Close Call With Disaster:
Lessons from the Hurricane Laura evacuation of a HUD subsidized apartment in Galveston
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Summary
As Hurricane Laura headed toward the Gulf Coast on August 25, 2020, residents of the Galveston HUD-contracted Section 8 apartment complex Sandpiper Cove Apartments suffered the consequences of insufficient preparation and disconnection from local emergency management plans. Failures in communication between local and state emergency management agencies to low-income housing residents, in flood-prone Galveston, led to confusion and failure to evacuate by some of the island’s most vulnerable residents, including older adults, people with disabilities, and mothers with young children, most of whom are Black. Inadequate shade, water, food or restrooms created uncomfortable waiting conditions for residents, including babies and seniors, awaiting evacuation assistance. Lack of personal protective equipment and crowded bus conditions exposed evacuees to increased risk to COVID-19 exposure during the active pandemic. This report describes the evacuation as experienced by residents of Sandpiper Cove Apartments and presents recommendations for improvement in future storm evacuations.
Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) and City of Galveston’s Office of Emergency Management (OEM) must improve their educational and preparation efforts at Sandpiper Cove and other similar areas. Within this low-income population in low-lying areas, seniors and people with disabilities must receive special attention, planning, and care in order to ensure they can participate in an emergency evacuation.

I. Narrative
   a. Galveston on Watch

For at least three days prior to the mandatory evacuation order for Hurricane Laura, the City of Galveston and other stakeholders were monitoring an impending storm. On Saturday August 22, the National Weather Service gave a briefing on Tropical Storm Marco and Laura, which was announced on the City of Galveston’s public Facebook page. On Sunday August 23, the City of Galveston stated via their Facebook page that Tropical Storm Laura was expected to make landfall as a Category 2 hurricane on Wednesday night along the upper Texas Coast and Louisiana. At this time, the City used social media to urge residents to be ready to evacuate with essential supplies and medications.

On Monday August 24, City of Galveston Mayor Pro Tem Craig Brown issued a voluntary evacuation order for residents living in low-lying areas and west of the end of the Seawall, effective at 1 p.m. In announcing this via Facebook, the City of Galveston and the City’s Office of Emergency Management (OEM) both noted that the path of the storm was still uncertain, so residents should look out for a possible mandatory evacuation as early as that night or the next morning.

Mayor Brown signed a mandatory evacuation order on Tuesday, August 25 at 6:00 AM. Both the City of Galveston and the City OEM posted Facebook updates with further details early Tuesday morning. Those details included instructions that residents who had signed up for the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry (STEAR) program indicating they needed evacuation assistance could take buses from the Island Community Center, and could call the City OEM for assistance getting to the community center. Further Facebook posts included information on how to sign up to receive emergency alerts from the City as well as more preparedness instructions.

   b. Sandpiper Cove Resident Evacuation Experience

Communication from City government and City OEM staff via social media and news outlets failed to reach many residents at Sandpiper Cove Apartments.

Sandpiper Cove Apartments are in a census tract where 58% of people are below the poverty line and 71% of all children (under 18) are below the poverty line, according to 2018 Census data. The tract is the most impoverished on the island of Galveston. Accounting for race and ethnicity, this census tract is 53% Black, non-Hispanic, 25% Hispanic, 20% White, non-Hispanic.¹

Confusion and Initial Notification

On the morning of Tuesday, August 25, the day of the mandatory evacuation order, some Sandpiper Cove residents had learned of the mandatory evacuation order and buses via local government social

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media posts, phone calls between friends and family members, and word of mouth. The tenants Texas Housers staff spoke with were not informed or participating in the state/city STEAR program intended to facilitate their evacuation. Thus, the evacuation began to break down from the start. Though some people saw on social media that the buses were going to Austin, residents who inquired at the bus site said that staff would not confirm where the buses were going. Many people knew that the buses were staging at 4700 Broadway, yet many did not have a ride to get there with their children and essential belongings. Not all residents may be capable of navigating social media or are even in possession of devices that can reliably access it, leaving some Sandpiper Cove residents without critical information.

On the morning and into the early afternoon of the evacuation day, residents were still waiting for details, as the announced noon departure time for the buses passed. Some residents expected to get information from Sandpiper Cove Apartments management, the J.Allen Management Co., but the office had a “closed” sign posted – management has stated this is standard now due to the pandemic.

In response to urgent phone calls from Sandpiper Cove tenants, Texas Housers’ outreach worker traveled to the site. Tenants sought information about how to evacuate and said they could not find out how to get to the bus staging location, were not able to get in touch with apartment management, and did not know how to contact the local emergency management office. Texas Housers staff called the Galveston Housing Authority, which referred the inquiry to the City of Galveston’s OEM number. City OEM staff said that residents needing a ride to evacuate should meet at 4700 Broadway, the Island Community Center, before noon to take a charter bus. An exact location to where evacuees would be taken could not be provided, but they stated it should be near Austin and that residents should pack enough toiletries and clothing for the next day or two.

**Preparation to Leave Sandpiper Cove**

Some residents of Sandpiper Cove grew frustrated that they did not know what to take with them or how to prepare as the bus departure deadline approached. People piled into cars, some shuttling families to the Island Community Center buses while others evacuated themselves via their own or friends’ vehicles. Residents, many mothers with young children, were scared and confused but shared what little information they were able to access about where to go and what to take.

Many tenants had no car and had to make a choice for themselves and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic: put their lives at risk either by taking a crowded bus, by piling into cars with other families, or stay behind during the storm. With COVID-19 viral exposure risk known to be increased by spending time sharing air with others, the bus and shared car transportation options carried extreme risk of exposure and future illness.

Certain tenants at Sandpiper Cove had particular difficulties with the decision about how and when to leave. One woman’s husband was in the hospital, and she could not get ahold of officials there to find out if or how he would be transported; she had to decide whether to depart the island potentially leaving him behind or to stay and try to ensure his safety. Ultimately, the couple decided to depart Galveston together and found a hotel, only to have to rush to another hospital due to the husband’s condition.

For those who were able to obtain basic evacuation information, the City OEM number proved important. For example, one Spanish-speaking family was given the City OEM number and received information in order to evacuate. Texas Housers staff confirmed however that even those who called
the phone number were often met with long hold times and ended up exploring other options out of fear that waiting could leave them stranded as buses departed.

While this City OEM assistance number was posted on the city’s Facebook page and perhaps other places, many Sandpiper Cove tenants were unaware of it in the moment when it was needed.

Management Preparedness
The Texas Housers staff member walked around Sandpiper Cove the day of the evacuation, sharing last-minute information and giving desperate families rides to the Island Community Center in order to evacuate on the buses. She encountered people who were confused, including an older man, mothers with multiple children, and two families that spoke Spanish and required translation help to understand where to go to be evacuated. She did not encounter any management staff, and residents reported they had not heard from and could not contact management. Based on a follow up conversation with management staff, it is unclear when on-site office staff were released to evacuate themselves. Only after noon Wednesday, when transportation-dependent residents should have already been at the Island Community Center, Sandpiper Cove maintenance staff were seen handing out copies of J.Allen Management Company’s Emergency Preparedness Plan. This plan included:

- Outline of equipment that management staff should have on site prior to hurricane watch or immediately following a tropical storm notification;
- Staff checklist for Hurricane Watch, that includes “Resident Notification - Hurricane Watch letter and After the Storm letter distributed to all residents;”
- Staff checklist for Hurricane Warning, that includes “Resident Notification - Hurricane Warning letter distributed”;
- Generic information on evacuations, including advice to heed any evacuation orders and to “call local government authorities” if in need of transportation;
- List for Emergency Kit; and
- Forms for “If You Plan to Stay in Your Apartment” and “If You Leave Before the Storm” with instructions to complete the appropriate form and submit it to management.

This appears to be a mashup of instructions to management and tenants and only resulted in more confusion.

This “Hurricane Preparedness Plan” was left at the front doors of many residents who had evacuated, and placed at the last minute in the hands of those already in the process of leaving or deciding what to do. The plans were only in English, some had duplicate pages and some had pages upside down. One frustrated tenant took a photo of the maintenance staff handing out the plans in the afternoon, to document what was happening. She reported that the maintenance person told her taking this photo constituted harassment, that she had no business taking pictures, and that she could be evicted over this because he would report her to management; she had not heard from management that day until this encounter, and expressed frustration that management was not knocking on doors or telling tenants about the evacuation. Despite Spanish-speaking tenants with limited English proficiency living at Sandpiper Cove Apartments, the “Hurricane Preparedness Plan” was only in English.

It was clear this document was not adequate to inform tenants how to prepare for an evacuation, even if the corrected documents had been distributed, as other failings would have rendered it ineffective. We were not able to determine if Sandpiper Cove tenants received a copy of this Hurricane
Preparedness Plan previously, such as with their lease or at some other occasion. Though this plan states that during a hurricane watch and hurricane warning, various letters would go to tenants (Hurricane Watch letter, After the Storm letter, and Hurricane Warning letter), Texas Housers staff found no evidence that those letters were distributed and could not confirm with management staff. Tenants who spoke to Texas Housers staff report they did not receive any of those letters. If tenants had time and wished to submit the forms for “If You Plan to Stay in Your Apartment” or “If You Leave Before the Storm,” it was not clear where or to whom those forms could be submitted with the management office closed for an extended time before the day of the evacuation.

Residents At Risk of Staying Behind
Though this was a mandatory evacuation event, some people, particularly seniors and those with disabilities, were left behind. A Texas Housers staff member noted that at least four people in the two buildings she surveyed stayed rather than evacuated. This included one older adult and an older person with a grandchild with a disability. If Hurricane Laura had hit Galveston directly, these people could easily have been killed.

Lack of connection to City OEM notifications and directions put some people at risk of being left behind in the storm. Texas Housers staff received a text after 4 p.m. on the day of the evacuation from a Sandpiper Cove resident with three children who was hearing for the first time about the buses and evacuation. While this tenant had a car, she worried about not having money for gas and a hotel so she considered staying at Sandpiper Cove during the storm with her children. The lack of information could have led her to remain in harm’s way with her family when help was available. She ultimately evacuated that day on her own and paid out of pocket for lodging using money that she could not afford to spare.
Unrelenting Heat and Long Waits at Bus Location

The distance from Sandpiper Cove Apartments to the Island Community Center bus staging location, ranges from 0.5 mile (11-minute walk) to 0.7 mile (15-minute walk), or about eight blocks. On August 25, the high was 93 degrees with full sun.

Many Sandpiper Cove residents could not walk or take their children or belongings to the bus location. Many people needed rides but did not know they could call City OEM for transportation assistance, causing them to forgo social distancing directives and rely on neighbors with cars and others to get them to the buses. Texas Housers staff assisted four families to get from Sandpiper Cove to the buses.

At the bus site, people waited outside in full sun and heat with all their carried possessions. Though they were on site at the Island Community Center, the facility – developed in the wake of Hurricane Ike and funded with federal disaster funds in part for this purpose – remained closed. Even the seniors and young children could not enter the large air-conditioned space where they could have relief from the elements, chairs, restrooms, and likely ample space to distance.

There was nothing at the evacuation site that informed people where to go or what to do. Two tables, each with an individual line, were staffed, and police officers were standing around. With two lines and no clear signage or guidance, people sometimes stood in the wrong line for a long time, only to be told to go to the other line first and do both lines again. At the first table, staff took down names, addresses, phone numbers, and names of the people in their party; at the second table, people got a wristband that appeared to have a chip in it. Despite social media messages saying that these buses were headed to Austin, staff at the tables would not confirm where the buses were going, so residents were unable to alert their loved ones about where they would be. After receiving a wristband, evacuees were not told when buses might depart. Occasional announcements on a loudspeaker or megaphone were difficult to understand, so many people waited for hours without information. When information was given, it was only given in English.

Sandpiper Cove residents and others wait outside the Island Community Center on August 25, 2020 to sign up for space on buses to evacuate the island.
Those who rushed to the evacuation staging location spent hours in the midday heat with shade only available from a few trees people could crowd under together. Older residents were sitting on their walkers, families had babies in their arms or in car seats, and many sat on the ground or curb. As a result, social distancing was nearly impossible. Water fountains inside the building were inaccessible, leaving many without water to drink. People who were disabled received no special accommodation in the heat. No water or food were provided. There was no option to wait inside or on the air-conditioned buses. Texas Housers staff saw an older woman assisted by medics to an ambulance.

Galveston residents gathering at the Island Community Center included people from Sandpiper Cove, from Holland House public housing, many seniors, and residents from the rest of Galveston who had to rely on public transportation to evacuate. An estimated 60-70% of the crowd waiting was African-American, about 25% Hispanic, and about 10% white non-Hispanic.

Masks were not handed out to people waiting, despite the pandemic. Some people wore masks but not everyone had one. People were not being assisted or instructed to space out for COVID-19 prevention.

Many people reported waiting five to six hours at the Island Community Center from their arrival to bus departure, with buses there idling. There were at least six buses that left throughout the afternoon and evening. The first bus departed some time around 2 or 3 p.m. One bus designated for Holland House public housing residents departed, while older adults and disabled residents of Sandpiper Cove kept waiting outside for a bus. One bus left around 7 p.m. At 9:20 p.m., families were still waiting. Others waited in their cars for information on where to go. The last bus reportedly left the Island Community Center around midnight.

**Bus Departures and Travel to Austin**

The buses were packed, leaving physical distancing impossible. Texas Housers staff asked a bus driver if he could tell her the destination of the bus, and he said it was against the rules to do so. Even after departure, tenants were still not told where they were being taken. At least one person in a wheelchair was carried up the stairs rather than using a ramp. On at least one bus, the scene onboard was chaotic. People were fearful due both the lack of information about what was happening and the pandemic risks.

On the road, there was a stop at a convenience store so people could stretch their legs and have the opportunity to buy refreshments. Most families who were evacuated had incomes below the poverty level and many did not have the money to buy a drink or snack.

The buses arrived at the outskirts of Austin, at the racetrack known as Circuit of the Americas. One bus from Galveston arrived here at 9 p.m., another at 2 a.m. The buses waited at Circuit of the Americas, with some residents sitting on buses there for hours, likely while officials determined allocation of hotel rooms. Some Sandpiper Cove residents had been without food from morning or midday Tuesday until early morning Wednesday, when around 1 a.m. officials provided sandwiches, though evacuees reported they were given no water or drinks.

**Hotel Experience in Austin**

Some Sandpiper residents who evacuated by bus reached hotels in Austin around 3 a.m. Even after the lengthy wait at the Circuit of the Americas racetrack, the group check-in process was long. Residents were assigned hotel rooms and given keys, but were not given basic information on whether there would be food available in the morning, or whether they needed to pack up and check out the next day.
After following the mandatory evacuation order and taking buses to Austin, Sandpiper Cove residents were left without access to information about what to expect next. They did not have a contact person to call or a phone number to reach out for information. Instead, rumors spread via word of mouth as one person found out information from the hotel staff or others. There was no organized way information reached residents staying at the hotel. Residents who came downstairs from their rooms Wednesday morning found Red Cross personnel giving wristbands that allowed access to food while at the hotel; these residents alerted others, so they would not miss the opportunity. Some evacuees praised the Red Cross as the only organized assistance provided to them.

Some Sandpiper Cove residents reported poor treatment by hotel staff. When they requested the wireless internet password, hotel staff told them they could not use it because they were not paying customers. With already a dearth of information, this further isolated evacuees who needed to access social media, news of hurricane updates and contact with family and friends.

On the second day in Austin, Sandpiper Cove residents who had driven themselves were given $50 gas vouchers and many headed back home to Galveston. Those who had arrived on buses still did not know when they would return home, and there was not an organized way they were alerted when it was time to go. Only word of mouth amongst residents enabled them to find out about the departure time.

Return to Sandpiper Cove
Upon their return by bus to Sandpiper Cove on Thursday, August 27, residents found notices at their doors from property management about their upcoming mandatory relocation for a renovation of the apartments. Some also found the property management’s Hurricane Preparedness Plan at their door as well, left there by staff on Tuesday afternoon.

City officials, TDEM and property management conducted no debrief or assessment of the evacuation to see if all tenants had been able to evacuate safely.

II. Discussion and Recommendations
   a. Vulnerable Populations, Flood Prone Locations
Residents of Sandpiper Cove are more likely to be forced to evacuate from the city during storms compared with those living on higher ground closer to the seawall. Despite repeated flooding over the years, HUD and other government actors are planning a major rehabilitation of Sandpiper Cove Apartments without raising its elevation, keeping residents at high risk for future flooding and damage to their vehicles and furniture. For people with disabilities who have to live in ground floor units, exposure to repeated flooding threatens both their lives and possessions.

The exposure to heat and sun for Sandpiper Cove residents while awaiting the bus evacuation from the island was uncomfortable for all, and dangerous for some, such as people with health conditions, babies, and seniors. Staff should have screened for special assistance needs at check-in and ensured that at least the people who were most vulnerable had shade, water, and protection from the elements.

The Hurricane Laura evacuation demonstrates the City of Galveston’s Office of Emergency Management failed to serve some of the city’s most vulnerable residents. OEM staff must improve education and preparedness at Sandpiper Cove and other similar properties, paying special attention to accommodate older adults, people with disabilities and people living in poverty.
The City of Galveston’s Office of Emergency Management must take the financial situation of low-income residents into account. People must be informed of what assistance they can expect during an evacuation before a storm hits. Resident-facing staff assisting in the evacuation (such as at bus sign-up tables) should be equipped with information on what will be covered. Low-income Galveston residents without the means to pay for a place to stay in another city, gas money, or spare cash for needs that will come up along the way, may be compelled to stay in harm’s way during a disaster – even if that turns out to be a deadly decision – if they don’t know that their needs or their children’s needs can be met while away. Addressing these fears and concerns of low-income residents is an essential part of ensuring that people understand that evacuating when an order is given is the best choice. And it is fundamental that people are informed of where the evacuation will take them.

During the mandatory evacuation on August 25, Sandpiper Cove residents were hurrying, making them more likely to forget essential items like medication, extra bottles for babies, and important documents. If residents had received clear communication about what time to be where, then they could have adequately prepared themselves the morning of the evacuation. The fact that residents felt rushed to pack in order to evacuate immediately on Tuesday morning indicates a lack of preparedness education, that would have encouraged people to pack well ahead of the mandatory evacuation. Lists of what to pack and how to prepare should be standard educational materials that effectively reach people living in subsidized housing. While this information should be routinely available, it needs to be restated when evacuation is imminent.

Title VI of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin (including language) by recipients of federal financial assistance. This applies to those engaged in emergency management and emergency-related services. A 2016 federal agency memo notes ways that access to emergency services by communities of color can be impeded. For example, emergency planning in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina assumed that most residents could evacuate in personal vehicles, and failed to incorporate transportation needs of all segments of the population. However, over one-third of the African-American population of New Orleans did not own cars, and 15% of city residents relied on public transit. This failure to address the needs of transit-dependent communities could be linked to racial and ethnic disparities in emergency response and recovery. In southern California wildfires in 2007, vital information for evacuation was disseminated only in English even though a large Limited English Proficiency population lived in the area. This denied these individuals the critical information to respond safely in the emergency. The lessons these past disaster evacuations have provided were ignored in the Hurricane Laura evacuation.

The guidance for state and local governments for compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 sets out specific practices for federally-assisted actors such as the property managers, the city and TDEM. These include reaffirming commitment to nondiscrimination protections at the leadership level, and communicating that commitments throughout departments and staff; disseminating all information

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in ways that are accessible to diverse racial, ethnic, and Limited English Proficiency populations; seeking participation from these populations to inform emergency managers and raise awareness of needs. Further, the guidance recommends that governments actively engage in information collection and sharing with community organizations, nonprofits, advocacy groups, and local community leaders in the immediate and long-term aftermath of an emergency, in order to evaluate whether programs and services are reaching and meeting the needs of diverse racial, ethnic, and Limited English Proficiency populations, and then to address any gaps in services or barriers identified. This follow up evaluation process, which does not seem to have taken place in this case, helps to safeguard against discrimination against certain populations.

Tragically, flooding and effects of hurricanes are predictable events at Sandpiper Cove and other neighborhoods with high concentrations of people of color living in poverty in Galveston; these areas have flooded before and will flood again. Past racist practices have placed these populations in areas of great environmental risk. Some Sandpiper Cove residents have lived there for decades and have had experiences in the past with chaos and poor planning in evacuations.

b. Dangers of Being Left Behind

In this evacuation, notifications and access to essential phone numbers were not available to people who needed the information in the moment. Even though City of Galveston’s Office of Emergency Management utilizes the state STEAR program to share information with those who need special assistance, that program did not reach these residents effectively.

STEAR is a state-level TDEM program providing a free, voluntary registry that provides local emergency planners and responders with special information on residents’ needs in their community. The STEAR registration is overseen at the state level, with information on TDEM’s website for individuals and local governments. The state program gathers information on citizens who may have disabilities and require additional assistance during an emergency or have transportation needs. Local governments have the option to use the registry information for preparedness and response activities, but local governments are not required to do so. Thus local governments use the information in different ways, and services vary by locality. Participation in the program by local governments should be mandatory.

According to the City OEM’s website, people encouraged to sign up for STEAR include people with disabilities, and people with access and functional needs such as limited mobility, communication barriers, require additional medical assistance during an emergency event, require transportation assistance, and require personal care assistance. Registration can be completed through an online form or by calling 2-1-1 locally. The City OEM uses STEAR to coordinate hurricane evacuation transportation services, such as access to the buses from the Island Community Center on the day of the evacuation.

Despite what appears to be a well-organized program on paper, many residents of Sandpiper Cove were not effectively connected to the STEAR program. This could be a failing in outreach and education if those who need the program have not heard of it; perhaps there is a need to for residents to update their STEAR registration periodically; or the way notifications went out to registrants may not have reached these Sandpiper Cove residents. Whatever the reason, the program failed many evacuees.

Based on the experience with STEAR in this evacuation, we question the level of participation of affected populations and overall effectiveness of the program. The state should conduct an audit of this program, to ensure that vulnerable people have the help they need in an emergency.
c. Layered Responsibility

Non-subsidized apartment owners and managers do not have an affirmative obligation to assist tenants with evacuation for natural disasters such as hurricanes. Owners of the HUD-subsidized apartments should be held to a higher standard. State and local governments are responsible for responding to disasters, with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assisting with planning or response. Local jurisdictions such as the City of Galveston have emergency plans, called a basic plan, with annexes for detailed areas and standard operating procedures. When evacuation is necessary, the head of the jurisdiction, either the mayor or county judge, may issue an evacuation order. Public Housing Authorities have a responsibility to plan and participate in evacuation of public housing projects.

In its general Emergency Management Plan for the City of Galveston, responsibility for emergency functions is split among a number of departments, agencies, and groups. Specifically, an executive group including the mayor, city manager, emergency management coordinator, and county judge provides guidance and direction for emergency response.

The City of Austin has, at the request of the State of Texas, implemented a regional hurricane evacuation Shelter Hub Plan to receive evacuees from the Gulf Coast. The City of Austin and City of Galveston have an interlocal cooperation agreement for short-term shelter during emergency evacuation. During Hurricane Laura, TDEM coordinated the provision of buses for evacuation of those without their own transportation from Galveston. TDEM coordinated the bus staging at the Island Community Center, using some local staff in a joint effort.

Typically, TDEM or American Red Cross provide communal shelter in hurricane evacuations, but due to COVID-19 concerns, evacuees were placed in hotel rooms instead. TDEM reported that they had reserved rooms for evacuees on buses, but then residents arriving in cars filled many of those rooms, causing a wait for some people on buses. American Red Cross facilitated food provision and some information at the hotels for evacuees.

The events during the August evacuation show a major failure in the City OEM preparedness system. The bus evacuation plan was not publicized effectively. The contact information for City OEM that residents must rely on in an emergency should be dispersed and readily available to all residents. Apartment management and the city OEM should both ensure that emergency numbers are available to residents, including a city ordinance requiring outdoor signage displaying emergency evacuation numbers.

This does not represent a problem at Sandpiper Cove Apartments alone. The City OEM planners should have reached out to all similarly situated tenants. Without thorough follow up conversations with low-income and vulnerable Galvestonians after an evacuation such as for Hurricane Laura, the City OEM cannot know how effective its programming and preparedness is. City OEM should follow up with tenants in affordable housing properties to find out their experience during Hurricane Laura and make necessary changes to ensure that all can evacuate effectively in the future. Drills could be an effective piece to add to preparedness education. Social media and news outlets alone failed to reach many people; instead City OEM staff should go on site at known locations of vulnerable residents.

Similarly, property management staff that does have emergency preparedness plans in place must make good faith efforts to follow those plans in the event of emergency. If tenants rely on getting information
promised by a management plan, then managers’ negligence in failing to provide such information can place tenants in grave danger.

d. Compounding Disasters: COVID-19

The lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) provided to people waiting in crowded conditions and then gathering into packed buses is unacceptable given current public health danger in the COVID-19 pandemic. Sandpiper Cove residents reported that they did not see masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, or protective items available to those waiting and taking evacuation buses. Some people came with their own masks, but in a situation where evacuees must rely on procedures adopted by officials overseeing the evaluation, organizers should have prepared with at least enough disposable face masks for each bus seat. At the bus staging site, the heat and humidity made wearing masks uncomfortable, such that many people pulled masks down around their chins to breathe fresh air or cool down, despite proximity to others.

It is widely reported that people of color contract COVID-19 at higher rates than other populations\(^3\) and that those with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of more serious symptoms. The population registering for STEAR and taking the buses aligns with those at higher risk from COVID-19 exposure. Likewise, the public housing and Section 8 tenants who were also served by the buses include a high proportion of people of color as well as older adults, and people with disabilities who are more likely to be adversely affected by the virus. Putting particularly vulnerable residents at risk in this way is unacceptable and unlawful.

After this high level of likely community exposure, it is incumbent on public health officials at all levels to ensure that all evacuees receive convenient and rapid COVID-19 testing. In a Hurricane Laura briefing on August 26, TDEM Chief Nim Kidd stated that people can access testing at the existing locations throughout the state, and that if they had to open the Austin Convention Center for congregate shelter, then people would have been offered COVID-19 tests on site there. However, knowing the barriers to transportation experienced by the residents of Sandpiper Cove and given the high exposure risk in the evacuation, an appropriate public health response after their return would require bringing testing and contact tracing to them, well-advertised and on site at the apartment property. This is the only way to ensure ready access to testing for this group and shield them from further spreading the virus if it was contracted during the evacuation.

III. Recommendations

a. Preparedness in Blue Skies

To improve the situation for future evacuations of Sandpiper Cove and other low-income Texas residents, we recommend the following actions to be taken during “blue skies” to prepare for future disasters.

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

• Design a public education campaign to reach residents (especially those with low incomes, living in Section 8 supported housing or public housing, those living in low-lying areas and unprotected by the seawall) to ensure they know what City OEM evacuation procedures are, what to expect in different types of emergencies, how to register for STEAR, and what number to call if they need assistance evacuating.
• City OEM should conduct educational activities and distribute flyers at housing complexes and vulnerable neighborhoods regarding STEAR and the evacuation assistance program.
• City OEM should connect with community leaders, tenant councils, resource centers, and others to ensure that information on STEAR reaches vulnerable Galvestonians.
• City OEM should follow up regularly, particularly at the beginning of storm season, to ensure that current residents in vulnerable neighborhoods are educated and equipped to seek assistance with evacuation.
• City OEM should encourage property managers to post STEAR information and to post the City OEM emergency contact number (that residents can call during evacuation for assistance getting to the evacuation staging site) in a prominent location at all times.
• Use and advertise a reliable phone number that residents can call for information. This may be the City OEM number recommended for STEAR registrants (409-765-3710) during Hurricane Laura, or 2-1-1.
• City OEM should increase STEAR outreach and sign-ups, and clarify to STEAR registrants that City OEM rather than local apartment management is the appropriate source of information in case of emergency.
• TDEM, City, and State officials should ensure they have a system in place to inform evacuees with up-to-date information from the time of advanced warning of an approaching hurricane, during evacuation, and during the time they are sheltered in another city. Information that must be shared includes where evacuation buses will take residents (at least the city, with additional detail if possible), when residents can expect to return (even an estimate would be useful while they wait in shelter), and how they will have their food and other basic needs met.
• To increase preparedness of vulnerable populations, City OEM must conduct more education on what to take in the event of evacuation and how to prepare in the days leading up to possible evacuation. This would alleviate the issue of residents forgetting their essential documents, filled water bottles, medicines, or other supplies and necessities.
• For preparedness training, include a personal preparation list in the plan, and go over it when conducting drills or education. Include a recommendation to have important documents gathered together in a bag ready to go.

PLANNING

• Disaster plans must take into account medical needs that require electricity to stay alive, such as a person with vials of insulin that must be kept cool or a person with a medical device that must be plugged in regularly. These concerns could hinder their willingness to evacuate and must be accommodated in emergency evacuations and shelter-in-place situations.
• Ensure that Sandpiper Cove residents and others in similar positions are consulted on the evacuation plan affecting them, to ensure that the plans are realistic and will work in a disaster.
• Involve vulnerable residents in coming up with a plan for how information will be disseminated during a disaster or evacuation in a way that they can easily access and track.
• City OEM should hold focus groups with vulnerable residents such as those at Sandpiper Cove to determine what modes of communication are most effective in sharing this information both in blue skies preparation and during an evacuation. Problems like changing phone numbers of potential evacuees should be addressed.

ENSURING EQUITY

TDEM, City, and State leadership should reaffirm their commitment to nondiscrimination protections, and take the following actions to ensure compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and avoid inadvertently discriminatory practices. Leadership should communicate that commitment throughout their organizations.

• Officials must disseminate information in ways that are accessible to diverse racial, ethnic, and Limited English Proficiency populations in Galveston.
• A review and follow up engagement with Galveston residents regarding their experience with the Hurricane Laura evacuation is essential, including identifying those who did not feel they were able to gain adequate information to evacuate or could not access evacuation assistance. City OEM should engage in information collection and sharing with community organizations, nonprofits, advocacy groups, and local community leaders in the aftermath of the emergency, in order to evaluate whether programs and services are meeting the needs of diverse racial, ethnic, and Limited English Proficiency populations, and then to address any gaps in services or barriers identified. This can help identify what populations were affected, and anecdotal and qualitative data should be used to formulate or upgrade recovery and mitigation plans, and to make sure that plans and implementation do not disproportionately exclude specific racial or ethnic populations.
• TDEM and City OEM should engage with diverse populations within Galveston to inform them on practices and raise awareness.
• For Limited English Proficiency populations, ensure that translated materials are available so that their access to information is equitable and that educational activities are conducted in appropriate languages.
• Annual preparedness meetings such as town halls should be used to facilitate community engagement. Location and timing should cater to the most vulnerable residents, such as holding these on site at low-income apartment complexes or nearby parks.

COVID-19 AND PUBLIC HEALTH

• Existing emergency plans should be updated to take COVID-19 risk into account. With people of color at higher risk of COVID-19 infection and mortality over other populations, their health needs must be taken into account in planning for evacuation of low-income communities where access to individual transport options is low. Changes could include:
  o More buses to allow physical separation
  o Screen evacuees for COVID-19 and provide special precaution for at-risk persons.
  o Tell people before boarding buses that they will have testing available immediately after their return to Galveston (if feasible based on storm damage).
  o Track testing results of evacuees to monitor for exposure clusters and follow up with robust contact tracing
To circumvent having COVID-19 fears converge with an emergency evacuation, conduct regular on-site COVID-19 testing clinics in low-income communities and communities of color.

b. During Future Evacuations
We recommend the following to address difficulties experienced within the evacuation procedures:

INFORMING HARDEST-TO-REACH RESIDENTS

- When an evacuation is contemplated or ordered, city officials such as City OEM, police, or fire department should be sent to low-income or Section 8 apartment complexes and other areas identified to be vulnerable in order to announce an evacuation and share the phone number for transportation assistance to the bus staging location.
- Areas or homes to be notified could be identified through sites with multiple STEAR registrants or other prior City OEM outreach efforts.
- During the hurricane watch phase, City OEM and apartment managers could pass out flyers with phone numbers of important agencies that residents may contact, where phones will likely be answered during emergency (e.g., City OEM info line, STEAR registration, American Red Cross, number to call for assistance getting to evacuation hub site).

CLEAR COMMUNICATION FROM APARTMENT MANAGEMENT

- Apartment managers should give clear, proactive messages to tenants about changes to water, gas, electric, or other services on their properties. This includes affirmatively stating that these services will remain on if that is the case. For example, this can be communicated through clear signage posted as soon as an evacuation order is issued, regular permanent signage on the outside of the management office; flyers distributed to residents; and management staff walking through the property informing residents as they prepare to evacuate.
- If apartment managers have a hurricane plan, then they should follow that plan to the best of their ability. When a management hurricane plan states that management will distribute letters to tenants during hurricane watch or warning, this can cause tenants to rely on that information; if the information is not then provided, tenants may be left out of the actual notifications that would allow them to reach safety.
- HUD should audit the performance of Sandpiper Cove management in the Hurricane Laura evacuation to develop better procedures for HUD properties in locations at environmental risk.

INFORMATION SHARING

- Officials must provide any known information openly with evacuating residents. This should include what costs will be covered in an evacuation such as shelter and food, in order to assure those with low incomes that they have the option to leave.
- Bus drivers and all personnel and staff should know they can share information with residents they are transporting and assisting. This includes, if known, information on where vehicles are going, where evacuees will be sheltered, and how they can find information on next steps. Withholding information is inhumane in an already scary evacuation situation and could deter people from choosing to evacuate.
- City OEM should have a staff person at the bus staging hub to inform people about the plan, and should have a network at apartment complexes and other ways to push out the information to vulnerable residents who will utilize transportation assistance to evacuate.

WAITING CONDITIONS FOR RESIDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

- At the bus staging site for evacuation, staff at check in should ask about special needs such as disability, age (seniors or young children), or health conditions. Use this information to ensure that those who need special care have shade, water, and restroom access at a minimum while waiting, and that their medical and health needs are met during the ride.
- Where the bus staging site is located adjacent to a large community center, as in this case, officials should open the space for waiting and provide water, seating, and restroom access.
- City OEM or TDEM should provide water and food for evacuees, recognizing that those residents who are transportation dependent may not be able to afford rations on the road.

COVID SAFETY

- City OEM or TDEM should provide personal protective equipment, particularly masks and hand sanitizer, to all people waiting in line to sign up for evacuation buses, for use during the wait and in transit during the evacuation. These materials should be stocked and ready for the next evacuation.
- State, county, and local officials are responsible for the public health threat imposed on residents in a group evacuation, and, in this case, they must coordinate to provide free COVID-19 testing, on site at the apartment complex, as soon as possible to Sandpiper Cove residents who evacuated.

c. Tenant Recommendations for Improvement

As an example of how soliciting input from affected populations can illuminate the gaps, the following is a list of recommended solutions generated by two Sandpiper Cove tenants in response to the Hurricane Laura evacuation. Deeper conversation and focused efforts by emergency planners should result in additional detailed plan updates based on local input.

- Officials should have a plan ahead of time that people have been told about.
- Residents should know the steps to take when disaster is coming.
- Residents should know names and phone numbers to call for information on an evacuation.
- Officials should have a specific plan for getting people with disabilities to safety; for people with limited finances; people without a car; people with multiple children; and older adults.
- Residents should know how to prepare, what to take with them.
- Officials and staff should provide clear communication along the way, so that residents are informed during the evacuation of what is going on and what the plan is.
- Residents should experience humane treatment.
- At hotel or shelter, residents should be treated well and should be allowed to use the wireless internet even though not paying for rooms themselves, in order to access information and communicate with friends and family.
Officials should conduct a debrief on what happened and how it went. Someone should ask what the hardships were and how to improve, inquiring with residents who evacuated and with those who did not.

Conclusion
The evacuation of Sandpiper Cove Apartments residents in advance of Hurricane Laura was poorly planned, badly executed, and exposed evacuees to several hours in soaring temperatures, confusion, and possible infection of the coronavirus. In far too many natural disasters, most notably Hurricane Katrina, people with disabilities, people with few resources, and people of color have been left behind to fend for themselves with fatal circumstances. We cannot consign vulnerable communities to substandard conditions born of governmental indifference and a lack of planning or care.

While multiple levels of government came together to conduct an evacuation from Galveston for Hurricane Laura on August 25, 2020, the poor planning and execution could have led to unnecessary loss of life. People who stayed behind, or received pertinent information just in time to evacuate, could easily have been killed if a hurricane hit and they did not leave the island. Evacuees have likely been exposed to COVID-19 through the evacuation, where a lack of ability to distance, inconsistent masking, and lack of follow-up testing could exacerbate spread. The recommendations set forth in this report must be heeded by government officials in order to ensure the safety of vulnerable residents living in flood prone areas of Galveston.

We must use the lessons from the Hurricane Laura evacuation to learn and do better. The failure to do so may be catastrophic.