Messaging for the Last Mile

The Backup Setup

At 8 AM CT on 26 August 2020, NWS Weather Forecast Office (WFO) Lake Charles, LA (LCH) evacuated their office to allow staff to seek safe shelter on higher ground and in hurricane-resilient structures out of the path of rapidly intensifying Hurricane Laura. The decision was made on the increasing potential for a Category 4 landfall in southwest Louisiana, with wind and potential storm surge of more than 12 feet to impact the facility, located less than 25 mi from a highly prone coast. Local hurricane warning operations were turned over to WFO Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley, TX (BRO), including public phone lines. Meanwhile, members of the LCH management team deployed to the city Emergency Operations Center to continue direct core partner support.

WFO BRO maintained a unified message of potentially catastrophic winds and “unsurvivable” storm surge through Laura’s landfall at around 1 AM on 27 August, and provided local hurricane and flash flood warnings through the night into the daylight hours. While operational staff from LCH was relocating to safer ground, BRO staff assisted with social media posts and LCH web graphics to reach tens of thousands of residents in southwest Louisiana and far southeast Texas. An unknown but likely sizable number of these residents likely used the information to make critical last-minute preparedness and evacuation decisions.

All Hands on Deck: Public Service for a Devastating Outcome

WFO BRO had planned days ahead for the situation. Extra staffing was on duty and ready to handle the more than two dozen phone calls and a few interviews from the southwest Louisiana/far southeast Texas region and beyond. Updated hurricane threat and impact information was provided seamlessly via text, graphic, and social media. A widely viewed Facebook Live session during the afternoon of 26 August was a critical piece the message, where forecasters urged followers to resolutely follow local evacuation orders. As Laura bore down by nightfall, LCH forecasters resumed social media posts, which allowed the BRO overnight forecasters opportunities to reach tens of thousands of residents in southwest Louisiana and far southeast Texas. An unknown but likely sizable number of these residents likely used the information to make critical last-minute preparedness and evacuation decisions.

The immediate transition was based on first-hand experience with casualties during recovery following Hurricane Hanna (25-26 July 2020), where four persons died and another sustained critical injuries from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning in Edinburg, TX.

While there were at least a dozen CO poisoning deaths in Louisiana and Texas associated with recovery, those numbers could have been higher without safety messaging on multiple platforms from government, broadcast media, and other entities.

The Damage Was Done. Casualties Had Just Begun

Immediately after hurricane warnings expired or were cancelled, WFO BRO jumped into action with core partner briefings that highlighted the importance of public and partner safety messages during recovery. A WFO BRO forecaster reached out to a forecaster at WFO LIX for information that highlighted safety and casualty prevention. The information was repurposed into infographics, which included proper generator use and how to keep food safe and water potable. WFO BRO developed the preventing injuries infographic from scratch. Each would prove beneficial for other WFOs impacted by tropical cyclones later in 2020, as well as during the peak of the February 2021 Winter Storm in Texas and Louisiana.

The authors would like to thank the operational and supporting staffs at all WFOs who provided outstanding service to southwest Louisiana, far southeast Texas, and their own home forecast areas during the prolonged impact phase of Laura. We also thank NWS Southern Region for incomparable leadership through the event. Most importantly, we thank core public safety partners in Texas and Louisiana for their extraordinary life-saving efforts, and broadcast media for amplifying safety messaging to prepare communities.

Transportation

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Resources

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