

“We were hit bad! Water is leaking everywhere—small electrical fires have started!”

## Louisiana nurses describe the conditions they face in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida

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Hurricane Ida made landfall on Sunday as the second most powerful storm in Louisiana’s history. While the recorded death toll in the state is currently 12, deaths are expected to rise as first responders search damaged homes and respond to calls for help. Power has been lost for one million residents in Louisiana and 120,000 residents in nearby Mississippi. Power is not expected to return to the New Orleans area for several weeks.

Already working under the dangerous conditions of the Delta variant, health care workers in the hurricane’s path are now facing additional horrors. There are multiple reports from nurses on social media as well as in the mainstream media that several hospitals have suffered extensive roof damage, water damage and power outages.

Dozens of hospitals have lost power and had to evacuate all their patients to intact hospitals. Elizabeth, a nurse from New Orleans, reported on Facebook, “No hospitals in NOLA have power. They are all running on generators.”

Another nurse on Reddit described the experience on Sunday as the storm surged, “I’m in a Louisiana hospital. We are being evacuated. I was in the direct line of the hurricane in Lafourche Parish. We were hit bad! Water is leaking everywhere—small electrical fires have started—all COVID ICU patients were moved to the ER! We have no water and we have to poop in red biohazard bags. A rat fell on a guy’s head. This had been one hell of a day.”

Lady of the Sea General Hospital in Galliano, the Ochsner St Anne’s hospital in Raceland and Ochsner’s Health Center in Kenner were just some of the hospitals to have reported extensive structural damage. Hospital evacuations took place across the state. Many nursing homes and long-term services care facilities were also evacuated.

Depending on the facility, evacuations have different levels of difficulty. Patients who cannot walk have to be transported by several health care workers via stretchers

down multiple flights of stairs as elevators are not functioning.

Transporting critically ill patients, such as COVID patients in the ICU, can be deadly. A nurse on Facebook reported that multiple patients at her facility in Baton Rouge passed away during transport. The same nurse also stressed that she did not know how she would handle an influx of patients as her hospital is already full with COVID-19 cases.

In numerous instances evacuations were disorganized and unsafe. An investigation by the Louisiana Department of Health into the evacuation of 800 nursing home residents from eight separate facilities into a warehouse in Tangipahoa Parish during the storm is ongoing. Four residents have died following the evacuation.

Since Tuesday the state has been rescuing residents from the warehouse and has, so far, sent over fifty residents to a nearby hospital. One Louisiana Department of Health official, Joe Kanter, reported that many patients in the warehouse were soiled with urine and feces and families had no knowledge of their loved ones’ whereabouts during the storm.

Some hospitals and nursing homes were temporarily left without water, sewage or electricity due to failed generators. Others are still without power and water. Several nurses on the Facebook group “Louisiana Nurses” reported no running water or sewage at a hospital in Kenner since Sunday. Another wrote that they were without running water for a day, relying only on a limited supply of bottled water for all patients, staff and family members.

Joseph, a nurse in Mississippi, told the WSWs that he was staying in a nearby hotel, waiting his hospital to call him in to work. “Hospitals are on generators. They are working on paper. Only one or two computers can get Epic [hospital software used to organize and chart patient data]. Our hospital is doing what it can. They are full. No patients are

being discharged from the floors. Therefore, it's a gridlock. They are holding multiple patients in the ED."

Joseph stated that he is part of "Team B," meaning he was not on shift at the time of the hurricane, but will be called in in a few days to take over for "Team A" who was on shift during the hurricane and will remain locked down in the hospital until it is safe to change shifts. This is a common way of organizing health care workers during natural disasters and is a method used in most hospitals affected by Hurricane Ida. Depending on the location of hospitals, that means Team A nurses could be on shift for several days, sleeping in break rooms and lobbies.

As Hurricane Ida bore down on Louisiana, hospitals were already overfilled with COVID-19 patients, leaving little room for victims of the storm. The Associated Press reported on Sunday that there were more than 2,400 COVID-19 patients in Louisiana hospitals when the hurricane hit. After the ICU at one hospital lost generator power, COVID-19 patients had to be hand bagged, or manually resuscitated, until they could be moved to a floor with electricity.

Evacuated and closed hospitals can create a deadly situation for communities in the aftermath of Ida as residents face an increased risk of COVID-19 infections due to living in shelters or in close quarters with family. In addition, the improper use of generators in homes presents the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. According to New Orleans local news station WWL-TV, nearly four dozen people have been hospitalized and one person has died from carbon monoxide poisoning. The number of those hospitalized is bound to increase.

In Terrebonne Parish where hospitals were evacuated and closed down, only a small ER remained open. Terrebonne Emergency Preparedness Director Earl Eues warned Monday that "Our hospitals are out of commission. If you have a heart attack or cut your arm while chain-sawing or fall off a roof, we have very limited medical care for you."

Ida made landfall 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina hit the state, destroying much of the city of New Orleans. Elizabeth, a Louisiana nurse who worked at Methodist Hospital in New Orleans during Katrina, posted her thoughts on social media as Ida approached. "The same damned date of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Isaac. Katrina changed my nursing career forever and Isaac flooded everyone around me in my town, including my elderly parents. Having yet another storm bearing down on you, ON THE EXACT SAME DATE OF SO MUCH TRAUMA, really fires up someone who is already high strung..."

Elizabeth also shared an online journal she wrote during Katrina, describing working throughout the storm, saying "That night was hell. Absolute hell. Patients were screaming

for help (no call light system) all night long... You have NO IDEA how hot it was in the building. NO IDEA. We all dripped with sweat constantly... the stench of our patient's bodies, along with our own was almost unbearable."

Elizabeth described what happens when the generators stopped working in her hospital, an experience shared by nurses across social media during Ida. Patients who are on ventilators are reliant on electricity and will not survive unless someone is manually pumping their lungs with air. "One night, the generator died in the front building. They had to hand bag (ambu bag) the ventilator patients. Everyone took turns. Patients started dying... later the next day, the manpower basically ran out and the docs in the ICU decided to put t-pieces on the intubated patients (so if they could breathe on their own, they could. We stopped bagging). We lost four, I believe."

She continued, "We had NO MEANS to contact the families to let them know that their loved ones had died, and their bodies may not be recovered for weeks and weeks... the dead bodies in the morgue on the first floor had floated away."

The global ruling elite whose priorities lie with the profit interests of the giant corporations and the super-rich have shown that they are unwilling and unable to confront man-made climate change, which has exacerbated weather phenomena in line with repeated warnings made by scientists.

Decades of dismantling infrastructure, government regulation and social welfare have reduced hospitals and neighborhoods to a point where they stand no chance against natural disasters, leaving millions at the mercy of intensifying storms, heat waves and fires fueled by climate change.

Health care workers worldwide have suffered immensely under the decaying capitalist health care system that was ill prepared for both a global pandemic and extreme storms. It is time for health care workers and all workers to fight for a rational, science-based program to suppress the virus and combat climate change, based on putting human lives before profits. Above all this means taking up the fight for socialism.

*We call on health care workers to write in with their own stories about the conditions they face in their workplace. Contact us today and sign up for the Health Care Workers Newsletter.*



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