



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Sareta Davis, Chair, Winter Storm Review Task Force and Chair, City of Austin Human Rights Commission

- Rebecca Austen, Vice Chair Winter Storm Review Task for and Chair, Commission for Women
- Miriam Conner, African American Resource Advisory Commission
- Jeffrey Clemmons, College Student Commission
- Sally Van Sickle, Commission on Seniors
- Manuel Jimenez, Commission on Veterans Affairs
- Aletha Huston, Early Childhood Council
- Kathryn Gonzales, LGBTQ Quality of Life Commission
- Jonathan Franks, Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities
- ~~Molly Wang~~VACANT, Asian American Quality of Life Commission
- VACANT, Hispanic/Latino Quality of Life Resource Advisory Commission

DATE: July, 2021

SUBJECT: Winter Storm Review Task Force Report

City Council approved Resolution number [Resolution No. 20210325-067](#) to create the Winter Storm Review Task Force under section 2-1-2(E) of the City Code for the purpose of holding open public listening sessions during which individuals and organizational representatives can share information, experiences, and recommendations related to the winter storm and resulting crises. The task force's role is to create a structured public space for these comments and to summarize these into a final report for the City Council. Each of the following commissions appointed one member to the task force: African American Resource Advisory Commission, Asian American Quality of Life Advisory Commission, College Student Commission, Commission for Women, Commission on Seniors, Commission on Veterans Affairs, Early Childhood Council, Hispanic/Latino Quality of Life Resource Advisory Commission, Human

Rights Commission, LGBTQ Quality of Life Advisory Commission, and the Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities. The task force concluded its hearings by June 30,2021, and now submits this final report to the City Council for review and implementation of recommended actions.

This report is being shared with Austin City Council. This report will be presented to Austin City Council by this Task Force on [insert date(s)]

Attachment: Winter Storm Review Task Force Final Report

DRAFT

WINTER STORM REVIEW TASK FORCE REPORT TO AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL

[Do we want an introduction and letter from the authors—in my opinion an introduction/letter may be combined outlining what will follow in the with regard to the reported themes and major issues identified by our task force]

Sally- Indicated she would like an intro

Huston- summary but state that the TF is not endorsing any of the reccs/opinions submitted

COMMUNICATION

Means of communicating:

The use of Social Media to provide sporadic updates was problematic. Most had no ability to charge devices needed to connect on social media. Televised reports were also virtually useless for the same reason. In times of such emergencies input received indicates communication via radio, and the provision of emergency portable radios, would be most efficient in the future in similar circumstances. Communication with the elderly and also individuals with disabilities must also be coordinated and improved.

Huston- Mention Facebook meetings were not very helpful (couldn't hear questions)

Sally- Mention some neighborhood established phone trees

Miriam- Add TOC and suggest after each section having reccs, and data of how many people call in and where they heard about it (PB will provide the amount of people who spoke/testimony)

Information: (Re-label "Transparency of Information")

Information was know well in advance so the expectation of better communication on how to prepare.

Transparency was big problem. Information was either lacking or inconsistent. For example, "rolling black-out" turned into days without power for many, and no consistency as to when power would/would not be rolling for others. Without warning, water services were shut-off. This occurred within two days of certain media outlets reporting that the City of Austin assured citizens there was no issue with regard to the availability of electricity to our water treatment plants. There seemed to be a lack of knowledge on the part of city officials as to how to direct citizens to attempt to protect their plumbing. Messages were received to let faucets drip, turn faucets off, cover out door spouts, and leave out door spouts uncovered.

Language:

Not enough translation into languages other than English The ability to also disseminate updates and communicate in languages other than English is also paramount. The ability to communicate emergency information to those who are visually and hearing impaired is essential. Some citizens reported to us that due to their disabilities, they were unable to reach out for help, nor were they able to read or hear any communications with instructions and/or up to date information about the crisis.

Austen- Cultural competence, nuances on how people connect (who is providing info), community members sharing info differs from how the City communicates info. Warmer centers not equipped to connect with individuals who were visually impaired.

Miriam- Use of 311 vs. 211, using text (e.g. Amber Alert, City trash/ARR text services). AISD parent/teacher phone trees can be utilized...may know best way to communicate. Use of radio.

Garay- Make sure have interpreters in person

LOSS OF COMMUNITY TRUST

Inconsistent and incorrect information led people to distrust authorities, a problem that has long-term consequences even outside of an emergency event. A present-day example is the current inconsistent communications from ERCOT about possibility of blackouts during hot weather.

Austen- People may have distrust of city authority, may have more trust with faith leader, community leaders, schools and potentially use those avenues. Chair Austin wants TF to imbed pictures, video into the report.

Huston- Communications must be trustworthy. (example Mayor in office)

OUTREACH

The City of Austin must have a standing plan and standing orders to reach out to and protect vulnerable populations [the elderly, people with medical issues or equipment requirements, students in apartments on their own for the first time or without disaster information, etc.]. Lack of any plan to ensure communication and a feedback loop with all citizens could exist is essential. Access to information can be the difference between life or death in a catastrophic situation.

Include families with children, especially babies, elderly, students (don't have resources that others may have), and unsheltered people.

FAILURE AND BREAK DOWN OF THE ELECTRIC GRID

Lack of foresight (see “rolling blackout” above) and the clearly racial, ethnic, and socio-economic inequities with regard to those that lost power – some lost for days were glaring and pervasive and yet another indicator of the lack of racial equity in Austin. We received expert testimony from a professional in the electrical field that assured us Austin Energy has access to affordable technology that would have allowed for the cycling down of power in a manner that would have helped mitigate and perhaps avoid the black out altogether [insert specific technical information and data gathered from him by a member of the working group]. It was absolutely unacceptable that there was zero conservation of electricity, e.g., downtown buildings fully lit when no one was there. The City must install charging stations capable of being connected to and using alternate sources of power so that Austinites can in the future charge phones or computers in disaster situations.

Huston- Note comment’s from Julie Koidin’s testimony in this section.

Austen- Hearing there would be rolling blackouts but then longer periods of loss of electricity.

Miriam- Noting that the same issues can happen with the heat. They have had 10 blackouts already.

WATER

There was a complete lack of potable water supplies and no organized means of distribution of water, food, or other supplies once available. Many neighborhood associations and nonprofits organized distribution efforts and created a make-shift dispatch center for communication. The Community Resilience Trust thankfully lead this effort. This was the job of the City. The City must have an emergency dispatch operation that can function in times of catastrophe to aid non-profits and individual citizens who have the capability and means to provide aid to Austinites in catastrophic situations. For example, Fire hydrants should not have been blocked by fire departments, but should have been available to supply water.

Huston- Add food access and sanitary supplies (diapers), well water, not being able to boil water

Miriam- Add dog food, baby food, milk. Separate sections for food and supplies, mention MREs (only in English), non-perishable, perishable food. City providing water bottles- not sustainable...instead using totes.

Austen- A lot of restaurants rose to the challenge and provided water. A lot of community members came together using their money to provide to their fellow neighbor. Non-profits raising a lot of money (Austin Mutual Aid) and not receiving reimbursements. Fire hydrants freezing and locking them created issues. Making things less bureaucratic.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND SERVICES

Across City District we heard testimony indicating renters live in places with absentee property managers; no one available to deal with emergencies, and in addition a lack of supply (water/dry foods) stockpiles within complexes that caused residents to rely solely on their existing stockpiles or neighbors, who were in just as desperate of a situation with respect to such supplies.

Calls to 311 were not answered and no points of contact for emergencies – all lines were busy for hours and/or shut down. In one instance we received testimony from residents of the same Austin apartment complex who reported that the Austin Fire Department came to put out a fire; then left without helping stranded occupants or even providing them with basic information as to how they could try to access other emergency services (food, water, shelter, etc.).

Shelters were not available for people with no heat in their homes Homeless people. I personally participated in calls to emergency services pleading with them to send help to over 68 individuals living under overpasses that asked for help to get to shelter so they would not freeze to death overnight. Animal shelters closed, and animals left unattended perished. The City needs to define emergency or catastrophe services, and also have a plan for what will happen when those services don't work. When the people who can't operate the services, who is in charge? How often are drills and training happening that are preparing those who need to execute to execute plans that are in place?

Miriam- List all city departments that need to be held accountable and those that failed. Need to hold the businesses (H2O partners, Travis County disaster response)...refer to CRT report. Mention VOAD, volunteer organization partners working on disaster responses.

Austen- Mention that the TF heard from employees of the City and there were issues (county, city, state, federal and how each play a role, take action together and communicate)

INFRASTRUCTURE BREAK DOWN AND FAILURES

The lack of equipment to clear roads, or the lack of skill of emergency services personnel to use the equipment in inclement weather, was unacceptable. People could not drive to places with power, but citizens rationally expected trained emergency services to be able to do so. Emergency services training and procedure to be able to operate continually and act in emergency weather situations must be present. It is completely lacking at this time.

Franks- Many people with disabilities rely on public transit (cap metro, uber, etc.) Significant impacts to persons with disabilities. No transportation options so no access to groceries, medical supplies, etc.

Miriam- TXDot said we don't have snow equipment in central Texas...need to improve that area. Generators, salt, 4-wheel drive, tools to place chain on tires.

Garay- Not just snow equipment but broadening to other equipment.

Austen- The extent of the damage was so extensive (clear roads, down power lines, trees) that the City resources were exhausted.

PRICE GOUGING

Hotels were full and were charging \$1000/night. This is unacceptable and the City's Legal Department and Civil Rights Office must review validated reports of such conduct and punish withing the full extent of criminal and civil law.

Austen- Cite some specific testimony and reports. Individuals being turned away or charged unreasonable amounts. Supplies at some shelters but not at other shelters, where they were needed.

Huston- Include testimony heard from hotel rep. Austin Mutual Aid contacted folks in tents and several didn't want to leave belongings or animals/pets.

Miriam- Instead of Price Gouging, do a "Hotel" section instead, could cover pricing and treatment from hotels. "Access to Shelter" section and can include warmer centers in that section. Warming centers had restrictive hours and not available for overnight stays, started downtown which is not ideal. Transportation to warming shelters is needed. Also Survive to Thrive that worked and volunteered helping folks.

ROLE OF NON-PROFITS AND NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS

Many nonprofit organizations stepped up quickly, organizing groups to deliver and distribute bottled water, food, and sanitary supplies in different parts of the city. Breweries produced bottled water quickly. We need an organized dispatch center equipped to operate in emergency situations, and with the ability to coordinate with organizations such as the American Red Cross and other organizations that helped or coordinated a response on the ground during and after the storm.

Austen- If TF Members have detailed notes from testimony provided, lets incorporate in this area. The pandemic really exacerbated response and life-threatening decisions. Non-profits exhausted from providing resources because of pandemic (cash strapped, resources, etc.)

Franks- Cap Metro did request cases of water be delivered.

NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Through the combination of the above issues, a general sense of uncertainty created great anxiety for Austinites. As we continue to weather extreme events where power and other resources will be tenuous, people may feel increased distress. Emergency services must be provided the resources to have trained mental health personal accessible to Austinites during catastrophes to help them manage the trauma and anxiety produced by living thru a catastrophe.

Austen- Ongoing mental health resources, damage to homes, ongoing repair issues. Individuals already marginalized makes it much works.

Miriam- Animal welfare and service animals. What happened to the food industry... farmers, groceries not having produce, and restaurants not having food supply. Add content regarding more resources for social workers (door checks)- this should not be APD.

Huston- Instead of “must language” shift to what is needed. Emphasize the people who don’t have housing.

Austen- TF submit pictures, graphics or video to incorporate. And add a summary from the Community Resilience report (Miriam will do this).

Franks- Make sure a description for each picture is added.