

Tips for Covering, and Surviving, a Hurricane

Pre-reporting on an area's flood risk will save reporters a lot of time, and headache, when and after the storm hits.

- Request from FEMA lists of homes that are part of the National Flood Insurance Program. FEMA can give a list of homes by zip code and will include when the homes were built. Keep in mind: Not all of these homes are in the 100-year floodplain.
- Request from FEMA a list of homes that are considered severe repetitive losses – homes that have been severely damaged by flooding multiple times. This will help show which neighborhoods are the most vulnerable to flooding. (FEMA might give addresses, but will likely only give zip codes.) Establish sources in those areas before the storm hits.
- Find the floodplain gurus, typically a floodplain manager or the head of a local flood control district. These will be indispensable sources for policy changes, extent of flooding, damage to levees or other flood control projects.
- Understand your floodplain maps. When were they last updated? How old is the data (LIDAR and rainfall frequency data) used to compile them? If they haven't been updated, why not and who/what got in the way?
- Talk to local offices of emergency management about their method of communicating evacuation routes and zones. Can you get shape files/GIS data from them to build evacuation maps? (On the Gulf Coast during Harvey, some counties had this data, others did not. Made it very hard to build an interactive evacuation map.)
- Know the issues with National Flood Insurance Program. The GAO has many studies on the program's pitfalls. The CBO's "The National Flood Insurance Program: Financial Soundness and Affordability," Sept. 2017, is a great primer on the program's financial woes.

Covering any disaster can be chaotic, but planning and communication in the newsroom are still possible, and crucial.

- Be prepared to have many staffers stranded in their homes, or unable to reach the newsroom. Some people will lose power, or will have to evacuate. Tips on staying safe during the storm are helpful – especially for first timers.
- A daily, detailed newsroom-wide staffing plan will help cut down the confusion and repetitive assignments. Plan should include a list of who is working (editors, photogs, reporters, web producers); when they are working (shifts); how to reach them; what they are working on (assignments, neighborhoods they are in). Every day should end and begin with a new staffing plan sent to the entire staff.
- Keep track of who you talk to. Newsroom might create a spreadsheet with names, numbers, notes on personal circumstances (neighborhood, w/ or w/o flood insurance, etc.)
- Keep flood gear in your car or at your desk. Might include: waders, rubber/hiking boots, waterproof or resistant jacket and pants, cellphone charger for car, radio, pencils, water and food. (Some of this gear might be contaminated by flood waters and will have to be sterilized or thrown out.)
- Keep an eye out for environmental hazards. The National Response Center, run by the U.S. Coast Guard, often gets first reports of toxic spills. The center keeps (nearly daily) updated spreadsheets with data on each report. Keep in mind some of these are preliminary reports – actual spills might be smaller, or greater, than reported.

The chaos won't end when the storm blows away. A month after Hurricane Harvey, the Houston Chronicle's coverage is still taking shape. Thus far, we have:

- Created a special investigative team assigned to develop project stories out of Harvey. Each reporter on the team is assigned to dog an issue (i.e. housing, insurance, dams)

Questions? Suggestions? Contact :

Ryan Maye Handy, energy reporter, Houston Chronicle; ryan.handy@chron.com; @ryanmhandy; 713-362-2384.

