

Emergency Preparedness

In September of 2005, there were some tense days as we wondered if we would bear the brunt of Hurricane Rita. As it turned out, we were spared. Many people considered the precautions and preparedness as useless, and a big inconvenience. No one in Willis was displaced from his home, no local infrastructure was damaged, and the water supply was unaffected. Although power was out for several hours, and it was hot during that time, nothing here was physically destroyed. I don't know how many were thankful that they were alive to be able to complain, or considered the outcome of a different scenario.

At 4PM on September 23, 2005, Hurricane Rita was a Category 3 hurricane (winds from 111-130 mph), with sustained winds of 125 mph, and higher gusts. Hurricane force winds (at least 74 mph) extended 85 miles from the center, and tropical storm force winds (39 to 73 mph) extended 205 miles from the center. On the evening that it came ashore, Rita was a huge storm, with winds of at least 39 miles per hour over an area more than 410 miles in diameter. Any place directly in front of Rita bore her wrath for over 34 hours as the hurricane passed over.

According to the National Hurricane Center's website, a Category 3 storm can be expected to cause structural damage to small residences, blow down large trees, and destroy mobile homes. The felling of trees typically blocks roads, and destroys electrical lines and poles, water lines, and gas lines. Collapsing structures typically injure or trap people at a time when rescue and medical assistance will not be able to reach them for an extended period of time.

Now, suppose that Hurricane Rita had come ashore at Galveston, approximately 100 miles from Willis, and went straight up I-45 and on to Dallas. Willis would have been only one community in a swath 410 miles wide and more than 1,000 miles long that would have endured winds ranging from 39 mph to 125 mph for almost 36 hours. With more than 200 mobile homes in the city, at least 200 families would have been displaced. Other homes would have suffered structural damage from wind and tornadoes. The electrical power distribution system would have been destroyed, with broken poles and wires tangled in broken and twisted trees, all of which are across streets and citizens' yards. Landline telephones would have been inoperable because of broken lines and poles. Cellular service would also have been disrupted as the wind and flying debris damaged the cellular sites, too. Water service would have been interrupted because the roots from falling trees would have broken water and sewer lines. The odor of natural gas would have fouled much of the city as the gas could be heard hissing from lines that also were broken by upended trees' roots. People would have been suffering from wounds and medical conditions that require treatment and hospitalization, but emergency medical assistance couldn't reach them because of the debris in the roadways. As the clouds clear, the summer heat and humidity would have caused heat indices of 110-113 degrees. Hordes of mosquitoes, fire ants, and snakes would have seemed to appear overnight. And although it would look bad in one's own neighborhood, many people would not realize that the damage was just as bad for a hundred miles or more in any direction, and that it would be several days before roadways could be cleared to the point that relief convoys could bring in supplies.

If a Category 3 hurricane was 48 hours away, with a 99% probability that the projected path will be through downtown Willis, are you prepared to be completely self-sufficient in

primitive conditions for at least three days? If you are responsible for loved ones and animals, can you take care of them all by yourself for three days? Are these loved ones pregnant women, small children, infants, or elderly, or do they have special needs such as diet, medications, oxygen therapy, breathing machines, allergies, or have mobility challenges? Before you answer, please consider what each person will need.

Water (at least one gallon per person per day)

- Bottled water
- Gallon bags frozen
- Water heater for drinking
- Bath tub, washing machine, sinks, etc. for other uses

Nonperishable Food (require no refrigeration, no preparation or cooking, little or no water)

- Ready to eat canned meats, soups, vegetables, fruits
- Eat food from refrigerator before it spoils
- Canned juices
- High energy foods
- Comfort foods/snacks

Sanitation (prevent illnesses)

- Five gallon bucket with cover
- Toilet paper, towelettes (Baby wipes)
- Handwashing soap or waterless gel
- Household bleach
- Plastic bags with ties
- Feminine supplies

Shelter

- Tarp and rope
- Tent

Clothing & Bedding

- At least one complete change of clothing per person
- Sturdy shoes or boots
- Raingear (poncho)
- Hat and gloves
- Pillow, blanket, or sleeping bag

Special Items

- Baby formula
- Baby bottles
- Diapers
- Prescription medications
- Insect repellent
- Extra oxygen tanks

- Eye care (contact lenses, glasses)
- Pet foods and medications

First Aid Kit (doesn't have to be elaborate)

- Band-aids
- 5" x 9" sterile dressings
- 4" x 4" sterile gauze pads
- 4" conforming roller gauze bandages
- Triangular bandages
- Germicidal hand wipes
- Antiseptic wipes
- Medical grade non-latex gloves
- 2" adhesive bandage tape
- Anti-bacterial ointment
- Sting kill swabs
- Bandage or utility scissors
- Tweezers
- CPR mask or barrier face shield
- Aspirin or non-aspirin pain reliever
- Anti-diarrhea medication
- Laxatives
- Antacids
- First aid book

Tools & Supplies

- Mess kit, or disposable plates, cups, and utensils
- Emergency preparedness manual
- Knife
- Firearm
- Cash, travelers' checks, and change
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Whistle
- Aluminum foil
- Battery-operated radio or TV with extra batteries
- Flashlight with extra batteries
- Manual can opener
- Fire extinguisher (ABC Type)
- Pliers
- Wire cutters
- Duct tape
- Hammer or hatchet
- Waterproof matches or disposable lighters
- Plastic sheeting
- Medicine dropper

- Plastic storage containers
- Wrenches (to turn off water and gas to house)
- Plywood, screws, wall anchors (to protect windows to keep winds from getting inside the structure and ripping it apart from within)

Entertainment (based on ages of family members)

- Games (cards, dominoes)
- Books
- Portable music devices (but don't waste TV or flashlight batteries in them)

Important Family Documents (need to be in waterproof container if not in a safe deposit box)

- Will, insurance policies, contracts, deeds, stocks, and bonds
- Passports, social security cards, immunization records
- Bank account numbers, credit card numbers and companies
- Household inventory, important phone numbers
- Family records such as birth, marriage, and death certificates

The kit should be stored in a cool, dry place known to all family members. A smaller version should be carried in each vehicle.

Food and water should be replaced every six months to ensure freshness. Items can be marked with date of purchase, and rotated out for daily use as they are replaced.

Now if you think that this is too complicated, and that you will just evacuate, you should stop for a minute and think about what that means, and what you will need to be successful. With Hurricane Rita, the people who evacuated were like a horde of locusts, consuming everything in their paths. There is no guarantee that water, food, fuel, and other basic needs will be available along your route or at your destination. You will need to have all of the above items, plus some others. Fortunately, there are things one can do to prepare for evacuations, too.

Planning

- Destination (Where will I go? What about animals?)
- Shelter (Where will I stay? Can I make reservations?)
- Route (How will I get there? Are there alternative routes?)
- Method (Which vehicle will I take? Do I need to rent a vehicle or trailer?)
- Timing (When do I leave?)
- Protecting property (Is there time to board up the windows and doors?)
- Communication (Do other family members know if I'm okay, and how to contact me?)

Supplies

- Map
- Fuel (stabilized gasoline is good for a year)
- Well-maintained vehicle

Being prepared for a hurricane, or other disaster, is not very difficult, and not very expensive. Most of what is needed is already in your home. It just needs to be arranged differently.

What is really needed, and what cannot be bought at Wal-Mart or Target or Academy, is a mind-set that recognizes one's own vulnerability to the disruption of the conveniences of modern life, and an attitude of personal responsibility to plan and prepare for that event. If the event never occurs, then you can be thankful. If it does, then you will be ready to take care of yourself and your loved ones. It is always better to have something and not need it, than to need it and not have it!

I'll leave you with a question to ponder – Can I bet my life, and the lives of my loved ones, on how prepared I am today?

For Additional Information:

www.redcross.org

www.fema.gov/hazards/hurricanes

www.mocosherriff.com