

Disaster Preparedness: The City was Unprepared to Respond to Winter Storm Uri



Objective

Did the City's disaster planning and preparedness efforts position the City to respond effectively and equitably to Winter Storm Uri?

Background

Winter Storm Uri was a severe winter weather event in February 2021. Many Austin residents experienced periods without electricity for multiple days. Pipes across the city froze or burst leaving residents without water or struggling with flooding in their homes. Many Austinites had to leave their homes, travel in unsafe conditions, and shelter in City-run warming centers and shelters or with friends and family. Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic made the City's response to the emergency particularly challenging with the added risk of spreading infection.

The impact on the community was significant, especially for seniors and people experiencing homelessness. There were 21 deaths within the Austin city limits. Sixteen of these deaths involved hypothermia as either the sole cause or a factor in the death. People who died tended to be older than the general population, and four were experiencing homelessness.

What We Found

The City was unprepared to respond to Winter Storm Uri because the City's planning efforts did not adequately consider the risks of a severe winter storm or a widespread disaster.

Exhibit 1: City plans recognized a winter storm as a potential disaster but underestimated the storm duration, system-wide loss of power and water, and regional impact



Source: Office of the City Auditor Analysis of City plans related to disasters, July 2021

The City has not acted on prior recommended actions that, if addressed, may have improved the City's response. This includes recommendations related to:

- Planning for extended emergency events
- Improving continuity of operations (COOP) planning
- Improving language access
- Providing backup power at City facilities that may serve as shelters

The City also has not historically prioritized or funded disaster preparedness or community resilience initiatives, such as efforts to implement resilience hubs.

The City did not communicate effectively with Austin residents in the days leading up to or during Winter Storm Uri because the City was unprepared for such a severe winter storm. As a result, residents were left without critical information that may have helped them stay safe.

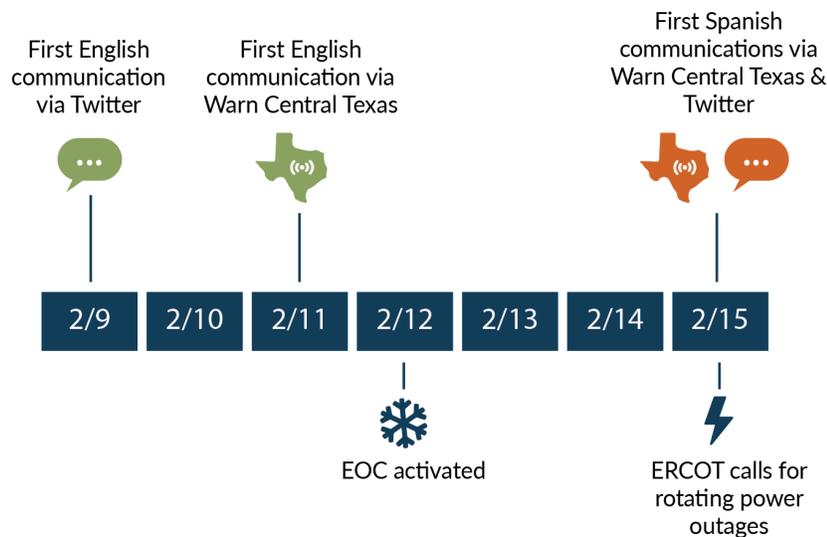
- The City's early messages did not communicate the urgency of the situation to residents or adequately prepare residents for possible risks, such as prolonged power or water outages and impassable roads.

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What We Found, Continued

- Residents received information after it was too late to be useful.
- The City communicated minimal information in non-English languages, and information that was communicated was often less timely than messages in English.

Exhibit 2: The City was late warning the public about the storm in Spanish through its main Twitter account and Warn Central Texas



Source: Office of the City Auditor analysis of the City’s communication to residents during Winter Storm Uri, September 2021

The City’s disaster planning and preparedness efforts also did not ensure the City had adequate resources, including staffing and supplies, to respond effectively to Winter Storm Uri.

- The City does not have a Citywide emergency supply stockpile or inventory to rely on during emergencies.
- The City lacks an effective process for ensuring City staff are available and trained to respond in a disaster.

The City’s disaster planning and preparedness efforts are not equity focused.

- The City’s plans are too general and do not contain the specificity needed to help staff serve the populations who need help the most.
- The City does not have a formalized process to engage with community stakeholders to assist with reaching vulnerable populations before or during a disaster.
- The City does not know if it is reaching the most vulnerable members of the community because the City does not have a good way to measure its outreach efforts.

As a result, the City’s response to Winter Storm Uri did not effectively serve all residents, including people experiencing homelessness, seniors, and other vulnerable populations.

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What We Recommend

The City Manager should:

- Prioritize COOP planning by:
 - Directing departments to keep COOP plans up to date and to conduct regular exercising on COOP plans
 - Monitoring and tracking COOP efforts at the Citywide level to ensure COOP planning is up to date and that department COOP plans align to Citywide disaster planning
- Prioritize and implement initiatives to increase disaster preparedness and community resilience, including establishing resilience hubs and improving disaster preparedness education
- Evaluate current Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) staffing and add additional staff needed to ensure HSEM is able to achieve its goals
- Update processes to ensure adequate staff from across the City are available and trained to respond to disasters

The Director of HSEM should:

- Plan, train, and conduct exercises for significant or catastrophic events, including severe winter storms
- Prioritize, implement, and track past recommendations related to disaster preparedness and response
- Ensure the City has adequate emergency supplies and equipment available for future disasters
- Work with the Director of the Communications and Public Information Office to create and implement a Language Access Plan for emergencies
- Ensure the City's disaster response efforts meet the needs of vulnerable populations in the community by:
 - Explicitly addressing equity in the City's emergency preparedness and response plans
 - Developing specific procedures for ensuring responses are equitable
 - Formally involving the Equity Office in disaster planning and response
 - Evaluating whether disaster preparedness and response efforts are reaching and meeting the needs of vulnerable people and using the results to inform planning going forward
 - Developing, implementing, and monitoring the effectiveness of a comprehensive plan for outreach to vulnerable populations at all phases of a disaster
- Develop a formal strategy or plan for involving the community in disaster preparedness and planning