

Weathering the Storm: How Law Firms Should Plan for Natural Disasters

Disaster is best handled when there is a plan. While many legal marketers are aware of the need for a crisis communication response plan in the wake of a public relations misstep, many fail to consider crisis response plans for other types of disasters. For firms that operate in areas prone to natural disasters, preparing for the worst – particularly in light of increasingly frequent dangerous weather phenomena – is an important safeguard for your business, your clients and your personnel.

A Record-setting Year of Disasters

This year in particular has been a harsh one for the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. The first named hurricane was Arlene, which formed in April, well ahead of the start of the official hurricane season. This was only the second time that a storm formed in April; the last was Ana in 2003.

The U.S. mainland took its first big hit thanks to category 4 storm Harvey on August 26, which dropped up to 51 inches of rain in some parts of the Texas Gulf Coast. The same day, the National Weather Service began tracking a disturbance that would later become Hurricane Irma. Hurricane Irma made landfall in the Florida Keys on September 10 as a category 4 storm. Then on September 20, the season's strongest hurricane, Maria, made landfall in Puerto Rico. Maria plunged the entire island into darkness, and it could take six months to restore power there.

This is the first year that the U.S. has been hit with more than one hurricane making landfall as a category 4 storm. One major storm is a big deal; three in such a short time is unprecedented. The effects rippled far outside Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Puerto Rico and the other affected areas.

This year's record-setting hurricane season is a good reminder to all of us that we need to have internal and external crisis plans ready to deal with whatever Mother Nature throws at us, no matter the time of year. Here are some tips to get you thinking about your law firm's crisis response plans.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

- Form a crisis response team and begin regular meetings in advance. Get this group together regularly as a weather event approaches.
- Make sure your staff and attorneys have the time needed to prepare their homes and families for the approaching storm.
- Pre-position critical staff and attorneys outside the projected area of impact. Think about closings for areas that could affect clients, IT systems and operational resources



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for the firm outside the affected office.

- In case communication systems are interrupted or local members of the firm are forced offline after the storm, make sure those in other offices are trained to jump in and help provide coverage to minimize impacts.
- Reach out to clients, inform them of the firm's plans and provide a backup contact if you become unavailable due to the storm. Find out what your clients have planned internally and whether they have a backup contact should the need arise.
- Before leaving the office before the storm, make sure managers and partners have the cell or home phone numbers and alternative email addresses for everyone on their teams. Some people might not have access to firm email to check in.
- Identify who will serve as the media spokesperson on issues related to the storm and who the backup person will be, if needed.

Check In

- As soon as it is reasonable to do so, check in with your team to make sure everyone is accounted for and assess their home and work status.
- Report the status of team members to the crisis team, including those who may need help or have gaps in coverage due to communication failures or home situations of employees.
- Check in with clients to assess any needs they may have or how the firm can assist in getting their operations back up and running.

Communicate

- Communicate with staff and attorneys about the status of the office and when it is scheduled to reopen. Also, make sure to let them know the firm's expectations for those who are unable to report to work on that day due to impacts related to the storm. People need clarity.

Supporting Those Affected

- How can you support your affected staff and attorneys? Does the office have power? Access to showers? Tell people they can come into the office to recharge.
- Can your attorneys help provide advice to those affected?
 - In Houston, the bar association staffed a table at the city's largest shelter with volunteers answering questions. [Baker Botts coordinated their lawyers](#) and in-house attorney clients to host a phone bank where people could call in anonymously and seek advice. The firm also created a [Harvey Crisis Response Guide](#), available on their website.
 - In Florida, the [bar raised the income eligibility](#) for free legal aid through its online legal clinic, Florida Free Legal Answers, to help ensure those affected by Hurricane Irma have access to legal assistance. More than 500 lawyers signed up to participate in free legal clinics for those affected by Irma.

Serving Clients After the Weather Event

- Be diligent in planning your office reopening. If roads are not clear or are dangerous to traverse, think about remote working alternatives for employees.
- Business is global and so are our clients. Local clients may be preoccupied with their own clean-up efforts, but those outside the affected area will not lose a beat.
 - [Latham & Watkins](#) and [Thompson & Knight](#) demonstrated this by meeting a previously scheduled date (September 7) to complete an agreement for Bruin E&P Partners [\\$1.4 billion acquisition](#) of oil and gas assets from Halcon Resources.

With all storms, safety is key. Prepare for how your law firm will handle business interruptions in advance. This is coming from someone who moved to Houston in 2000 and has weathered Tropical Storm Allison, Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Harvey.

How were you affected during this hurricane season? Leave me, [Michelle McCormick](#), a comment or contact me to assist in your preparedness plan at mmccormick@jaffepr.com.