

Disaster relief and the psychology of 'once in a lifetime' events

September 29 2021, by Jacqueline Goodman



Damage to Casino Pier in Seaside Heights, New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Credit: [Mark C. Olsen](#)

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, my fourth-grade class raised money for the Red Cross by selling rubber wristbands. We lined up in

the cafeteria to buy them, coming together as a school to support the victims of a "once in a lifetime" event.

Then in 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit New York City. I examined pictures of flooded apartments and damaged stores. The familiarity of it—an atypical storm scouring an entire coastline—felt ominous. Rather than a discrete, uncharacteristic experience, Hurricane Sandy hung in the air like a harbinger. For most of my life, New York City was firmly and reliably out of the direct path of most hurricanes.

A few weeks ago, Hurricane Ida hit New Orleans before spiraling up the east coast to New York City and beyond. Most major news publications did not call it a "once in a lifetime" event—sixteen years after Katrina, transformative hurricanes are too common to be crowned with such a hyperbolic epithet. These are seasonal nightmares, at best, and weekly nightmares, at worst. Gone are the days when a category five [hurricane](#) was exceptional and a hurricane in New York City was a crisis of the imagination.

Despite increasing occurrence and severity, most places in the United States are woefully underprepared for natural disaster. Climate change is here, but our attention and resources are repeatedly allocated to only one chapter of a climate event: crisis response. We mobilize quickly in the aftermath, but we often fail to acknowledge that natural disasters are years in the making. The structural impact of any one storm can differ vastly based on infrastructure planning and investment in natural disaster prevention.

There was a brief window to prepare for Hurricane Ida. First responders were informed, [local governments](#) could proactively guide citizens, and susceptible residents could ready their families and their property. But a few days' warning can only go so far; when Ida struck, entire communities remained vulnerable. Across states, [first responders](#) rushed

to relieve the immediate crises where possible, but the underlying infrastructure had already failed them.

Now, communities impacted by Ida face the second leg of the disaster—the long-term recovery. The lasting consequences of the storm have started to emerge: [power outage](#), flooding, garbage collection, home reconstruction, hunger, and more. There is undeniable urgency to solve these issues. At the same time, with infrastructure destroyed, there is a chance to reimagine what reconstruction looks like.

Too often, crisis relief and long-term planning are unnecessarily regarded as trade-offs. One Louisiana-based company, PosiGen, demonstrates an alternative to that thinking.

PosiGen is a residential solar company in Louisiana that has outfitted 12,000 low-to-moderate income households statewide with [solar panels](#) since 2011. Initial reports show that most of PosiGen's solar systems survived Hurricane Ida. In fact, the solar panels "storm hardened" the roofs, meaning that roofs with solar panels were better off than those without.

In addition, many PosiGen customers are "battery storage ready," meaning that the solar panels can easily plug directly into a large, in-home battery. During the daytime, rooftop solar panels charge the batteries. Customers can then discharge the batteries to power their homes and electronics into the evening, even if [power lines](#) are down. It's a strategic way to quickly reinstate electricity while also investing in future resilience.

The primary barrier to installing batteries is funding. Today, PosiGen installs solar panels and roofing, which it is mobilizing at full capacity to try to meet the needs of communities in Louisiana. The financing required to procure batteries is outside of PosiGen's immediate

operational budget. The company would have to petition the government and seek support from the Department of Energy (DOE) or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to mobilize that amount of capital.

Federal agencies, like DOE, tend to fund projects slowly, and this kind of project might be out of the scope of FEMA. It's a challenge to gain access to urgent infrastructure funding. Our [government institutions](#) and policy measures aren't built to accommodate speed, permanence, and durability all at the same time. Moreover, we do not usually see wipeout disasters as opportunities to rapidly rebuild for climate resilience. They're understandably addressed as humanitarian crises. But up until recently, we had painted those cataclysmic storms as "once in a lifetime" events.

If we think of climate events like Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Sandy or Hurricane Ida as one-off incidents, it incentivizes quick fixes for infrastructure. In that context, meaningful investment in a climate resilient future is unnecessary because [natural disasters](#) can be considered anomalies. "Once in a lifetime" thinking doesn't work in the era of [climate change](#), and we need to adapt accordingly. The next hurricane might be next week. How many times must our communities suffer before we readjust our mindset and see disaster response and climate planning as one in the same?

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