



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Bruce Mills, Interim Assistant City Manager *Bm*

DATE: October 3, 2023

SUBJECT: **Winter Storm Mara After-Action Report and Progress Update**

The [Winter Storm Mara After-Action Report](#) was developed by Riskconnect, Inc. with support from the City of Austin Homeland Security & Emergency Management (HSEM) and in accordance with Texas Department of Emergency Management (TDEM) criteria. The comprehensive report includes focused After-Action Reports from Austin Energy and Austin Resource Recovery as well as action item recommendations.

The After-Action Report aims to assess our response to February 2023 Winter Storm Mara, identify areas of appropriate action, acknowledge our shortcomings and, most importantly, outline the steps we are taking to better prepare for future emergencies. The 2023 ice storm tested the resilience of our city in ways never before experienced. The After-Action Report provides us with valuable insights into our response efforts.

Prior to the issuance of this report, significant changes and improvements were already completed or underway to improve response efforts to future emergencies. These include increases to staffing, additional and updated training, hardening of critical structures, expansion of back-up power sources, revamped emergency communications plans, targeted improvements to power restoration efforts – including outage map functionality, and vegetation management and storm clean-up efforts. Below are examples of key changes implemented by Austin Energy (AE), the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM), Austin Resource Recovery (ARR), and Austin Public Health (APH) due to lessons learned by Winter Storm Mara.

Austin Energy

Austin Energy expanded emergency management leadership from a single dedicated employee to a team of four, creating an Emergency Management Director title (hired in June 2023) and adding two Emergency Management Coordinator positions, both scheduled to join the Austin Energy team in the coming weeks.

Austin Energy teams also visited several peer utilities with experience in long-duration outages to assess their operational processes and determine best practices. The team visited Southern California Edison (wildfires), Jacksonville Electric Authority (hurricanes), and Long Island Power Authority (cold weather/tropical cyclones) over the past several months.

Improvements to Austin Energy's online outage map have been completed, with a special focus on improving accuracy of customer data in times of high traffic volume. Austin Energy continues to explore the platform's capabilities for expanding and improving outage alerts and enhancing customer usability features.

Thanks to the City Council approving four additional contract companies in June in order to catch up on overdue vegetation management, Austin Energy is also accelerating tree trimming and vegetation clearing near power lines to reduce the risk of outages caused during severe weather events. A feasibility study, funded by \$1 million approved by Council in the Fiscal Year 2023-2024 budget, to assess placing distribution lines underground to mitigate the risk of power outages during severe weather events is launching soon, with a Request for Offers from qualified consultants issued in September.

The utility has identified several other areas of near-term focus that require attention prior to winter: customer experience, enhanced emergency preparedness, storm response and coordination, and mutual aid efforts. Teams are working to implement the following Action Items as soon as possible:

- Establish and train for a damage assessment process for emergency response.
- Establish an operational procedure to produce systemwide estimated times of restoration for long-duration outage events. Consider a phased approach as Austin Energy gains better information about the extent of the damage during an event.
- Re-evaluate Incident Command policy and procedures and focus on employee preparedness, emergency response procedures, and training such as conducting dry runs, drills, and exercises.
- Re-evaluate storm prioritization process and optimize restoration criteria in phases to support emergency response.
- Establish and update mutual aid agreements and Emergency Electrical Services Contracts as well as a process for maintaining them.

Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM)

HSEM serves as the heartbeat of the City's preparedness and response to emergencies and disasters and Winter Storm Mara highlighted a need for investment and reorganization. HSEM staffing levels have increased and functions redefined to create a more robust structure, beginning with a new Department Director appointed in June 2023.

Because educating the public on emergency preparedness and communicating during emergency situations are so critically important, the communications/community engagement team has significantly expanded with six new staff members, including two community

engagement specialists and a community engagement language access specialist. HSEM leadership also hired a position to oversee data portal technology integrations, which will improve transparency, and added a Finance Manager and Logistics Chief Emergency Plans Officer to their roster.

Led by HSEM, the City has continued to strengthen outreach and educational programs to empower the community to prepare for natural and human-made disasters. In addition to the ongoing Get Ready Central Texas Emergency Preparedness Campaigns - which routinely reach as many as two million people digitally and focus in turn on winter weather preparedness, wildfire danger, flood risk, and heat and water safety - HSEM staff designed outreach and training efforts tailored for individual neighborhoods and communities. These efforts include neighborhood pop-up events, launching a preparedness training program for the public, and encouraging proactive actions, such as signing up for outage alerts and highlighting the need for emergency kits and family emergency plans that include sheltering.

To improve communications during emergencies, HSEM has trained more than 50 communications staff members throughout city departments on various National Incident Management System and Incident Command System protocols. All Public Information Managers in the City have been trained for the activation of the Joint Information System (JIS) and Joint Information Communications (JIC), which are designed to ensure aligned communications during an emergency. Additional training for specific communications role in the EOC is ongoing, including training communication staff to serve in EvOCs (Emergency Operations Centers established for special events, including ACL and SXSW.)

HSEM has also extensively reviewed and updated several plans to strengthen emergency response, including its Emergency Operations Plan, Social Media Policy, Joint Information System/Joint Information Communications Policy, Emergency Language Access/Limited English Proficiency Plan, and the multi-year Training and Exercise Plan. In October, HSEM will conduct a gaps and needs assessment for training and exercise needs for the entire Central Texas region.

Austin Resource Recovery

Austin Resource Recovery has been widely celebrated for its role in the storm recovery, including receiving a 2023 Best of Austin Award from the Austin Chronicle for Best Disaster Response. However, there are areas to improve upon and ARR is already actively addressing recommendations in the After-Action Report related to its mission.

These include making necessary upgrades to the brush collection and processing facility at Hornsby Bend; designating an emergency management team that will be responsible for serving at the EOC during an emergency event; improving cross-departmental and external communications; and collaborating with Austin Energy to make updates to Storm Service Request to provide damage estimates and mapping.

Austin Public Health

Austin Public Health has updated the Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) plan based on

lessons learned from the response including addressing improving language access and creating agreements with locations for use.

A bright spot in storm response was the use of APH Community Health Workers (CHW) stationed at pre-existing locations such as resilience hubs and neighborhood centers to provide better access to resources. APH also sent CHWs to a handful of high vulnerability areas without power for multiple days. These CHWs connected community members with resources and informed about MARCs. APH is working with the CHWs to document the processes that occurred and to create formal strike teams which will help us ensure the CHWs are trained to respond during future emergencies and can plug into APH operations.

This is by no means a complete list of actions and improvements that have taken place since February, but a snapshot of the extensive work already underway to position the City of Austin to prepare for and recover from emergencies like extreme weather events and ensure we have the tools and systems in place to keep Austinites safe and informed throughout such an event.

We are primarily focused on diving deeper into the shortcomings in our preparedness and response strategies the report points out. We are committed to addressing these findings head on. The report concludes with 78 action item recommendations in the following areas:

- Communication
- Planning & Preparedness
- Operational Coordination
- Resource & Asset Management
- Technology & Infrastructure
- Shelter Management

Community input and feedback from more than 30 departments were invaluable in shaping the After-Action Report and will continue to guide us as we strengthen our emergency response capabilities. Given the challenges of climate change, we can anticipate an increase in severe weather and natural disasters. Being prepared for these events is key – and everyone’s responsibility. As a City, we are committed to helping residents know what to do in the event of an emergency and building resiliency in our neighborhoods and communities.

Next Steps

As indicated above, Austin Energy has already developed a comprehensive action plan that outlines specific steps for implementation. HSEM will reconvene departments to develop a Corrective Action Plan, assign action items, and establish timelines to complete each action.

Once the city-wide Corrective Action Plan is completed, it will be publicly available through the [Community Resiliency Improvement Status Portal \(CRISP\)](#). We anticipate the Corrective Action Plan will be completed by December 2023. Progress on the Corrective Action Plan is tracked, and that information is also available to the public through the Open Data Portal.

cc: Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager
CMO Executive Team
Department Directors