

Concurrent Disaster Response Success Story: Town of Addison, Texas

The Concurrent Disaster

In February 2021, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Texas was hit by a statewide winter storm. The storm caused power grid failures, water lines breaks, and icy dangerous road conditions, including in the Town of Addison, Texas. Addison is a small town of just 4.4 square miles with a population of about 16,000 residents – many residing in apartments – and 268 food establishments.

Challenges

The Environmental Health Division of the Town of Addison faced the challenges of the winter storm in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic requiring them to remotely manage food safety, public health, pandemic protocols, warming stations, and power to assist residents in response to the storm.

From February 11 - 20, 2021, the impacts posed the following challenges for food establishments, residents, and our Environmental Health Division:

Loss of Power

- Refrigerators/freezers were not able to maintain proper temperatures to ensure food safety. Improper food temperatures could result in foodborne illness and foodborne outbreaks.
- Lack of heat inside the food establishments led to water lines freezing, breaking, and damaging pipes and structures.
- Reduced ability to communicate electronically (e.g., cell phones, computers, etc.)

Water Line Breaks

- Inability to maintain safe, sanitary conditions due to the lack of water for hand washing, cleaning, and sanitizing.

COVID-19 Pandemic Protocols at Food Establishments

- Inability to:
 - Maintain proper social distancing
 - Use face covering
 - Use hand sanitizer
 - Monitor symptoms

Impassible Roads

- Staff unable to physically be onsite at food establishments

Solution

The Environmental Health Division's response was based on the protocols already in place for the pandemic and for maintaining food safety inspections, including:

1. Providing virtual and telephone inspections, guidance, and assistance to food establishments.
2. Working jointly to provide information through social media and Town employees.
3. Partnering with food establishments with electricity to serve as warming and charging stations for the community at no cost. Sandwich shops that volunteered as a warming location also provided free sandwiches or bottled water.

Results

Short Term Results

- Coordinated immediate response to resident needs for temporary heat and power

Long-term Results

- More coordination and communication with the marketing department. Preparedness plans for the Environmental Health Division now include the marketing department.
- Participating with the Economic Development Department to meet quarterly with the food establishments
- Seek ways to use our resources to help the community and each other

Lessons Learned

Through partnership with the marketing department, we were able to provide residents with winter storm safety information and food establishments with food safety guidance. As a result, the establishments were able to maintain compliance with COVID-19 protocols and the Environmental Health Division staff were able to maintain inspections, data, and communication with food establishments.

Lessons learned include ensuring:

- Staff are fully equipped for remote work
- Contact lists are verified regularly
- Written protocols are updated
- After-action reports are completed immediately so all details are included
- Weather reports are monitored so staff is prepared for the worst-case scenario

