed for part of a day, part of a week, or a full week or more, the FLSA does not require the city to pay nonexempt employees for time they did not work even if such employees would normally be scheduled to work if the city were open. However, in instances where a nonexempt employee receives a fixed salary for fluctuating work hours (i.e., an employee who has agreed to work an unspecified number of hours for a specified salary), the city must pay the employee his or her full weekly salary for any week in which any work was performed. *See* 29 C.F.R. §778.306.

The city is required to pay an exempt employee his or her full salary if the employee works any part of a workweek in which the city is closed or cannot be reopened due to inclement weather or disaster for less than a workweek. *See* 29 C.F.R §541.602. For example, if the city is closed for only

part of a week, and the exempt employee worked during any part of that week, the city is required to pay the employee the employee's full salary if the employee's worksite is closed or cannot be reopened due to inclement weather or disaster for less than a full workweek. *Id.* If the city is closed for a full workweek and an exempt employee performs no work during that workweek, the city is not required to pay the exempt employee. *Id.*

Q **Can a city penalize an employee who leaves his place of employment to participate in an emergency evacuation order?**

A Texas law prohibits an employer from discharging or discriminating against an employee who leaves the employee's place of employment to participate in a general public evacuation ordered under an emergency evacuation order or a local disaster declaration. *See* Tex. Lab. Code §22.002. An employer who violates this provision is liable for any loss of wages and employer-provided benefits incurred by the employee as a result of the violation. *Id.* §22.003. However, this provision does not apply to emergency services personnel, including fire fighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, and other individuals who are required to provide services for the benefit of the general public in emergency situations, provided that adequate emergency shelter is provided for such individuals. *Id.* §22.004.

Q **Are city employees entitled to hazard pay?**

A Hazard pay for city employees is not mandated by state or federal law. State law requires state agencies to pay eligible state employees hazard duty pay. Tex. Gov't Code §659.302. No similar law requires a city to provide hazard pay to its employees, but a city can choose to do so by enacting a policy allowing for such pay. City personnel should review their emergency management plan to determine if and under what conditions hazard pay is authorized. ★

PREPARING FOR DISASTER: PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE DISASTER STRIKES AND ALL-HAZARDS PREPAREDNESS TIPS FOR TEXANS

By **James Elliott**, Division Chief of Preparedness, and **Wes Rapaport**, Chief of Media and Communications, Texas Division of Emergency Management

All disasters begin and end at the local level. That's not just a mantra – it's baked into state laws, rules, and policies, serving as a guiding principle for the emergency management discipline in Texas. The prospect of refining emergency planning can be challenging or daunting for many communities and organizations. When resources are limited and the stakes are high, finding the right approach to improving emergency planning requires bottom-line emergency management considerations. The bottom line for many communities comes down to assuring that critical services and resources continue with little or no disruption regardless of the emergency or special hazard event. Bottom-line emergency planning considerations feature comprehensive inclusion of business processes and business impacts.

In planning to expect the unexpected with an all-hazards approach, communities are at times overburdened when trying to account for all-hazards at the expense of planning for likely or impactful hazards in their community or organization. There are key measures to take into consideration to ensure bottom-line emergency management planning is effective while also factoring any needs to anticipate all-hazards.

Emergency planning efforts demand consideration of specific, likely and impactful risks, threats, and hazards. As emphasized by the National Preparedness System (NPS) [link 1], an all-hazards planning approach accounts for the full range of threats and hazards presenting risks to a community or an organization's capacity to fulfill its necessary functions in an all-encompassing fashion. An all-hazards approach has been a national planning recommendation since the inception of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) publication of the State and Local Guide for All-Hazard Emergency Operations Planning [link 2] in 1996. The bottom-line for any community or organization in an emergency comes down to protecting life, property, and the business capacity required to fulfill services. Bottom-line planning based on likely, impactful risks can be met effectively

The Texas Division of Emergency Management hosts one phase of the state's multi-pronged annual hurricane exercise in College Station, Texas on April 8, 2025.

with well-developed planning using business analysis. It is important for planning professionals and stakeholders to factor in specific hazards and threats impacting business processes to accurately access recovery point objectives (RPOs) and recovery time objectives (RTOs). Understanding business processes and business impacts are a proven means to better assess recovery points and recovery times. Intimate understanding of community or organizational business continuity informs response to likely emergencies from impactful hazards specific to the risks of a community.

At the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM), our charge to support Texans before, during, and after disasters is engrained in the vision that all disasters are local. State support is meant to be just that — support — as officials in communities across Texas prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the effects of disasters of all kinds.

With that in mind, our team works tirelessly through our network of field staff and subject matter experts at headquarters to ensure Texas communities have what's needed to address any hazard that may arise.

As we reach hurricane season, local officials are encouraged to thoroughly review emergency operations plans to reflect current

Photo Credit: Texas Division of Emergency Management/Nate Purvis

risks, any updated contacts, and logistical considerations such as evacuations, sheltering, and other coordination of response and recovery measures.

Training is a crucial component of our work. TDEM recently held a multi-phased hurricane exercise with the Texas Emergency Management Council agencies to reaffirm the state's readiness for hurricane season. Our local partners are urged to proactively prepare. Practicing now makes preparation a reality. To test readiness, cities are strongly encouraged to hold multi-agency drills, tabletop exercises, and full-scale exercises when possible, involving local departments, schools, hospitals, and utility providers. TDEM staff stand ready to support those local and regional efforts.

Many communities and organizations face a host of potential emergencies or possible risks from special hazard events from both natural and human-caused conditions. According to FEMA's website [link 3], from 2015-2025, almost fifty disasters and declarations impacted Texas communities including wildfires, floods, winter storms, tropical storms, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Impacts on Texans have featured loss of life and personal property often entailing significant disruption of critical services for whole communities for extended periods of time. Generally, loss of critical utilities; transportation disruptions; communication obstacles; and many other systemic failures within an impacted community will likely compound challenges when managing emergencies regionally or locally.

Beyond natural emergencies, human-caused disasters can heavily disrupt business processes, routine operations, and can adversely affect bottom-line emergency management objectives for communities and organizations. Industrial accidents involving hazardous materials can drastically impact lives, property and critical infrastructure disrupting necessary functions for community-based and organizational stakeholders.

Perceived difficulties with proactive planning for dynamic emergencies are not new. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 1947 historical vignette "The Corps Responded to One of the Worst Industrial Accidents, the Texas City Fire" [link 4] a combination of local, state, and federal personnel responded to a massive ammonium nitrate explosion on a harbored cargo ship requiring rescue and relief efforts. Emergency efforts extended over the course of seven days to retrieve victims and clear wreckage. Lapses in early response efforts by vessel crew members along with improvised recovery influenced emergency planning efforts in the future. This incident provided early lessons on bottom-line emergency planning gaps involving community collaboration. In a report from Texas A&M University's National Chemical Safety Program on the 1989 Phillips Complex Disaster [link 5], a series of explosions close to the Houston ship channel and subsequent fires took significant time and resources for recovery. Dangerous chemicals and failed safety protocols converged highlighting significant shortcomings in standard operating procedures according to The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) findings. The Phillips Complex Disaster informed communities about bottom-line gaps in community coordination before, during, and after the emergency.

The United States Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board's Investigation Report on the West Fertilizer Company Fire and Explosion [link 6] in 2013 offers another example of the complexity of emergency management for a community. During the West Fertilizer Company emergency, a fire and subsequent explosion entailed initial response focused on the fire but did not fully incorporate business resource awareness in considering a stockpile of 80,000 to 120,000 pounds of fertilizer grade ammonium nitrate (FGAN) that was at risk. When these volatile chemicals were compromised by the fire resulting in a fatal explosion approximately 20 minutes after initial response efforts, critical information flow in the business process was not fully incorporated into planning. Fatal injuries and scores of other injuries rapidly strained the community's resources. Among key issues noted in the report, emergency planning efforts were deemed lacking across critical areas including communication

as initial response efforts inadequately accounted for evacuation notification for first responders and community members.

Beyond human-caused accidents, deliberate actions by offenders or other intentional actors further convolute the variety and dynamics of threat identification and emergency planning obligations. The Texas Homeland Security Strategic Plan 2021-2025 [link 7] highlights a variety of human-caused threats impacting Texas including crime, human trafficking, gangs, cyber threats, and terrorism.

Coordination is critical— at and between all levels of government. Proactively ensuring local jurisdictions are in regular communication with emergency management partners, including TDEM and nearby jurisdictions, is essential for a swift and unified response and enhances capabilities to mobilize resources when they are needed.

Before disaster strikes, working to ensure infrastructure teams such as transportation, public works, and utility departments, have inspected drainage systems, power systems, and pre-identified flood-prone areas, can help reduce vulnerabilities before disaster impacts arrive. Such examples can aid in identifying shortcomings or other issues needing resolution.

On March 18, 2025, the White House issued an Executive Order for Achieving Efficiency Through State and Local Preparedness [link 8]. This order "empowers state, local, and individual preparedness" to more effectively ready for emergency incidents through a reduction in federal preparedness and response policies. Among other directives, the Executive Order creates a National Risk Register to better identify risks to infrastructure.

Regardless of the developing federal preparedness guidance, communities have opportunity and responsibility to plan and prepare themselves and their constituents.

Identifying and implementing multiple planning strategies, such as all-hazards and risk-based approaches, will enable communities to prepare for what may lie ahead. TDEM's network of preparedness personnel assists local jurisdictions in Texas with whole community planning. More information can be found on the agency website [link 9].

So how can leaders prepare the public? Trust-building is a year-round activity. Public trust is built with transparency, so officials should be prepared to provide consistent updates through multiple channels in multiple languages to reach the whole community.

Each elected or appointed official should be familiar with their emergency management role. Training in Incident Command System (ICS) roles and responsibilities is highly recommended and can be found by visiting PreparingTexas.org.

Some communities have great success with annual hurricane preparedness events and regular seminars to enhance public awareness. Collaboration with Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOADs), non-profit groups, faith-based organizations, and other community members to ensure as many people with varying degrees of access of functional needs as possible are being considered in planning efforts.

TDEM's Executive Guide, a thorough, 30,000-foot view of emergency management in Texas for local officials, can be found on the TDEM website [link 10].

There remains a well-tested trove of policies, procedures, and practices that are beneficial to know, revitalize, customize, and integrate. As officials look ahead, revisiting the basics of the emergency management discipline may contribute to success.

A cornerstone of preparedness measures involves Continuity of Operations (COOP) – the efforts within individual organizations or communities established and maintained to ensure that necessary or critical functions continue to be performed during the disruption of normal operations. Continuity planning and COOP programing ensures the provision of critical functions and services across a range of emergencies and other unforeseen disruptions or continuity events. The primary COOP program elements that are adjustable to organizational needs consist of plan creation and maintenance; testing and exercising plan elements; and strengthening continuity posture. COOP plan maintenance across an organization or community requires periodic updates and exercises or training designed to improve or sustain assurance of necessary functions. The continual cycle of plan maintenance and plan exercising along with the programmatic refinement associated with likely or impactful risks works to strengthen continuity posture. Ideally, community-based or organizational COOP components ensure necessary functional performance with agility and efficiency.

COOP program management requires many efforts to ensure continuation of operations or necessary functions. COOP plan maintenance consisting of periodic updates, record reconciliation, and annotation of operational or procedural adjustments should be accurately and frequently reflected in COOP program and COOP plan artifacts as frequently as substantive changes or programmatic conditions arise. COOP program quality assurance and quality controls are subject to government guidance and law; leadership oversight; internal auditing; and compliance with other COOP authorities and program input. COOP program quality

is further assured through community and/or organizational coordination and administration. This coordination may be informed by risk-based approaches instead of all-hazards approaches to better align to bottom-line emergency management requirements for communities and organizations. Effective risk management practices and procedures assist communities and organizations in accomplishing emergency management, preparedness, and continuity objectives.

Many methods of conducting risk assessments exist, but a risk assessment should answer the following questions:

- What are the likely and impactful threats and hazards for the community/organization?
- What are the characteristics of the threats and hazards (how may the threat and hazard affect the community/organization?)
- What is the likelihood of occurrences for the threat or hazard?
- What would be the overall risk value for the threat or hazard?

Communities and organizations can never eliminate every risk entirely, but officials have a responsibility to protect life, property, and the environment. Successful efforts also involve scalable thinking. Sheltering is another aspect of emergency management that can be looked at ahead of time. Jurisdictional leaders are encouraged to identify shelter locations, ensure accessibility, stock appropriate supplies, and consider signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with any entity that may be called upon to provide support for sheltering operations. Determining the ability to scale operations based on the size of the incident and the needs of the community are vital. Municipalities should also prepare for post-storm recovery efforts, such as debris management and commodity distribution.

Preparedness efforts including continuity planning demand an intelligent analysis and prioritization of where and when to focus resources, funding, and other assets based on likely risk and the features of impacts. Community and organization leaders and staff at all levels need to also consider the interdependencies between and among organizations that share critical roles in the delivery of capabilities. The synergistic relationship between communities and organizations requires stakeholders to coordinate planning between public and private sectors.

Officials should also encourage their constituents to enact personal preparedness measures as well. Helping community members find ways to build and pack emergency supply kits allows households the opportunity to be more self-sustaining when an incident occurs. Every household should have a few days' worth of food, water, medications, flashlights, important documents, and extra batteries. Families should pack accordingly for being stuck at home for multiple days, or stuck away from home for multiple days, depending on the risks in the area.

Family communications plans are often overlooked or taken for granted, as many people neglect to factor potential disruptions for cellular connectivity during a disaster. It's important for Texans to know how to reconnect with loved ones if separated by designating a meeting spot and identifying an out-of-area-contact with whom everyone can check-in. Knowing local evacuation routes and understanding local evacuation zones can also help ahead of time. Keeping all vehicles full, when possible, can eliminate a variable as well.

Texans are urged to stay informed, follow trusted news and weather sources, and sign up for official alerts from municipalities. Obtaining a weather radio or using official applications endorsed by local emergency managers is more reliable than relying on social media rumors when time is of the essence.

Preparing one's home is another way to minimize the impacts of disaster. Clear gutters, trim trees, secure outdoor items, and speak with property owners or tenants about any emergency procedures that may need to be addressed.

TDEM has published all-hazards preparedness tips for Texans online at tdem.texas.gov/prepare.

Working together, leaders, the public, and industry, can improve outcomes and best serve people through all phases of a disaster. ★

Links

1 https://tinyurl.com/2cucx4rm
2. https://www.fema.gov/pdf/plan/slg101.pdf
3. https://tinyurl.com/5n7zd4at
4. https://tinyurl.com/3x5wysut
5. https://ncsp.tamu.edu/reports/phillips/chp1-3.pdf
6. https://tinyurl.com/9e38zhnc
7. https://gov.wexas.gov/uploads/files/press/HSSP_2021-2025.pdf
8. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/test
9.https://tdem.texas.gov/preparedness/local-planning
10. https://tdem.texas.gov/executive-guide

MITIGATING WILDFIRE RISK IN TEXAS: A COLLABORATIVE PATH TOWARD SAFER COMMUNITIES

By **Erin O'Connor**, Program Leader, Texas A&M Forest Service

Texas is a vast and geographically diverse state, second only to Alaska in land area and California in population. Home to more than 170 million acres of land, 25 metropolitan areas, and three of the 10 largest cities in the United States, Texas is growing rapidly. As the population expands and development spreads into natural areas – or the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), where human development meets wildland vegetation – the threat of wildfires to people, homes, and critical infrastructure continues to rise.

Yet wildfire is not an unfamiliar or foreign phenomenon to Texas. Historically, wildfire has been a natural and essential force in maintaining the health and diversity of Texas ecosystems. However, decades of suppression policies and the general lack of fire on the landscape have disrupted this natural balance. The result is dense vegetation and fuel accumulation that increase the potential for destructive and fast-moving wildfires.

Since 1996, the state has experienced significant wildfire seasons across all regions, transforming wildfire from a primarily rural concern to a statewide issue that affects both urban and rural communities. More than 90 percent of wildfires in Texas are caused by human activity, and about 86 percent of those fires occur within just two miles of a community, emphasizing how close and common the threat has become to impacting our homes and livelihoods.

While coordinated wildfire response is crucial for addressing active fire events, true wildfire resilience depends on a different set of strategies. Proactive measures such as vegetation management, structural hardening, defensible space creation, public education, and comprehensive planning are essential to reducing the intensity and spread of wildfires before they ignite.

Wildfire mitigation is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each region, city, and neighborhood in Texas has its own relationship with wildfire, shaped by geography, climate, vegetation, land use, and community values. As such,

the steps communities take to reduce their risk must be tailored to their specific needs. From developing evacuation plans and training emergency responders to completing mitigation actions, educating residents, and planning with local officials, there are many effective and locally adaptable actions that Texans can take to reduce wildfire risk.

A cornerstone of proactive wildfire planning in Texas is the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). This collaborative, community-driven process engages local stakeholders, including fire departments, emergency managers, landowners, and city officials, to identify local wildfire hazards and develop mitigation strategies tailored to the specific needs of the community. CWPPs serve not only as a plan to reduce risk but also to provide awareness and a sense of shared responsibility in protecting people and property from wildfires.

To support cities, towns, and rural communities in wildfire risk reduction, Texas A&M Forest Service offers a range of planning tools and technical expertise. A key resource is the Texas Wildfire Risk Explorer, a powerful web-based application designed to help users assess, visualize, and understand wildfire hazards across the state. The Risk Explorer serves a broad audience, including the public, local governments, private landowners, hazard-mitigation planners, and fire professionals. The tool provides vital baseline data, maps, and analytics that inform decision-making and support the development of CWPPs and other fire-adapted community strategies. You can access the Risk Explorer at www.texaswildfirerisk.com,

Another valuable program available to communities is Firewise USA®, an initiative of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Firewise encourages neighbors to work together to take measurable steps in reducing wildfire risks at the community level. Through education, risk assessment, and the implementation of proven fire-resilient landscaping and home hardening techniques, Firewise communities become safer and more resilient. Participating in Firewise USA® also connects residents with expert guidance and can even help them qualify for certain insurance incentives or grant funding. Learn more about how to get involved at www.nfpa.org/firewise.

For those who want to learn more and get involved in reducing wildfire risk in your community, numerous opportunities exist across Texas:

- Watch webinars and attend workshops to educate residents, community leaders, and professionals on wildfire risk, mitigation practices, and planning strategies.
- Educational articles and guides are available through the Texas A&M Forest Service website and partner organizations to help individuals and communities understand fire-adapted principles.
- Direct assistance is available by contacting local Texas A&M Forest Service representatives who can offer technical support, training, and help to develop plans and programs tailored to your area.

By combining local knowledge, modern tools, and statewide collaboration, Texas communities can take meaningful steps to become fire-adapted and more resilient in the face of increasing wildfire threats. Preparing for wildfire starts well before the smoke appears and, together, Texans can build a safer future through education, planning, and proactive action. ★

CYBER RESILIENCE IS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT: HOW CITIES CAN PREPARE FOR CYBERATTACKS

By **Jake Simpson**, Principal, Incident Response, Cyber Consulting, Crowe

Emergency management teams no longer only prepare and respond to physical disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and earthquakes. Cities are increasingly grappling with a new crisis: cyberattacks. Successful attacks can have a quicker onset than a tornado and be more disruptive than an earthquake. Such attacks involve targeted takedowns of critical services, such as 911 dispatch, water treatment, and traffic control, all of which put public safety, infrastructure, and public trust at risk.

Cities across Texas have firsthand experience with some of these cyberattacks. From ransomware attacks locking down entire municipal networks to business email compromises redirecting five- and six-figure payments, the threats are real – and growing. However, many municipalities continue to approach cybersecurity as a purely technical issue rather than as a core function of emergency management. Cybersecurity is not just a responsibility of IT. It's a board of governance and management responsibility, and a team response is required.

Public sector leaders can take proactive steps to strengthen their city's cyber incident response capabilities so that when – not if – a cyber incident occurs, impact is minimized, damage is contained, and essential services are uninterrupted.

- **Recognize that cyber incidents are emergencies.** One of the most important shifts local leaders can make is recognizing cyberthreats as emergency events, not just IT challenges. If a power outage or tornado trigger activation of an emergency operations center, then a ransomware attack that disables public safety systems or disrupts water infrastructure should receive the same level of urgency. To make this shift real, municipalities should incorporate cyberattack scenarios into their emergency preparedness exercises and include these risks in their hazard mitigation planning documents. Treating cyberthreats like other natural or human-caused disasters builds familiarity and coordination across departments and helps staff respond with confidence and clarity during an actual event.

- **Build a cyber incident response plan everyone can use.** While most cities have some form of an IT disaster recovery plan, these documents often focus only on restoring systems and overlook the broader coordination required during a cyber crisis. A comprehensive cyber incident response plan should serve as a clear and accessible guide for both technical and nontechnical staff during a fast-moving situation. The plan should define leadership roles, outline how incidents are escalated, specify when to notify senior leadership or law enforcement, and establish procedures for internal and public communication. It is also important to confirm that the plan is not solely stored on the municipal network, which might be inaccessible during an incident. Printed copies should be stored securely and reviewed at least annually. Conducting regular tabletop exercises helps validate the plan and prepares teams to respond more effectively under pressure.

- **Form relationships before a crisis hits.** During the initial hours of a cyberattack, response time is critical. Knowing who to call and how to activate external support in advance can significantly reduce recovery time and confusion. Municipalities should proactively establish connections with organizations such as the Texas Department of Information Resources, the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center®, and local Federal Bureau of Investigation field offices with cybercrime teams. In addition to government resources, cities should identify and maintain relationships with private sector vendors that can provide specialized support during an incident. These third parties might include cyber forensic investigators, crisis communications consultants, legal advisers, and incident response firms. Having pre-negotiated contracts or cooperative agreements in place helps make sure that external resources can be deployed without procurement delays so that cities have the support they need when time is of the essence. Having experienced coaches with specific knowledge of the latest threats and best response strategies is critical to the successful management of an emergency response when a crisis occurs.

- **Train leaders, not just the IT team.** While IT teams might be the most familiar with cybersecurity issues, the decisions that shape a municipality's response to a cyber incident often rest with executive leaders and department heads. These

individuals need to understand their roles before an incident occurs, particularly in areas such as public communication, legal decision-making, service continuity, and financial oversight. Local governments can improve preparedness by including nontechnical leaders in annual tabletop exercises that simulate cyber incidents. These exercises provide an opportunity to rehearse difficult decisions and reinforce coordination across departments. Cyber resilience requires more than just technical skill; it demands leadership alignment, thoughtful planning, and the ability to act decisively under stress.

- **Plan for redundancy in critical municipal services.** When a cyberattack disrupts systems, a city's ability to maintain essential services becomes critical to protecting the community. Leaders should identify the functions most vital to public health and safety, such as emergency response, water services, payroll, and public communication, and make sure that manual workarounds or offline procedures are in place to support those services during a disruption. Examples include having paper-based dispatch protocols available for public safety agencies, maintaining alternate communication channels such as radios or satellite phones, and storing encrypted data backups in secure cloud environments outside of the municipality's primary infrastructure. These redundancies serve as a safety net that keeps operations running and public confidence intact, even when systems are compromised.

- **Communicate quickly and transparently.** Effective communication during a cyber incident is essential to maintaining order, protecting trust, and guiding staff and residents through the response. Confusion and silence can lead to misinformation, panic, or loss of confidence in local government. Municipalities should designate a communications lead in their incident response plan and verify that this individual has the authority and training to coordinate messaging with leadership, legal counsel, and technical teams. Clear, timely updates should be shared with staff, media, and the public, especially when services are affected. While it might not be appropriate to share every technical detail, being transparent about the scope of the incident and what actions are being taken helps keep the community informed and engaged. Pre-drafting holding statements and frequently asked questions for common scenarios can save valuable time and maintain consistency across communication channels.

- **Learn, improve, repeat.** Each incident, whether simulated or real, is a valuable opportunity for local governments to strengthen their cybersecurity posture. After a response has concluded, cities should conduct a formal after-action review with all relevant stakeholders. This process should examine what went well, where delays occurred, and how planning, communication, or decision-making could be improved. These findings should then inform updates to response plans, training exercises, and resource allocations. When cities adopt a culture of continual improvement and learning, they build stronger, more agile systems that are better equipped to manage future threats.

Five Questions to Ask Today

1. Do we have a cyber incident response plan, and when was it last tested?
2. What are the most critical services we provide, and can those services continue if our systems go offline?
3. Do we have external consultants we can call for help during a cyberattack, and are contracts or agreements already in place?
4. How would we communicate with staff, residents, and the media if our network or email systems become unavailable?
5. Have we conducted tabletop exercises that include nontechnical leaders and emergency management staff?

It's When, Not If

Treating cybersecurity as a core emergency response item and planning accordingly can help local governments make sure they are equally prepared for a security event as for a natural disaster. Municipalities across Texas must be prepared to respond to ransomware, data breaches, and other digital threats. These incidents are no longer hypothetical; they are real, frequent, and capable of severely disrupting essential public services.

By treating cyber incidents as emergencies, developing and regularly testing incident response plans, involving leadership in training efforts, and investing in resilience strategies, cities can reduce their risk and protect their communities more effectively. Emergency management is evolving, and cyber resilience must be part of every municipality's planning and preparedness efforts. ★

FIVE CRITICAL QUESTIONS EVERY LEADER SHOULD ASK ABOUT CYBERSECURITY

By The TML Risk Pool Cyber Squad:
Ryan Burns, Cyber Risk Services Manager and
Mike Bell, Senior Cybersecurity Advisor

In an era where cyber threats are daily realities, city officials stand at the front lines. Whether handling sensitive data, providing essential public services, or conducting financial transactions, cities have become attractive targets for cybercriminals. And strengthening your cybersecurity isn't just the IT department's job – it's a leadership imperative.

At a recent roundtable of public sector leaders, TML Risk Pool's cybersecurity staff shared five essential questions that every city leader should be asking to safeguard their city's digital assets. These aren't the only questions that need to be asked, but they're a great place to start.

Leadership must drive security from the top down. Here are the five questions – and why they matter.

1. Do We Have an Inventory?

Why It Matters:
You can't protect what you don't know about. A complete and current inventory of all hardware and software assets is a foundational element of a cybersecurity program. Ask to see the complete list of your digital assets. Ensure the necessary processes and resources are allocated to keep the list updated and complete.

What to Include:

- ☑ Hardware and software assets
- ☑ Include all end-user devices (including portable and mobile)
- ☑ Track device owner/assignments
- ☑ Software maintenance/support contract dates
- ☑ Offboarding procedures should reference hardware inventory

Review these lists biannually or more frequently.

2. Do We Use Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA)?

Why It Matters:
For some systems, many cities use only a username and password to log in. If a user's credentials are compromised, threat actors have easy access. MFA is one of the simplest, most cost-effective ways to prevent unauthorized access – it works to protect your systems, even if user credentials are stolen.

Proof Point:
Microsoft reports that MFA would have prevented 99.9 percent of account compromises they have seen. Still, many cities don't implement it across all critical systems.

Avoid These Pitfalls:

- Leaving key systems without MFA
- Falling for MFA fatigue or social engineering attacks
- Not training employees on how MFA works

Where to Enforce MFA:
Require MFA for administrative access/remote network access/externally exposed applications at a minimum. Put in place actionable plans to implement MFA for all your system access.

3. Do We Have an Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) Policy?

Why It Matters:
Cities process millions of dollars in payments, making them lucrative targets for financial scams.

Examples from the Field:

- A spoofed vendor email led one member to send funds to a fraudulent account – resulting in a six-figure loss. (Spoofing is disguising a communication or identity to make it appear as if it's coming from a trusted source when it isn't.)
- Another member lost payroll funds due to fake human resource communications redirecting direct deposits.

Prevention Tactics:

- ☑ Out-of-band verification for payment changes
- ☑ Multi-person approval workflows
- ☑ Employee training on recognizing red flags
- ☑ Leverage free training tools like the "Hacker Hank" video on avoiding EFT fraud, available on the TML Risk Pool Cyber Squad's YouTube channel (@Cyber-SquadVideoSeries)

4. Are We Training Enough?

Why It Matters:
Human factors contribute to over 85 percent of cybersecurity incidents. Yet, most organizations spend less than 3 percent of their cybersecurity budget on training. Threat actors have pivoted their focus to your users, and they are succeeding. These attacks are getting more sophisticated, and your cybersecurity awareness training needs to keep pace.

Lesson Learned:
Even after watching the required annual training, employees are still victims of phishing attacks. The takeaway? Training must be ongoing, engaging, and evolving. Leaders need to openly discuss risks and threats with their staff.

Training Should Cover:

- ☑ Phishing and social engineering
- ☑ EFT and payment verification
- ☑ Device security habits
- ☑ Reporting suspicious activity

Pro Tip:
Promote a cybersecurity culture where staff are encouraged to report concerns without fear of ridicule or embarrassment.

5. Do We Have a Plan?

Why It Matters:
If leaders are unsure whether their organization has an Incident Response Plan (IRP), the answer is likely no. That's because an IRP is not just an IT function. It requires a coordinated, organization-wide approach, similar to a natural disaster. Without a plan, confusion and delays can worsen the impact. Ask to see your IRP. When was it last updated? When was it last practiced?

Key Elements of a Good Plan:

- ☑ Clear roles and responsibilities
- ☑ Communication protocols (internal and external)
- ☑ Data recovery and system restoration steps
- ☑ Conduct tabletop exercises to test readiness and identify gaps

Looking Ahead:
Tune in to the Cyber Squad's podcast on YouTube (@CyberSquadVideoSeries) to learn more. An upcoming episode will dive deeper into how to create and refine your city's IRP. The squad can share templates to help you develop one if needed.

Final Thoughts
These five questions are more than a checklist. They are a call to action. Today's leaders don't need to become cybersecurity experts, but they need to ask the right questions and ensure their teams are prepared. Starting with these five questions will help leaders understand their organization's current risk posture and identify any gaps.

With free tools, assessments, and policy templates readily available, taking the next step toward stronger cybersecurity is within every member's reach. The TML Risk Pool's Cyber Squad is here to help! ★

For more information, contact the TML Risk Pool's Cyber Squad
cybersquad@tmlirp.org
https://info.tmlirp.org/cyber-liability
https://www.youtube.com/@CyberSquadVideoSeries
512-491-2300

BUILDING A CULTURE OF PREPAREDNESS: HOW LA PORTE IS RAISING THE BAR IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

By **Kayla Baez**, Marketing and Events Coordinator, City of La Porte

The City of La Porte's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) is proud to share how we are enhancing disaster preparedness and resilience in our community. As a coastal city along the Houston Ship Channel, home to the nation's largest petrochemical complex and a thriving residential population, La Porte takes a proactive and innovative approach to emergency management that can serve as a model for other Texas cities.

La Porte's approach is also resonating nationally. In a recent community survey, La Porte received satisfaction ratings above the United States average in 50 out of 59 assessed areas. Notably, our efforts to ensure the community is prepared for emergencies scored 48 percent higher than the national average highlighting our commitment to preparedness.

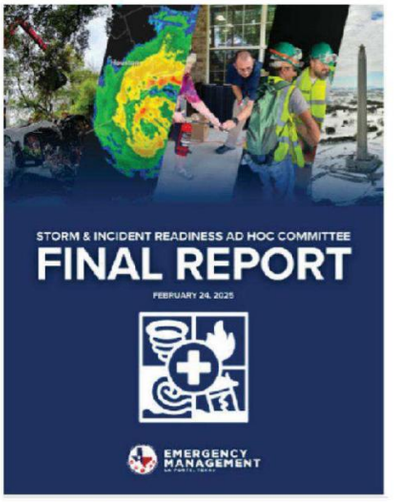
Public Engagement and Community Awareness

AlertLP Mass Notification System

We're expanding awareness of our emergency alert system through creative outreach, including partnerships with

local businesses that feature AlertLP coffee sleeves and integrated digital signage across the City. These signs can be taken over by the OEM during emergencies to share critical real-time information.

Educational Programs and Drills



Our annual Health & Safety Fair, the Wally Wise Shelter-in-Place Program, and Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC)-sponsored community-wide drills ensure residents are informed and prepared year-round. These initiatives foster a culture of awareness from elementary schools to senior centers.

Storm and Incident Readiness Ad Hoc Committee

La Porte City Council established a dedicated ad hoc committee composed of city council members, residents, and emergency management professionals to evaluate and enhance our preparedness for hurricanes, industrial incidents, and other emergencies. The committee has led targeted improvements, including:

- Modernizing emergency plans
- Identifying gaps in public communication and recommending new outreach strategies
- Strengthening coordination among first responders
- Evaluating infrastructure and Emergency Operations Center (EOC) improvements
- Promoting support for vulnerable populations and championing for volunteer support

Risk and Impact Modeling

Our hazard mitigation planning will now include GIS-based risk heatmaps, based on chemical inventory reviews, and facility-specific emergency plans. These tools will improve how we model impacts, allocate resources, and communicate risks to the public and officials. This work is being conducted through the La Porte Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) and is made possible by a grant from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ).

Resilience, Response, and Recovery

Mutual Aid and Industry Partnerships

Through active collaboration with local industry, regional response teams, and the Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council (SETRAC), we have strengthened emergency medical, fire, and hazardous materials response capabilities across jurisdictional lines.

Vulnerable Population Planning

We are refining evacuation and sheltering plans for seniors, homebound residents, and those with access and functional needs. This includes transportation coordination and strengthening partnerships with community organizations to reach underserved groups before, during, and after disasters.

Residential Generator Grant Program

In 2024, La Porte City Council approved a residential generator grant program administered through the city manager's office. This initiative subsidizes the cost for homeowners to purchase and install permanent home generators or tap boxes. By enabling residents to maintain power during outgages, this program supports the preservation of food, medication, and communication devices—reducing reliance on emergency services and enhancing overall community resilience.

Post-Event Recovery Strategies

We're enhancing contractor coordination to ensure faster debris removal and recovery operations. In addition, we're deepening partnerships with cell service providers to improve the resilience of communication networks and accelerate service restoration after storms or industrial incidents. GIS and drone technology support rapid damage assessments, while clear public guidance on debris separation and curbside placement is helping streamline cleanup and reduce delays.

Looking Ahead

From community education to advanced modeling and recovery planning, La Porte is committed to building a safer, more resilient city. By sharing our journey, we hope to inspire and learn from fellow cities across Texas as we collectively work to elevate emergency preparedness for all. ★

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: LESSONS FROM WINTER STORM URI

By **Sam Hankins**, Communications Specialist, City of Victoria

When temperatures in Texas drop below freezing for any length of time, many people's thoughts return to a fateful week in February 2021.

"It could happen again," said City of Victoria Public Works Director Ken Gill. "Every city fears that."

Victoria fared similarly to many Texas cities as Winter Storm Uri ravaged infrastructure throughout the state. First the blackouts began; then, the faucets ran dry.

The City of Victoria faced this emergency with a strategy informed by COVID-era crisis response tactics, with attention to critical infrastructure complemented by a robust communications strategy. Although no one knows when the next freeze will hit, City leaders are taking the lessons learned during Winter Storm Uri to ensure that the local response will only get better.

Understanding Human Nature

Communications Director Ashley Strevel was no stranger to crisis communications, having spearheaded the City's communications strategy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, up to and including the vaccination clinics that had scarcely begun when the forecast came.

In some ways, the department's preparations for Winter Storm Uri resembled those efforts: the coordination with the Victoria City/County Office of Emergency Management, the regular calls with outside agencies (in this case, the National Weather Service)—and the realization that human nature was likely to throw a few unexpected curveballs.

"When the pandemic started, we didn't realize that people were going to rush the stores for toilet paper," Strevel recalled. "As communicators, we can provide people with reliable and accurate information, but we can't always control the outcome."

Most of south Texas had about as much experience with freezing weather before 2021 as they had with global pandemics before 2020. Knowing this, Strevel's team worked to share some basic safety tips with the public – protect your pipes, watch for ice on the road – alongside more mundane updates about office closures.

Amid the uncertainty about how to prepare, rumors began to spread. Might the City try to protect pipes by shutting off water? Victoria had lost water service during Hurricane Harvey, and the memory of hissing faucets and non-flushing toilets stoked fears that the freeze would bring similar consequences.

On Monday evening, with a thin layer of snow on the ground outside, the Communications Department posted a firm statement on Meta (formerly Facebook), promising that the City would not shut off anyone's water unless a homeowner requested it.

Less than 24 hours later, the responses came trickling in: *Then why isn't my water running?*

Why the Water Wasn't Running

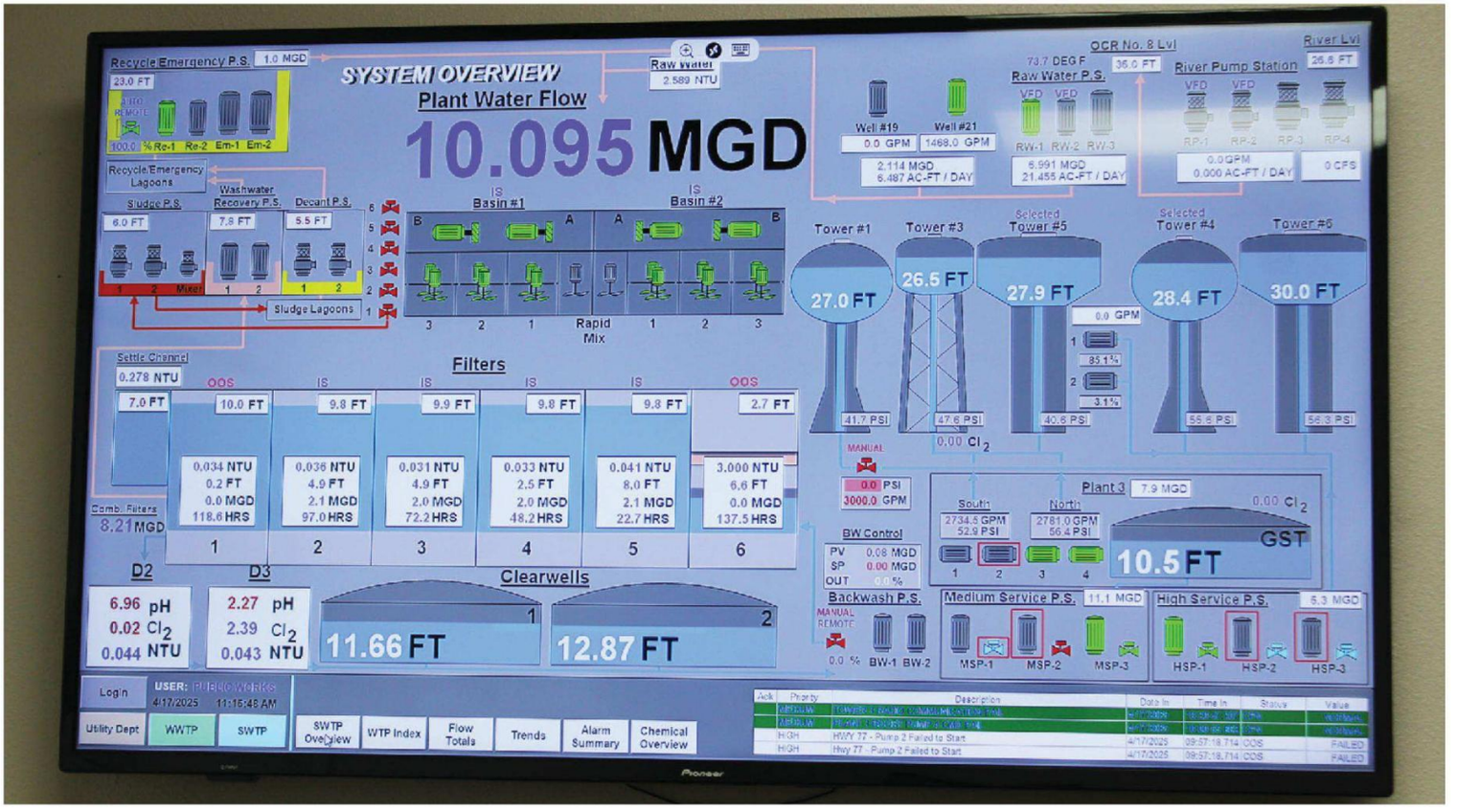
The Public Works department's supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) equipment monitors the City's water reserves and provides updates to Gill and his staff—when the hardware isn't frozen solid.

"The equipment was protected by standard weatherization," Gill said. "We were prepared for ordinary winter weather, but not for a freeze of this intensity and duration."

Public Works staff braved the cold to travel to work sites and read the water levels manually. As they did, they made a troubling discovery: While the frozen gauges had been giving staff a "full" reading, the towers had been draining quietly – and quickly.

Staff's suspicion as to the cause would be confirmed in the coming days. Fears of frozen pipes had led some residents to run all their faucets full blast, including whole apartment complexes that had shared incorrect information with tenants.

Public Works began pumping more to keep up with demand, and for a while, it worked. Still, a few residents did lose water at the start of the freeze—those whose pipes had frozen shut or worse, broken.



"People's water lines were freezing through the insulation," Gill said. "The City's lines were fine, but we were seeing private line breaks throughout the system."

Then, the pipes thawed. Water surged through the broken pipes. Before long, residents' worst fears came true as the faucets ran dry.

"It's hard to fill a cup that's full of holes," Gill said.

Straight from the Source

As the City began to receive panicked inquiries from residents who had lost water service, Strevel's first task was to separate fact from fiction.

"We had to explain that no, the City wasn't shutting off water, but we also had to tell them what really was happening," Strevel said. "At first we thought that some pipes might have broken in a few neighborhoods, but it was all over the city."

Strevel reached out to Gill and learned the sobering truth: The numerous private line breaks, combined with earlier overconsumption and the lack of warning from the SCADA system, had emptied the City's water reserves.

As Gill's team worked to restore service, Strevel sought to calm the growing anxiety using a tool that had served the City well during the early days of COVID-19: daily press briefings.

At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday afternoon, Strevel, Mayor Rawley McCoy, and City Manager Jesús A. Garza took part in a Zoom call with local media that was shared live on Meta and on Victoria's municipal cable channel, providing a straightforward update on what had happened, what the City was doing to fix it, and what residents ought to do in the meantime.

"Having that virtual face-to-face time with local leaders is comforting in a way that goes beyond just sharing information," Strevel said. "People want to know that they're getting information straight from the horse's mouth."

Throughout the coming days, Strevel's team committed to providing a written update every morning and a press conference every afternoon, detailing the gradual restoration of water service and emphasizing instructions for residents: *Keep your faucets closed. Report leaks. If there is a leak on your property, ask the City to shut your water off until it is repaired. And when you do get water back, remember the water boil notice.* A hotline was set up to answer residents' questions.

Along with practical advice, the updates helped residents understand what they were experiencing. *No, the water plant didn't lose power.* After Harvey, the City had added a robust backup generator, which was working just fine. This was a new type of challenge.

The steady stream of updates provided a sense of stability in the storm that Victoria was experiencing – stability that Strevel herself appreciated even more when she lost power one evening with her infant son at home. Though she was able to lean on family for help, she knew that others were not so fortunate.

"Being close to the source of information can be reassuring when you're in survival mode, and that reassurance is exactly what we wanted to share with our residents," Strevel said.

Finally, on Friday afternoon, officials held their final press conference, letting residents know that water service had been fully restored and adding that the water boil notice was expected to be lifted in the coming days.

Things began to return to normal as staff went back to their offices and continued to answer questions about the water boil notice, meter shutoffs, and other lingering issues. But the biggest question was, *how can we prepare for next time?*

'The City's Biggest Improvement'

When temperatures in Victoria are about to drop below freezing for any length of time, Public Works staff reach out to local apartment complexes and other high-volume water users with a simple but urgent message: Don't let all your faucets run.

Communications and Public Affairs has likewise tailored its pre-freeze messaging with Winter Storm Uri in mind. PSAs and social media posts remind residents to protect their pipes responsibly, with a steady drip of water from the faucet furthest from the meter—nothing more, nothing less. The department also encourages residents to sign up for the City's free water monitoring service, WaterWise, which can detect spikes in usage caused by hidden leaks.

"Personal responsibility is a key component of emergency

preparation," Strevel said. "Even as the City reviews our own processes, we encourage the public to likewise evaluate how they can better prepare and help us protect our water supply."

Gill reports that these measures have been effective in reducing consumption during the freezes that the City has experienced since, allowing Public Works to keep up with demand.

The reminders about protecting pipes are usually accompanied by some tips about backup power, particularly generator safety. Previously Communications would share this advice during the summer as part of its hurricane season messaging, but after watching the grid fail, the department has adapted to the reality that power outages are not solely a warm-weather phenomenon.

Another new addition is the City's mass notification system, powered by Everbridge, which allows Communications to reach residents via text, email, and robocalls. During a serious freeze, the system could be used to send updates to utility customers: *City working to restore water. Close your faucets. Call Public Works to report leaks.*

Public Works has also improved its preparations at every level, from the equipment used to the steps taken ahead of a freeze. Water monitoring equipment has been upgraded to withstand prolonged freezes. Software has been updated to show the current water volume in the tanks – not just elevation – and provide real-time updates. The draining and cleaning of basins – which is generally done during the winter when water consumption is lower – is only conducted if there are no freezes in the forecast that could cause demand to spike.

Gill intends to pursue further upgrades, including greater redundancy to protect against software issues and improved remote access to allow key personnel to view information and make adjustments from wherever they may be.

Even so, he recognizes that the progress made so far – particularly in the areas of communications and promoting personal responsibility – have been a huge step in the right direction.

"Citizen communication has been the City's biggest improvement," Gill said. "When residents can work together to meet these challenges, we get to say to 65,000 people, 'Congratulations, Victoria—we won.'"

Waiting for the True Test

During Victoria's most recent snowfall, as the Communications team was sharing updates about road conditions and trash pickup delays, staff made a decision: If no serious weather-related effects were observed by the afternoon, they would ask residents to share their snow pictures on Meta.

"We adjust the tone of the messaging according to the situation," Strevel said. "If the situation is urgent, then we communicate that and encourage people to take action, but if it isn't so serious, then being lighthearted can help people to stay calm."

Although the lessons of Winter Storm Uri have served Victoria well during the freezes since, Strevel and Gill know the truth: The City's systems have not yet been tested the way they were during Uri.

The only thing that is certain is that by continuing to improve Victoria's infrastructure as well as the ways that the City communicates with residents, local leaders will be better prepared to meet any storm that may come Victoria's way. ★

THE HIDDEN STRUGGLES OF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS: MANAGING STRESS IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD

By **Joshua Lee**, Director of Communications, City of Pearland

When disasters strike or crises unfold, the public turns to trusted sources for timely, accurate information. Behind the scenes, public information officers (PIOs) work tirelessly to ensure communities stay informed and safe. However, as technology evolves, misinformation spreads, and trust in institutions declines, the job of a PIO has become more stressful than ever.

A recent literature review highlights the mounting pressures on PIOs, from the rapid pace of digital communication to the emotional toll of crisis response. Many PIOs face fatigue and burnout, yet their role remains crucial in bridging the gap between government agencies and the public. So, how can they manage stress while maintaining effectiveness? Here's a look at the biggest challenges they face – and a blueprint for overcoming them.

The Pressure on PIOs

1. The Speed of Technology

The digital landscape is constantly changing. With billions of devices connected to the internet and social media usage skyrocketing, PIOs must adapt quickly. Information now spreads faster than ever, but attention spans are shrinking, making it harder to capture and hold public interest.

2. The Rise of Misinformation

False information is nothing new, but its rapid spread on social media complicates a PIO's job. When misinformation competes with facts, it creates confusion, delays response efforts, and increases public distrust. PIOs must work twice as hard to establish credibility and ensure their messages are heard.

3. Declining Public Trust

Surveys show that trust in government institutions has been steadily declining. This skepticism makes it more challenging for PIOs to be seen as reliable sources of information. Without trust, even the most accurate messages can be dismissed.

4. Crisis Fatigue and Burnout

The COVID-19 pandemic showcased the immense pressure on PIOs. They had to communicate evolving health guidelines in a politically charged environment while managing their stress. Studies indicate that government communicators experienced high rates of burnout during the pandemic – proof that the demands of this job take a toll.

A Blueprint for Managing Stress

While stress is unavoidable, PIOs can take proactive steps to manage it effectively. Here are some thought starters:

1. Accept Imperfection

Perfectionism can lead to decision paralysis. PIOs should focus on delivering clear, timely messages rather than striving for flawless execution. In a crisis, "good enough" communication is better than delayed perfection.

2. Verify Before You Share

With misinformation running rampant, accuracy is non-negotiable. PIOs should establish relationships with trusted sources and verify all facts before releasing information. This not only prevents mistakes but also reinforces public confidence.

3. Define Your Role

PIOs should clarify when they should originate information versus when they should amplify trusted sources. For example, a city might provide emergency response updates, but weather forecasts should come from the National Weather Service. Clear communication responsibilities reduce confusion and stress.

4. Be Strategic on Social Media

It's tempting to chase algorithms for maximum engagement, but frequency doesn't always equal effectiveness. Instead of flooding feeds with constant updates, PIOs should focus on delivering meaningful, reliable content. Consistency builds trust more than sheer volume.

5. Keep It Simple

People skim headlines and glance at alerts. PIOs must craft messages that are clear, jargon-free, and to the point. If an audience can't quickly grasp the information, they're unlikely to act on it.

6. Protect Your Organization's Brand

Every message shapes public perception. A strong, consistent communication strategy reinforces an organization's credibility and makes future messages more impactful.

7. Prioritize Self-Care

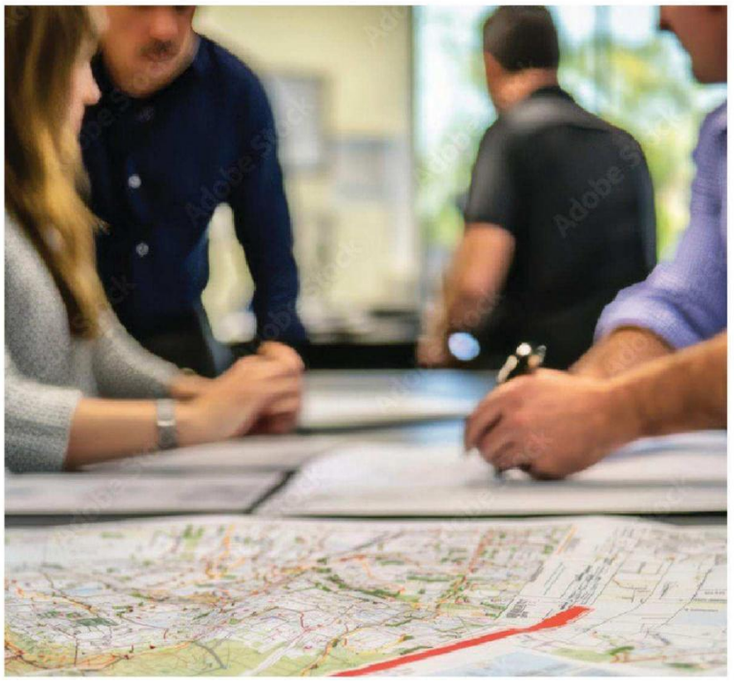
Long hours and crisis communication can take a mental and emotional toll. PIOs should build support networks, seek peer collaboration, and take breaks when needed. Local governments and agencies must also invest in resources to prevent burnout.

The Future of PIOs

The challenges facing PIOs are unlikely to disappear, but the right strategies can make the job more sustainable. By accepting imperfection, prioritizing verification, and taking care of themselves, PIOs can continue to serve their communities without sacrificing their well-being.

In an age of information overload, PIOs remain the trusted voices in times of uncertainty. The key to longevity in this profession? Balancing rapid response with mindful communication and self-care.

Have thoughts on this topic? Join the conversation! Share your experiences and tips for managing stress as a PIO by emailing Joshua Lee at jolee@peralandtx.gov. ★



10 STRATEGIES FOR LEADING IN A CRISIS

By **Center for Creative Leadership Staff**

1. Communicate key information, consistently.

In a crisis, information is powerful. It reduces emotional distress caused by the unknown, diminishes fear, and provides tactical guidance.

As a leader, your responsibility is to gather the most reliable, up-to-date information from trustworthy sources and share it with your employees. Doing so demonstrates that you're concerned, involved, knowledgeable, and on top of the situation. Without transparent communication, the crisis can have a negative impact on morale, attitudes, productivity, and retention.

Essential information should be disseminated to the entire organization by every means possible. We recommend first communicating face-to-face, whether in person or through virtual channels. But don't stop there.

Key information should be handled with the three R's: review, repeat, reinforce. Repeating and reinforcing information daily – and via multiple delivery methods – helps it to sink in and be retained.

2. If you're in charge, take charge.

The onset of a crisis presents immense pressure to act – and act quickly. Sometimes you must begin tackling a problem before you have a solid grasp of what's happening.

Effective leadership in crisis means being proactive and taking initiative. Do something even if it might be wrong; paralysis or over-analyzing is riskier. As you make decisions and take action when leading in a crisis, communicate those actions truthfully and honestly. As your response changes, keep employees updated with the three R's.

3. Be accessible to your team.

When leading in a crisis, be present, visible, and available to employees. When leaders appear calm, concerned, knowledgeable, and in charge, people are more likely to have confidence that things are under control.

Because it's not always possible to walk around your facility and talk to colleagues in person, let employees know how they can best reach you with status updates and questions.

It's also important to understand that organizational protocol needs to account for flexible leadership ranks during an emergency. Whoever is in charge is whoever is there. An entire operation can't be hamstrung because bureaucracy didn't account for a key player being unavailable when an emergency struck.

4. Prioritize the well-being of people.

It's important to do anything you can to reduce the emotional stress on people while "doing the job." Treat everyone within your organization with empathy and genuine concern. Show it by paying attention, using active listening skills, and responding to what people are telling you, as well as considering what isn't being said.

Leaders should assure people in their organization that it's all right to feel emotionally stretched in these circumstances. Communicating that message helps to create a psychologically safe work environment for people

to express their feelings, which is crucial in reducing the emotional impact of a crisis, promoting emotional healing, and reducing long-term negative effects.

Recognizing and managing the emotions of the situation can help with individual and group resiliency, as well as getting people to safety and back to normal (or a *new* normal).

5. Don't abandon your vision and values.

A crisis has the tendency to distract people from the job that must be done, even if the job is critical to the survival of the organization.

Leadership in crisis must include following and emphasizing the team's vision, mission, objectives, and standards of conduct. These well-established values have the power to help hold the organization together by providing security and continuity for its people.

6. Lead with positivity.

A leader's attitude is contagious. An upbeat, can-do attitude can keep people going even in extreme crisis. Because leaders are dealers in hope. Drawing on the power of positivity, loyalty, courage, morality, and other core values will tie your crisis response to what is important to people — making it more useful and impactful.

To lead others with positivity, leaders themselves must walk the walk. This means avoiding negative people, negative thoughts, and negative talk.

7. Take care of yourself.

During a crisis, leaders are often focused on the emotional turmoil of their direct reports. But it's equally important to be aware of your own emotional turmoil, its effect on your behavior, and its influence on your leadership abilities.

By paying attention to your emotions, needs, and behaviors, you'll be better prepared to handle the human dimensions involved with leading through a crisis. You'll also be more capable of containing the crisis, regaining control, minimizing damage, and effectively preventing, defusing, and reducing the duration of an extremely difficult leadership situation.

8. Make changes that protect your peace.

Leading in a crisis may mean doing some things differently to accomplish tasks while also preserving your personal wellbeing.

Try keeping some meetings short. Be more assertive. Say "no" more often. Take five-minute private breaks. Practice relaxation techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing.

Concentrate only on major issues; skip secondary tasks. Don't neglect spiritual exercises and activities that are important to you.

9. Plan for the next crisis.

As a crisis transitions from its urgent phase, the time pressures will also ease. At that point, the plan must evolve into a more complex system that looks at recovery and getting things back to normal, whatever the new normal looks like.

This is also when senior leaders need to ask an important question: Are we prepared if a similar emergency unfolds in the future? Most leaders will admit that crisis planning – for example, having a crisis action plan and setting aside resources for a crisis – is important. But sufficient resources are seldom placed in reserve for contingencies.

While improvisation can't be planned, thinking and team-building exercises can be built into a training program that prepares everyone for future events.

10. Remember the big picture.

It's natural to take one day at a time when considering how to lead in a crisis. But it's also important to maintain perspective by thinking about the broader vision you have of yourself, both personally and professionally.

Take moments away from the urgent tasks of "today" to think about where you will be and what you will be doing a year from now. These breaks can help you stop and appreciate that you're alive and that much good can come out of this crisis. ★

This article was originally published by the Center for Creative Leadership in "How to Lead Through a Crisis." The Center for Creative Leadership is a global, nonprofit provider of leadership development and a pioneer in the field of global leadership research. Learn more at https://ccl.org.

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