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**PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED**

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Disaster can strike at any time. We have heard it many times, but it is difficult to really take it to heart. The best defense against natural disasters and accidents is to be prepared. Have a plan, gather emergency supplies in advance, and make copies of important documents. And, very importantly, if emergency management personnel in Aransas county say evacuate, do it.

Listen to the radio or TV to be aware of potentially disastrous weather. The National Weather Service issues alerts of potential danger. A ‘watch’ means conditions are right for dangerous weather and to watch out. It’s usually issued far enough in advance to complete last minute preparations. A ‘warning’ is more serious, as the word implies, and indicates that weather which is a threat to life or property is occurring, about to occur, or very likely to occur. It usually means to take shelter or evacuate, depending on the situation, but listen to the radio or TV for more details, as it will vary with the situation.

Something to do right now is sign up for FirstCall, the Emergency Notification System of the City of Rockport and Aransas County. In case of an emergency, the system will call each number in the database, and deliver a short voice message. Those with caller ID will see the caller name appear as "FirstCall" with a 361 area code.  If the call is not answered or the line is busy, the system will try to make the call again.  The system can also send the emergency message to a cell phone or to an email address.

This helpful service is free, but you must register to receive the messages. Register online at <https://alertregistration.com/AransasCoTx/> or by calling (866) 484-3264. Residents can enter a combined total of up to five different phone numbers or email addresses.

This is a great time to put together a disaster kit for your household. You and your family need to be able to care for yourselves without outside help for at least three days. Make a plan; consider escape routes, family communication, utility shut-off and safety, insurance and vital records, special needs, caring for animals and safety skills.

Escape Routes. Discuss possible escape routes from your home, then draw a simple floor plan showing them and make sure all household members understand the plan. Select a spot outside the house for everyone to meet if evacuation is necessary for any reason. Likewise, make up a simple map of your neighborhood with street names and routes to evacuate by.

Family communication - Plan how you will communicate with each other in case you are separated during a disaster. Choose someone who lives in another area to be a point of contact for everyone in case you cannot contact each other.

Communication with emergency personnel - Be sure everyone in the household knows how and when to call 9-1-1. If you have a cell phone, add a contact named ICE, which stands for In Case of Emergency, with the phone number of who you would want contacted if you were badly injured. Make sure this is done on the cell phones of your kids, grandkids, parents, and grandparents. If someone is injured and unable to speak, emergency personnel will look for the ICE contact and be able to contact loved ones quickly.

Utility shut-off and safety - The City of Rockport’s Hurricane Response Plan contains the provision to turn off water, sewer and natural gas service in the event of a disaster, for the protection of the systems and facilities and for safety in the case of natural gas. For some types of disasters, you may need to disconnect utility service to your home. Again, listen to the radio or TV for instructions on what needs to be done during a disaster. Be sure responsible family members can turn off the gas, electricity and water. Contact utility providers for proper procedures. Never turn gas service back on by yourself.

Insurance and vital records - Make copies of your important documents ahead of time and keep them in a safe place away from home. Perhaps ask a friend or relative who lives elsewhere to keep copies in their files. Also, keep a set of copies in your disaster supply kit, along with some cash.

Special needs - Plan ahead for any special needs you or your family members have. If you have a disability requiring an ambulance, cannot drive or arrange transportation, or do not have a vehicle and have no one to help you during an evacuation, call 211 to register your name, address and special need.  This information will go to the Aransas County Emergency Operations Center so your needs can be addressed in the event of an evacuation. 2-1-1 Texas First Call for Help can also be called 24 hrs. a day for nonemergency information and referrals. For more information, visit [www.211.org](http://www.211.org). Check with elderly neighbors to find out if they have an emergency plan including transportation in case of an evacuation, and if they need help assembling a disaster supplies kit.

Safety skills - Adults and older children should know basic first aid, how to do CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation), and how to use a fire extinguisher.

Pet care - You will need to take pets with you if you have to evacuate, so figure out a plan. Pets will probably not be allowed at an emergency shelter, so figure out where your pet could be boarded nearby. Also, remember to pack an emergency supply kit for pets, including everything they would need for at least three days. Be sure to copy their vaccination records and include that as well.

If a big storm is approaching Aransas County there are a number of things to do to get ready. Check your emergency supply kit, making sure you have sufficient food and water for three days, as well as fresh batteries. Fill your vehicles with fuel, make sure you have ample supplies of any needed medications and copies of prescriptions, and get some extra cash. If a ‘hurricane warning’ is issued, inspect and secure mobile home tie-downs, board up windows, and secure lawn furniture, garbage cans and other light-weight objects.

For more information on disaster preparation and recovery, go to the Texas Extension Disaster Education Network website at <http://TexasHelp.tamu.edu>. In addition to on-line publications, you can download an app and e-book versions of the information. Call the Aransas County Extension office at 790-0103 for printed publications at no charge.

It bears repeating, be prepared, stay informed and follow the directions of Aransas County Emergency Operations Center. If emergency management officials in Aransas County say that we should evacuate, listen and do what they say. They will not issue an evacuation notice unless there is good reason for it. Being prepared will help us all to get through a disaster.

*Texas AgriLife Extension Service - Aransas County Office is located at 892 Airport Road in Rockport. AgriLife Extension education programs serve people of all ages, regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, handicap or national origin.*