# MANAGING WEATHER EMERGENCIES

TIPS FROM EMERGENCY MANAGERS



### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	01
There is No "Normal" – Paul Falavolito	02
Communication is the Biggest Challenge – Edward McGinley	03
Pre-plan for Weather Emergencies – Steve Spencer	04
Managing Back-to-Back Disasters – Susan Hall	05
Hurricane Emergencies	07
Surviving Sandy – John MacGregor	08
No Escaping Sandy's Wrath – Chris Niebling	09
Hurricanes: Not If, But When – Jena West	11
Worry About Water – Tyler Martin	13
Leave No Stone Unturned – Nancy Bellemare	14
How Earth Networks Can Help	17
Contact	20

### **WEATHER EMERGENCIES**

According to the National Weather Service, the agency responsible for issuing weather forecasts and warnings of severe weather, the United States is one of the most severe weather-prone countries in the world. Some 98% of all Presidentially declared disasters are related to severe weather.

And they're expensive. Since record-keeping began in 1980, there have been 250 weather disasters that have exceeded \$1 billion in damages.

SEVERE WEATHER DISASTER COSTS HAVE EXCEEDED \$1.7 TRILLION DOLLARS OVER THE LAST 40 YEARS.

Recovery can span decades and, as these storms increase in frequency and severity, recovery efforts for the areas hardest hit are stalling.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

We asked real emergency managers from around the U.S. how they handle severe weather before, during, and after it hits. Compiled here in this guide are their stories detailing how they prepare, take action, and manage severe weather emergencies like thunderstorms, tornadoes, and hurricanes. You'll hear about the challenges they've faced, the lessons they've learned, and how those lessons can help you prepare for the next weather disaster. These stories will help you improve your overall severe weather preparedness, with tips and tools for you to implement on every page.

## THERE IS NO "NORMAL"

Recently the "normal" summer thunderstorms have not been so normal. For the past 3 weeks, the mid-day 30-minute thunderstorms have wreaked havoc in our community on a weekly basis. Major roadways have been flooded like we have never seen before. Homes that have no creeks, ponds or spillways anywhere near them have been inundated with water and flooding.

The challenges have been many for me because I am also the full-time EMS Chief in my community and the half-time Deputy EMC. Our resources are strained, there is barely a budget and manpower isn't always at peak response because everyone else has a regular full-time job. I have found myself wearing many different hats while responding to the needs of the community at times of disaster, which challenges my leadership. If I am trying to shut down a roadway until the fire department or public works arrives on scene, I am also trying to get the word out on our OEM social media pages and answering text messages and cell phone calls with other agencies in the municipality. In the end, we somehow manage to pull it off, even with a lack of resources, manpower and budget. I guess resiliency is a thing after all.





Prepare a severe weather response for all types of weather events, even "normal" thunderstorms, as conditions can change rapidly and flooding poses a very serious risk to public safety.

## **COMMUNICATION IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE**

I have responded to several tornado events including:

- EF-5 (200+ mph) tornado in Castro County, TX in 1995
- EF-4 (166-200 mph) tornado in Friona, TX in 1995
- EF-2 (111-135 mph) and EF-3 (136-165 mph) tornadoes in Fort Worth, TX in 2000, and others

The biggest challenge is communication among responders.

In the Fort Worth event, the storms took out 2 of the 3 communications towers. For a while, we were using responders who were ham radio operators to communicate between the ICP, operations, dispatch and staging.

Can we have an emergency without communication problems? The point is: have more than one mode of communicating. Cell phones will be limited at best.

The other thing is be prepared to take care of your responders. It takes a lot of calories to work an event and plan to have food and fluids for your responders periodically. It should not be an afterthought to get water and nutrition out to the work areas.





When the cell phone towers go down (and they will), turn to radio and satellite phones. Amateur radio (aka ham radio) should be part of your back-up emergency communication plan to keep responders in the loop. Other communication channels include TV, the Emergency Alert System (EAS), and social media.



### **PRE-PLAN FOR WEATHER EMERGENCIES**

In June of 2014, the Wilson County School District in Tennessee became the first school district in Tennessee to hire a professional emergency manager to oversee the district crisis planning. Soon after, the district built a new Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and installed radio systems in each school connected back to the district EOC.

In the spring of 2016 the area was under a Tornado Watch as a line storms passed through. In the EOC, we had the radar pulled up and performed a communications check with all schools.

The NWS issued a Tornado Warning for the south side of the county with a circulation

headed for the City of Watertown. We were able to track the tornado on radar and warn the three schools within the polygon. The tornado passed through town near the schools knocking out power, blowing over trees, and damaging a few buildings.

Because the district had pre-planned a tornado event, we had the capability to not only monitor weather, but to communicate with schools during a power outage. We were able to ensure all of our staff and students were safe while assessing damage.





Don't wait until it's too late! Follow Wilson County's lead and ensure you have pre-planned for all severe weather emergencies and their possible impacts, including power outages. Periodically run communications checks and drills to make sure everyone knows what to do in the event of an emergency.



### MANAGING BACK-TO-BACK DISASTERS

In 2019, the Cherokee Nation (CN) in Oklahoma suffered a severe weather event including: tornadoes, historic flooding, potential coal ash from the power plant, heavy metal retention ponds on the brink of flooding, emergency evacuations, swift water rescues, contaminated water, oil spills, and a potential measles outbreak.

As part of this emergency event, the CN suffered back-to-back tornado touch downs within a week of each other. While recovering from the tornadoes, the Arkansas River began to flood numerous homes and businesses and stranding residents on their own little islands.

After working with the Southeast Florida Region 7 All Hazards Incident Management Team on training operations, the CN called us in to support their emergency response. While performing search and rescue operations, we discovered their radio communications were non-existent. Teams were running rescue missions via airboat and zodiac boats day and night with only cell phones. Our team's Communications Unit Leader ordered a portable radio tower, set this up on his own, and reprogrammed all of the team radios to re-establish communications. Numerous other safety concerns were identified and mitigated by our Safety Officer.

The State of Florida deployed a Liaison Officer from the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) to have a direct reach back to Florida for any deployment assistance. The FDEM was also able to arrange for the State of Florida Meteorology Unit to support the CN with daily meteorological reports.



### MANAGING BACK-TO-BACK DISASTERS

On day 2, we established an Incident Action Plan (IAP) for the current day as well as the next operational period to assist in getting ahead of the developing incident. Our finance and logistics operators also teamed up with CN to establish a streamlined ordering process to begin effectively tracking items for better financial reconciliation. We used constant social media messaging and news interviews to keep the CN tribal members informed of the ongoing rescue services being provided and health concerns regarding flood safety.

At the end of the deployment, our team developed and executed a seamless demobilization plan and executed an appropriate wash down and decontamination process for all vehicles and watercraft used during the rescue operations. Prior to leaving, we developed just-in-time training for CN staff to develop Preliminary Damage Assessment Teams to assist with steps toward FEMA recovery.

During this event, members from the CN Fire and EMS and the Cherokee Nation Marshalls service performed:

- 175 total deployments
- **56** critical infrastructure supports
- 20 people evacuated
- 19 calves rescued
- 18 welfare checks

- **17** critical supply transports
- 4 medical emergencies
- 3 swift water rescues
- 2 critical patients transported
- 2 dogs evacuated
- 2 show pigs rescued
- 2 cats rescued
- **1** additional highway closure
- 1 structure protection
  (live electric line arcing)



Build relationships with surrounding communities and call on them for support in an emergency. Always be prepared with a plan for back-to-back severe weather disasters that can complicate your recovery efforts.

ARTH TWORKS<sup>.</sup> **06** 

Hurricanes create extreme challenges for emergency managers. While hurricanes don't necessarily do more damage than other types of severe weather, they often bring a multitude of dangerous situations like flooding, storm surge, and tornadoes. Not only that, but depending on their size and strength, they can do more damage in less time than any other weather emergency.

Another reason why they are tricky to plan for is because the forecast often changes, more than once. As Dustin Hetzel, Airport Operations Compliance and Emergency Management Coordinator for the Savannah Airport Commission pointed out, hurricanes and tropical cyclones are often a "wait and see" situation. A small difference in water temperature or other weather fronts can completely alter the strength and course of a storm.

This was the case with 2012's Superstorm Sandy which started out as a Tropical Storm, struck Cuba as a Category 3 hurricane, and then weakened back down to Category 1 hurricane as it traveled along the East Coast of the United States. At the last minute, the storm made a sudden and unexpected left turn toward the coast – slamming into New Jersey and flooding both New Jersey and New York with storm surge that caused major damages. On the other hand, we saw Hurricane Dorian in 2019 change course several times with a very large cone of uncertainty that covered the entire state of Florida before ultimately decimating the Bahamas as a Category 5 hurricane with sustained winds of 185 mph. After wiping away many of the homes and structures in the Bahamas, Dorian weakened to a Category 1 hurricane and ran parallel to the Florida coastline before briefly making landfall in North Carolina and making its way all the way up to Canada.

Hurricanes are chaotic, sometimes surprising, and urgent disasters that can appear and evolve over the course of several days from nothing to a catastrophic storm system and back again. To save lives when a hurricane hits, your community needs extensive planning, preparation, and training. **These next few stories are specific to hurricanes and will help you better manage these severe weather emergencies in the future.** 



Hurricane Sandy had massive impacts on the New York Metropolitan Area. Our accredited private school has a dedication to citizenship and community service, and mobilized students and their families and friends to support rescue and recovery efforts in the NY-NJ-CT tri-state area. The manpower, material, food, and funds brought them not only face-to-face with the devastation of the storm, but in contact with many key government and first responder organizations that were manning the front lines of the storm response efforts. We completely agree that communicating is key to hurricane preparation and emergency managers should at least have a Plan B and Plan C for methods of communication before, during, and after a tropical storm.

Following this effort, they organized to retrace their steps and chronicle the direct impacts on cities, towns, government agencies, and the personal lives of so many victim businesses and families. The compilation of what they found resulted in a 300-page account of the storm, including: how it developed, who prepared for the worst (and who didn't) and how they fared, and many of the completely unforeseen factors of such a storm.

The book is a study of 'the unexpected' - one of the most critical aspects of disaster planning. The book is titled, "Surviving Sandy, The Superstorm That Reshaped Our Lives."





Expect the unexpected with backup plans for everything from communication to evacuation, and learn from others' experiences before a tropical storm impacts your area. Don't expect a Category 1 hurricane to be less powerful or damaging than a Category 5 storm. Every hurricane is dangerous and can cause significant damage and loss of life.

#### HURRICANE EMERGENCIES NO ESCAPING SANDY'S WRATH

wing emergency story is an excerpt from the book "Surviving Sandy - The Superstorm That Reshaped Our Lives."

When the sun finally came up, the only way emergency teams could get into the town was by boat. Mansions were cut in half. Others vanished from the face of the earth. Gas was spewing out of the homes left standing and I just stared in disbelief wondering how we would ever rebuild. It was incomprehensible.

#### More than 300 homes were destroyed and the remaining were severely damaged.

On October 29, Mantoloking had 520 homes. On October 30, 56 of those homes disappeared without a trace. More than 300 homes were destroyed and the remaining were severely damaged. We became the "Ground Zero" of the Jersey Shore. Every home suffered damage. No one escaped Sandy's wrath. Around 10:30pm on October 29, Sandy was at its peak, with water swells as high as 17 feet. Two major breaches occurred on Herbert Street and Lyman Street – cutting the island town into thirds. Experts say the water was traveling at a velocity of 20.3 knots, or the equivalent of 23 miles per hour.

#### We also lost our infrastructure of electric, phones, sewers, water and gas lines.

Sandy also brought the worst of all natural combinations – high tides, a full moon, and powerful winds. In addition to the homes destroyed, we also lost our infrastructure of electric, phones, sewers, water and gas lines. There was four feet of sand, live wires, and water everywhere so emergency vehicles couldn't move. We finally had to rent ATVs. Our department rescued 15 families that stayed during the storm. It was a miracle that no one was living in the homes that were washed away – and that there were no deaths or injuries.

In the days that followed Sandy, our emergency teams had a new battle: pressure from property owners and politicians to let people back into their homes. We had to keep people out because nothing was structurally sound. In the end, we set up tours for politicians so they could survey the damage. When the tours were over, the blank stares told the story. The level of destruction was so severe that the politicians went back and explained to homeowners how bad it was. After that, the pressure stopped, and we went to work.

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#### HURRICANE EMERGENCIES NO ESCAPING SANDY'S WRATH

It took several weeks to pave the roads of Mantoloking, and eventually we allowed residents "controlled access" to the area. Taking homeowners to their damaged properties remained the most heartbreaking of tasks. There were photo albums on the streets; toys covered in mold. I don't think there was one person who didn't shed a tear. Eight months later, the extent of the damage was still astounding. Hundreds of damaged homes lined Highway 35, still cut in half. Mantoloking became a kind of tourist attraction and people were curious. Still, there was an eeriness to it. The homes were half missing but when you looked inside, you'd see beds still made and clothes in the closet. It was mind-blowing.

The recovery process was slow but steady. By mid-December, utilities were back on. By mid-March, the first resident officially moved back home. And on June 15, the beaches opened for business. While there was concern about debris in the water, crews combed the sand and searched the waters for months. The items we found have been incredible. Crews have "fished" out microwaves, beds, cars, and much more. And there are also tales of how far some items have traveled. One of Mantoloking's heavy road signs was found 20 miles away. Part of a railroad also washed ashore, though no one is quite certain where it came from!

The range of emotions were intense, ranging from fear and sadness to exhilaration of rebuilding and reuniting with people. While the shoreline will never look the same and some people who are uninsured or underinsured will likely walk away, we will rebuild. It will take a few years, but Mantoloking is stronger than the storm.

Excerpt provided, by permission, from AMBIENT's book on Hurricane Sandy, - "Surviving Sandy – The Superstorm That Reshaped Our Lives" – (pp. 94-95 of 300-page, full-color account of storm), available on AMAZON at <u>www.amazon.com/author/ambientfunding/</u>. For hardcover edition, EARTH NETWORKS can provide a **20% discount**, plus **FREE shipping** (while supplies last), using **Promo Code: EARTHNET** 

#### HURRICANE EMERGENCIES HURRICANES: NOT IF, BUT WHEN

To say that in South Texas, you will be subject to experience severe weather when living here is not an "if," but "when." I have been through a few tropical storms and hurricanes, but if I thought Murphy's Law was at play during those instances, I hadn't yet mentally prepared myself for Hurricane Harvey.

Although emergency managers and local governments in the Gulf Coast region consistently plan, train, and exercise for inclement weather and its impacts to the community, Hurricane Harvey posed threats that had not yet been mitigated in many communities. Although Hurricane Harvey made landfall as a Category 4 Hurricane in the Rockport/Fulton area, Victoria was lucky to only have endured Category 1 sustained winds and minimal flooding. Had our community experienced the same storm strength as Rockport and its surrounding areas, we would have likely met the same fate. The greatest downfall in almost any response to any event or emergency is the word we utilize in so many instances: communication. Although our Victoria-area responders work well together and often have strong and robust lines of communication and networking, there are always improvements that can be made in this regard.

Complacency sets in and the voices of the "chicken littles" of the world (i.e. your local emergency managers) fade into the background because other emergencies and important tasks lie ahead of the individuals whose participation and buy-in for training and planning for inclement weather is paramount. If I could provide words of wisdom to agencies or governments looking to strengthen their emergency management and response efforts, it would be this: Generate the MOST buy-in that you can from your external partners on a sunny day to help them understand the importance



#### HURRICANE EMERGENCIES HURRICANES: NOT IF, BUT WHEN

of planning and mitigation for inclement or severe weather, as it will come back to haunt you no matter how much you try to pretend that the "hurricane monster" won't resurface from under your bed. Because it will. And when it does, there will be that "chicken little" voice in the back of your head reminding you that planning, communications, networking, and partnerships should be consistently worked on and evaluated on the sunny days, so that rainy days hurt a little less.





Generate buy-in for weather emergency plans, tools, and programs ahead of time, so when disaster strikes you'll have the resources to prepare. We recommend using NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information Billion Dollar Disaster reports or other hurricane statistics from reputable field experts (like us) to help build support.

#### HURRICANE EMERGENCIES WORRY ABOUT WATER

While serving in the Army, in Fort Riley, Kansas, Hurricane Harvey was a huge threat in the summer of 2017. After the monster storm crashed through, my organization was tasked to respond, by bringing water and food supplies to those who had just been saved from the disaster.

We left from Fort Riley and arrived In Oklahoma. We waited a day there, then started our trek down to Texas. When we arrived, I had never seen anything like it.

We quickly got to work distributing water and food to those that we could. I noticed children filling bottles of rainwater. I made my way to them to explain, in simpler terms, that the water could have chemical or biological contaminants, and absolutely not to drink it. While there, with those two skills in my tool bag, I was on high alert for anything that could have leaked into the flood water that could've permeated the skin. After a few days of assisting in every way we could; handing out blankets, food and water, while keeping the peace, we left for Kansas again.





Tyler points out something that often gets lost in the wake of these disasters. Floodwater is extremely dangerous to consume both because of contaminants and water-borne illnesses like typhoid fever! Educate your community before a hurricane or flood hits and constantly push out safety messaging regarding floodwater hazards during and after the storm to keep this top of mind.

Hurricane Katrina. Where does one begin? Our Emergency Department team signed into the hospital the day before the storm, arranged the shifts, sleeping areas, food storage. All team members were told to be prepared to stay for 3 days, to bring food and water, and clothes for the duration.

Evacuation orders for the surrounding towns were in place, highways were packed with slow moving traffic. We planned to lock our doors at 8 PM on Sunday when the storm was supposed to be in full swing. The day went well, we had no major emergencies, and were trying to avoid any admissions. We were hoping for an empty ED when we locked the doors. However, mid afternoon we started finding abandoned elderly in our parking lot. By 4 PM, we had three such patients dropped off by their families who were unwilling to care for them. Our ED continued to fill as the afternoon dragged on. Between people who had car accidents, dangerously obese patients, and those who feigned illnesses, we had most of the rooms full with patients without grave illnesses. Not exactly how I had planned it but had to deal with it. At 7 PM on Sunday, I was told second hand that there had been a call taken in the ED that the control center at the airport was sending us 30-35 patients with various complaints. WHAT? So we went into full Emergency protocol, cleared all the rooms, called for all residents and available staff, assigned a resident, a staff doctor, and nurse to each room. We then set up a triage area outside with desks and portable computers, wheelchairs, and chairs. Now we had everyone in place, waiting for the onslaught. While I was doing this my CEO was trying to confirm the phone call. He finally was able to speak to the General in charge who reported there were no such patients and was unaware of any phone call made to our department. I was relieved, but really annoyed. However, the teamwork and effort of residents, nurses, doctors was fantastic, so that went well.

Just before 8 PM we locked the ED doors. The winds started and the windows actually started bowing. Our front ED doors flew open, water started flowing through small leaks in the ceiling and down staircases. The city advised the water would be shut off at 4 AM as the pumps can't keep up with the rainwater. Staff awakened

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at 3 AM to take showers if they desired. We filled as many bottles of water as we could find. Then we put large barrels outside to collect water as the plumbing was not going to be working. At least we would be able to use a bucket of water to push our waste down.

By morning the storm had come and gone and created major damage. The parking lot and the surrounding streets were flooded up to the bottom of stop

signs. There was no way in and no way out! The power and air conditioning were off, but at least some emergency outlets were working in some areas. We had no phones, no SAT phones, and mobile phone service was spotty. The only thing we had was a little radio to listen to for updates. Communication and power

were two major problems and we didn't have secondary plans for either. The temperature was about 100 degrees in the department and we only had

one fan, which we kept rotating from room to room on the red plugs. Nurses cut off their scrubs to shorts and went sleeveless.

We had to ration food. Our stay lasted from Saturday to Thursday afternoon, when the CEO was able to lock the doors.

There were so many lessons learned. The first 24 hours before a storm and the first 24 after a storm are crucial. Be prepared with water/food for at least 1 week. Have a plan for alternative

## The first 24 hours before a storm and the first 24 after a storm are crucial.

bathrooms if you lose your water. Have more security in your parking lots before the storm to avoid the elderly drop offs. Also have adequate staff. Do not cut

back on staff, they may have a quiet few days, but there may also be a catastrophic event where you will need every one of those hands. Evacuate all dialysis patients and anyone on ventilators, have more IV fluids than usual available, more antibiotics, more of everything. We were able to bring our pets with us, which was

## A major lesson for me was remember your vehicles!

great but was very difficult to care for especially in that heat. They really couldn't go outside for almost 36 hours with the wind and the rain. If you can

make other arrangements for your pet do it. I was one of those single people with no nearby family who had to bring the dog and

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it wasn't easy. A major lesson for me was remember your vehicles! We had patients and nurses who were getting heat exhaustion. We could have started our vehicles ran some AC and cooled many of them. This didn't dawn on me until we were evacuating some patients to a nearby airport and their vitals improved from

the AC in the vehicles. Lastly, make sure your staff has an exit plan. Their homes may have been destroyed, they may not be able to get to their home

because of downed trees. The hospital should reserve hotel rooms somewhere within 50 miles for those who will not have anywhere to go. Make sure they have gas and gas money, I had to borrow \$40 from my CEO because I had no cash with me, and they had frozen all banking in the affected area. I also had nowhere to go and no phone service. I knew my home flooded, so I started driving to Baton Rouge and was finally able to get to a family friend that my brother knew and who adopted me for a few months. Before the storm, make sure every member of your team has cash, a place to go, has given you the name and address of where they will go, as well family contact information. We did not do this, and it was almost a month before I could be sure all of my staff had made it to safety. Again, not done well.

> Every storm is different, but hurricanes need to be taken seriously as it will change your world as you know it. It was the best learning experience as an

Emergency Department Director that I could have ever had but we could have been so much better prepared. Leave no stone unturned, think of everything beforehand!







No weather emergency response goes perfectly to plan. Learn from your experiences and the experiences of your peers to be better prepared for the next disaster.

Lastly, make sure your staff

has an exit plan.

#### REAL-TIME HYPERLOCAL WEATHER DATA HOW EARTH NETWORKS CAN HELP

When severe weather strikes, having real-time access to weather data at a neighborhood level is crucial to allocating resources. The National Weather Service will issue a severe weather warning for several counties in your area as a precaution and the storm may or may not impact all of those locations. We own and operate our own network of over 10,000 weather stations and lightning sensors which are deployed all across the United States. This means there's always a station close by and you get the most accurate, localized weather data around.

Our friends in Atlanta know all about the benefits of hyperlocal weather data. The Atlanta-Fulton County Emergency Management Agency (AFCEMA) in Georgia improved their weather-readiness on a hyperlocal level by installing 53 Earth Networks weather stations to build out their local network. With dozens of data sources recording and reporting on 25+ weather observations from all across the county, emergency management officials are better prepared to keep over one million residents safe from tornadoes, severe thunderstorms, and other forms of dangerous weather.



#### PROFESSIONAL METEOROLOGISTS ON-CALL 24/7 HOW EARTH NETWORKS CAN HELP

Ever notice that what you hear about the weather on the news isn't true for your area? When it comes to big weather emergencies, you need advice from someone who understands your region. Here at Earth Networks, we have a team with expert meteorologists ready 24/7, 365 for weather emergency support. During a major storm or special event, having access to custom forecasts and on-demand meteorological support can be a real life-saver.

In our home state of Maryland, our meteorologists help officials at the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) plan ahead to secure extra snow plow trucks and clear the roads faster to minimize disruptions and keep residents safe. Back in January 2016, the team supported MCDOT with custom forecasts every 6 hours during a major Nor'easter known as Winter Storm Jonas. This support helped the region dig out of more than 2 feet of heavy snow.



#### ACCURATE, AUTOMATED EARLY WARNING ALERTS FOR SEVERE WEATHER HOW EARTH NETWORKS CAN HELP

One of the best ways to minimize the impact of a severe weather emergency is to make sure everyone gets a warning with as much advanced notice as possible. One tool for issuing warnings is an outdoor mass notification horn and strobe system like our Sferic Siren. With Sferic Siren, emergency managers can automatically send far-reaching alerts out for severe weather like tornadoes and thunderstorms. As Dave Erwin, EOC Coordinator for the Kanawha County Emergency Management department in West Virginia notes, Earth Networks alerts help move people indoors before severe weather becomes a threat. Another tool for alerting is a mobile application like our Sferic Connect. There are a lot of free weather apps out there but nothing beats a professional solution when lives are on the line. This professional-grade mobile application takes the guess work out of navigating multiple sources of weather information and puts consistent, accurate, and hyperlocal weather information into the hands of every emergency and first responder on your team.



Weather-related emergencies are difficult to manage, but it's easier when emergency managers have the right tools and policies in place. Don't wait until it's too late. Get in touch with a weather expert from Earth Networks today to see how we can help you prepare for the next severe weather emergency.

Do you have a severe weather story to share? Share your story with us and we'll feature it in the next edition of this guide. You can share your story at **get.earthnetworks.com/emergency-management/severe-weather-stories** 

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