

Tornado outbreaks reminder to make smartphones disaster-ready

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Tornadoes have torn their way across the country as the natural disaster season starts, leaving hundreds displaced from their homes and lives in disarray.

During natural disasters like these, amid the immediate danger to those in the path, important documents can be damaged or lost and loved ones of those affected are left wondering if they're safe. In today's technological age, there are ways to keep these documents safe while also alerting others of your location.

Particularly if you live in an area prone to natural disasters, either spontaneous or seasonal, it's always best to be prepared.

In any [disaster preparedness](#) plan, you should start with the basics: necessities such as medicine, extra food and water, but also electronics and documents packed in a bag that is available at moment's notice. It is also important to keep the electronics fully charged so they are ready to go and accessible when disaster strikes, said disaster planning expert Dr. Chris Renschler, professor of geology at the University at Buffalo in New York.

Renschler suggests keeping physical copies of these documents places outside of the area affected by the natural disaster and the original documents in a go-bag, preferably in waterproof protection. However, if storage elsewhere is not possible, there are ways to keep these documents safe using technology.

Smartphone users can use scanning apps ahead of a disaster to put the documents on their phone, as well as simply taking pictures with their camera. Adobe Scan, Google PhotoScan and Genius Scan are free apps available on both iOS and Android devices and easily turns important documents into PDFs and saves them to your smartphone.

It is difficult to get back into a normal routine and reestablish oneself after a natural disaster alone, but even more difficult without proper documents such as insurance and vital records as it can take months to get replacements, says RAND Corporation's Anita Chandra. Because

these documents are not originals, they can have some limitations, but Chandra says it's a place to start when applying for recovery funds and insurance.

Cloud servers allow users to access documents they upload from any location as long as they have a password. Physical documents and those stored on computer hard drives can easily be damaged in a natural disaster, and storing copies of them on the cloud keeps them safe from wind, water, fire and more.

After the immediate emergency has subsided, contacting loved ones and emergency services can be difficult depending on the damage done and the havoc wreaked. If wireless service is available, Renschler says to call, text or post on traditional social media to alert others of your safety. There are also apps that allow others to see your location and know you are OK.

Apple devices come with the Find My Friends app which lets users opt into sharing their location with the contacts of their choosing. However, this app doesn't always work if the person doesn't have service and is limited to iPhone users. Google also allows Android users to share their location via the Google Maps app and sometimes within messaging apps. There are a number of apps that can connect people trying to get in contact with each other after a disaster and work with both phone systems.

Trusted Contacts works similarly to Find My Friends in that it allows users to share their location with choice people but also works if the person being located is offline or out of battery. This app also available on iOS and Android devices.

Zello walkie talkie app proved to be a useful tool during Hurricane Harvey by allowing users to communicate without using their phone and

text capabilities. Unlike a real walkie talkie, Zello allows unlimited users to communicate over unlimited channels to help people contact each other in a disaster environment. Zello is also available on iOS and Android devices, as well as on personal computers.

Additionally, apps such as What'sApp and GroupMe allow contacts to message one another using WiFi instead of cellular service.

"Anything that allows people to get a mass connection out, an update to all of their friends and loved ones quickly are certainly very helpful," said Chandra. "They are not a solution by themselves, but they can certainly help in terms of getting the word out that people are OK but also in terms of resources a community overall or an individual may need."

Those who are injured, stuck or stranded due to a natural disaster might also have trouble contacting emergency services, and there are apps to assist.

The American Red Cross has a host of apps that are useful in emergency situations, including their First Aid app. It walks users through how to properly administer medical attention before [emergency services](#) arrive. SirenGPS sends local first responders the user's location along with their medical profile. However, the local stations must subscribe to the service in order to receive the alert.

As Renschler points out, most of these services require a charged phone, and it is important to have back-up methods to charge these devices, such as portable and car chargers. Renschler also suggests knowing how your phone operates and what causes the battery to die fastest. When you are familiar with that, you can then use the apps that are the most efficient in sending out information to contact the most people with the least amount of battery.

While some [natural disasters](#) like tornadoes and hurricanes can come with some warning, others can take people by surprise, and it is important to always have an emergency plan.

"Thinking about preparation and preparedness is just part of what we have to do in terms of routine practice going forward," Chandra said. "Disaster preparedness is really important, and certainly can ease some of the burden because there is so much other burden that these communities are facing now with loss of loved ones and the emotional toll of disasters. All of us should be doing more early on as part of our daily practice."

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