

By Sandi Weaver
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Are you ready for your Hurricane Harvey?

Hurricane Harvey dropped 60 inches of rain on Houston, flooding out large portions of the city. In some spots of Florida, Irma threw down as much as 16 inches of rain and destructive winds whipped up to 142 mph. Here in Kansas City this year, we had two storms that dropped 6 inches or more of rain in short time spans, flooding many areas. And, lest we forget, the Midwest has earned the label “tornado alley.” Our neighbors in Joplin remember.

Are you ready if your house is suddenly gone?

What happens if your apartment building is severely damaged and deemed unsuitable for occupants?

Would you be prepared if you had to evacuate your home and city?

Beyond stores of bottled water, strips of dried food and spare clothing, much of life’s logistics depends on access to your financial and health information. Let’s work through some steps you can take now to make surviving easier if a Hurricane Harvey comes for you in 2018.

Cash is king

Plan for reserves of three to six months of regular expenses. This is the gold standard of the emergency fund. Keep two to three weeks’ worth of this in cash, in a fireproof, waterproof, locked safe. If the banking and ATM systems fail for a few days, cash counts.

Your investment portfolio should include some securities that can be sold quickly, with little downside risk. Securities such as short-term bonds or government bonds tend to hold value well and have very liquid, active markets. That’s not a corporate bond that trades once a week. That’s not a stock that can plummet 15 percent in a day. Most financial institutions can take directions via the internet or phone and electronically transfer funds to your bank in a day or two.

Plan to move your jewelry into that same fireproof, waterproof safe. It’s best to use one that’s bolted into the house structure so it cannot be easily carried off by looters if you and neighbors are displaced for a week or two.

Who am I?

Keep certain documents accessible. Your driver’s license or passport identify who you are. If your car is flooded out, you’ll need identification to rent another.

You may need your health insurance card if you're injured and need medical attention. Keep a copy of prescriptions you regularly take or keep the user ID and password to the pharmacy you use if you have an account with them that lists those. Have a copy of your immunization record.

Keep the contact information for your property and casualty insurance company. It's your responsibility to give them notice of damage to property; they may be arranging for special assistance measures you can use.

Keep a copy of your legal documents — such as powers of attorney for health and financial decisions — accessible. My office keeps digital copies of these for our clients as a backup. Keep copies of the documents where you are the agent for others, such as your elderly parents, your spouse or your adult children. Keep a copy of last year's tax return if your CPA's firm does not do so.

Have access — via phone or a paper list — of phone numbers and addresses for family and other key contacts. When is the last time you recalled a phone number for a friend from memory? We've all lost those skills since the advent of the smart phone!

Have a list of your user IDs and passwords for key accounts on the web.

Location, location, location

You can keep the essential papers on the above information in a paper file which you can grab and go. If you do, consider using a plastic cover to protect the files.

Or you can use the cloud for much of this information. Windows offers its OneDrive cloud, Google has its GoogleDrive, Dropbox has cloud storage — and there are more. Most of these offer a free account with limited storage, which can suffice for what you'll need in most cases. You can put scanned copies of much of the above information in your cloud file. For example, you can scan your immunization record and move the file into your cloud storage account.

If you use a password manager, the user ID and password to that app opens the keys to all your other accounts, including unlocking your account in the cloud where you store some of this. There are several apps — such as RoboForm, KeePass, and LastPass — to manage passwords. Many of these have a limited free service. Some may be adequate for your needs; others cost a nominal amount.

My password manager opens my account at my property and casualty insurer's website, my account at my medical insurance company, my account at my primary care physician's group, my accounts at my bank, my accounts at my investment broker, my cloud storage accounts and more. I can reprint most of the documents directly from those accounts: health insurance card, proof of car insurance, any prescriptions, etc.

If you're going to use cloud storage and accounts at your financial institutions' websites, you'll want to use robust passwords which are not easily hacked. You can implement two-step authorization for added security on critical sites.

If you are forced to relocate to a hotel out-of-town or an emergency shelter, you'll have what you need if the facility has internet access. If cell towers are down and texting doesn't work, use Messenger or What's App because those operate on wi-fi rather than cell service, to stay in touch.

The keys to the kingdom

Don't forget to grab your cell phone, charger cables, portable power battery and credit cards. Take the house keys and car keys. Carry out treasured photos if you haven't previously scanned copies up into the cloud or onto a DVD.

We financial planners are always preaching "Have a plan!" Resolve to make small changes now to let you better survive a catastrophe if a Hurricane Harvey comes for you in 2018.

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