



2021 ARCTIC BLAST REPORT

PREPARED BY VALENCIA GUNDER

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INTRODUCTION

As the devastating Arctic storms approached Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee in February 2021, The Smile Trust in partnership with the Movement for Black Lives activated the Community Emergency Operations Center (CEOC), a grassroots disaster relief system created in 2017 by The Smile Trust. The CEOC was called to action by a network of 30+ frontline-led organizations and mounted a community-led disaster relief response effort that stretched across five Southern U.S. states. More than 750 volunteers from across the nation performed wellness checks on over 50,000 households to gain an understanding of the specific impacts of the Arctic blast on Black and brown families and communities.

While the storms didn't select only Black communities, 91% of our survey responders from these communities believe that governments purposefully and actively neglected to protect the health and welfare of Black communities in the aftermath of the storms.

For these respondents, their city, state, and federal governments systematically failed to provide even the most basic support and resources to the communities of color bearing the brunt of increasingly strong storms.

This impact report is the result of our unparalleled effort to engage local residents in the wake of the Arctic storms. It highlights the work of community leaders, gives examples of alternative disaster relief systems, brings awareness to systemic oppression, and shines a light on existing resilience. We present findings from our polling of 50,000 households in impacted Southern states.



In the final section, we provide 12 recommendations in the form of a roadmap to build our political and fiscal power and elevate the brave and transformative work in which our people are already engaged.

The Smile Trust, the Movement for Black Lives, and our many allied organizations and groups call for a thorough accounting of all taxpayer-funded efforts to prepare for, respond to, and rebuild after the Arctic storms. We must start with a transparent determination of the full extent of the damage and unmet needs. State governors, state agencies, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) must be held to account for choices they made which grossly failed to uniformly address the needs of our communities. Among our many recommendations, we also call for the establishment of a \$1 billion community disaster fund for each impacted state and demand that our local and state governments across the South finally and seriously address the failing water and power systems by shifting to modern, regenerative, and renewable systems that are clean and safe for us all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are proud of the work of the frontlines. We are our own first responders. Advocates, organizers, and community leaders responded to their communities by providing over 50,000 families with wellness checks, water, food, temporary housing and medical supplies.

“We are our own first responders.” - Valencia G.

Thank you to Jamecia Gray, Brittany Bibb, Mercedes Fulbright, and Rukia Lumumba for your selfless work during our relief efforts. We can not thank you enough.



MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO REPORT



THE SMILE TRUST, INC. was founded in 2014, and is an International Nonprofit Organization that serves and advocates on behalf of unsheltered populations and works toward fixing food insecurities and building resiliency for under-resourced communities in the U.S. and Global South.

THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES (M4BL) formed in December of 2014, was created as a space for Black organizations across the country to debate and discuss the current political conditions, develop shared assessments of what political interventions were necessary in order to achieve key policy, cultural and political wins, convene organizational leadership in order to debate and co-create a shared movement wide strategy. Under the fundamental idea that we can achieve more together than we can separately.

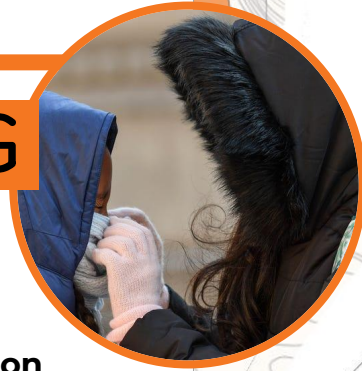
THE RED BLACK AND GREEN NEW DEAL (RBG NEW DEAL), is an initiative of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), puts Black liberation at the center of the global climate struggle, and addresses the impact of climate change and environmental racism on Black communities. This RBG New Deal agenda proposes immediate actions policymakers, corporations, and every day people can do to fortify Black people—especially those most marginalized, such as disabled, chronically ill, transgender, gender- nonconforming, and intersex people—from the uniquely racist practices of the fossil-fuel industry. We are organizing to introduce a National Black Climate Mandate that includes federal legislation to address the climate crisis by investing in Black communities and repairing past harms.

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THE SOUTHERN POWER FUND is a collective of justice leaders using strong community standing and connections within philanthropy to fund movement by modeling anti-capitalistic, community control of resources that generate sustainable, autonomous support for Southern frontline communities.

ORGANIZATIONS LEADING THE EFFORT:



Mount Helm Baptist Church

MS PPC

BYP 100 Jackson

Pickles and Popsicles Inc.

Alderman

Sarah's Touch

Milestone Cooperative - Black
Farmers

JXN Community COVID Response
Coalition

Working Together Jackson

Operation Good & Safe Streets

Mississippi State University

Students

BLM Memphis

Study & Struggle

Educate Inc.

Mississippi State University
Students

Mississippi Rising Coalition

Alternate Roots

MS Black Women's Roundtable

Immigrant Alliance for Justice &
Equity

MS Votes

MS Poor People's Campaign (MS
PPC)

Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition

People's Advocacy Institute

Love Unlimited, Inc.

Black Voters Matter

Texas Organizing Party

Working Families Party TX

Sunrise Movement TX

Faith In Texas

WRITING TEAM: Valencia Gunder with contributions from Kyle Giller, Cally Guasti, Priscilla Lopez, Adrien Salazar, David McDougal, Susan Glickman and Kali Villarosa.



A TALE OF TWO STORMS

In February 2021, the unprecedented Arctic Blast storms brought devastation to communities across the South, with particularly intense impacts for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Caribbean communities. From Texas to Alabama and as far north as Tennessee, millions of people lost power and were under boil water advisories. Families were stranded inside their homes without heat, food, and water. People burned furniture and resorted to other desperate means to stay warm in the freezing conditions. For those who were fortunate, mutual aid groups, neighbors, and family might have provided food. This went on for weeks in some of the hardest hit areas.

City, county, state, and federal officials were grossly negligent in protecting the health and welfare of black communities. As was well-documented by the national and international media in the aftermath of the storms, power and water were quickly restored in many wealthy majority white neighborhoods, while poorer communities of color continued to suffer under power outages, boil water advisories, and lack of heat. This pattern of systemic neglect and state-sanctioned violence toward black and brown communities underscores how crucial it is for our communities to have a say in how resources are allocated in the aftermath of storms and what neighborhoods are prioritized for storm preparedness. Ending these patterns of neglect by shifting power and resources to impacted communities is a central goal of the movement for climate justice.



SELF-DETERMINATION & COMMUNITY CONTROL

The fight for the survival of our majority black communities in this rapidly changing climate will play out in the increasingly contentious fights over what priorities drive our city, county, and state budget priorities. Warmer, wetter weather has added billions of dollars to the already stretched budgets of our cities, counties, states, and federal government. Black communities must move decisively in the fight over precious resources. The struggle is real and the window of opportunity is now.

In particular, we must fight proactively — via our local, state, and federal emergency management planning processes, as well as legislative measures and budgets — to ward off the state-led erasure, displacement, and even genocide of black communities in the midst of disasters. This is particularly urgent in the fight over the significant money that cities, states, and the federal government have begun allocating to raising roads, moving water, and redesigning infrastructure to protect certain communities while leaving others to die through immediate exposure to disaster or through prolonged neglect that leads to erasure.



FIGHTING FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR COMMUNITIES



During the worst days of the storm over 16 million people in Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi were under boil water advisories. In Memphis, Tennessee, all 650,000 residents of the city were under boil water advisories for over a 3 week period, with some neighborhoods being impacted for far longer. Across these states, over 500,000 people were without any water at all. In Jackson, Mississippi, nearly all 150,000 residents of the city were without water in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Nearly 5 million people across these states were without power.

These deadly failures of water and power systems were layered on top of a raging pandemic that had already killed more than 93,000 people in these states. The pandemic had already ravaged the communities of color that were hardest hit from the fallout of this storm. By some estimates, **approximately three-quarters of the people who died** in the Arctic storms were people of color.

These systemic infrastructure failures across the region were avoidable and required immediate intervention since heavy storms are the new normal and will continue to bring chaos, disruption, and loss of life in their wake. Intervention requires not only advance preparation and updates to energy and water infrastructure to meet the challenges of worse and more frequent storms, but also requires more resources from FEMA and local disaster relief agencies with a more equitable distribution of these resources to those most impacted.



Neighborhood-level recovery efforts were undermined by **extreme gaps in the delivery of critical services and supplies** for those most in need across all the impacted states. These gaps were by design and the consequences were seismic. For many low-income residents, the elderly, those with medical needs, and those in substandard housing, the lack of accessibility to services and resources was traumatizing, dangerous, and increasingly deadly.

Residents of majority Black and brown neighborhoods went weeks without power and water outages, had less access to disaster relief resources, and were over-represented among the scores of people evacuated and displaced by the storm. As demonstrated in hurricanes Katrina, Irma, and Michael, American cities consistently neglect Black communities in the wake of extreme weather events - communities that have already disproportionately borne the impacts of climate change.



RESIDENTS' CONCERNS

In February, March, and April, we surveyed over 50,000 households in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee.

- ❖ The average household size consisted of 3-5 people, including children.
- ❖ About 17% of these households had family that was incarcerated, and only 1.3% knew of the wellness status of their incarcerated loved ones.
- ❖ Racial composition of households show that 63% are Black, 23% are Latinx, 9% are White, 2% are Indigenous; and 3% identified as Other.
- ❖ About 63% survey participants identified as female, 34% identified as male, and 1% identified as Transgender or Gender Nonconforming.

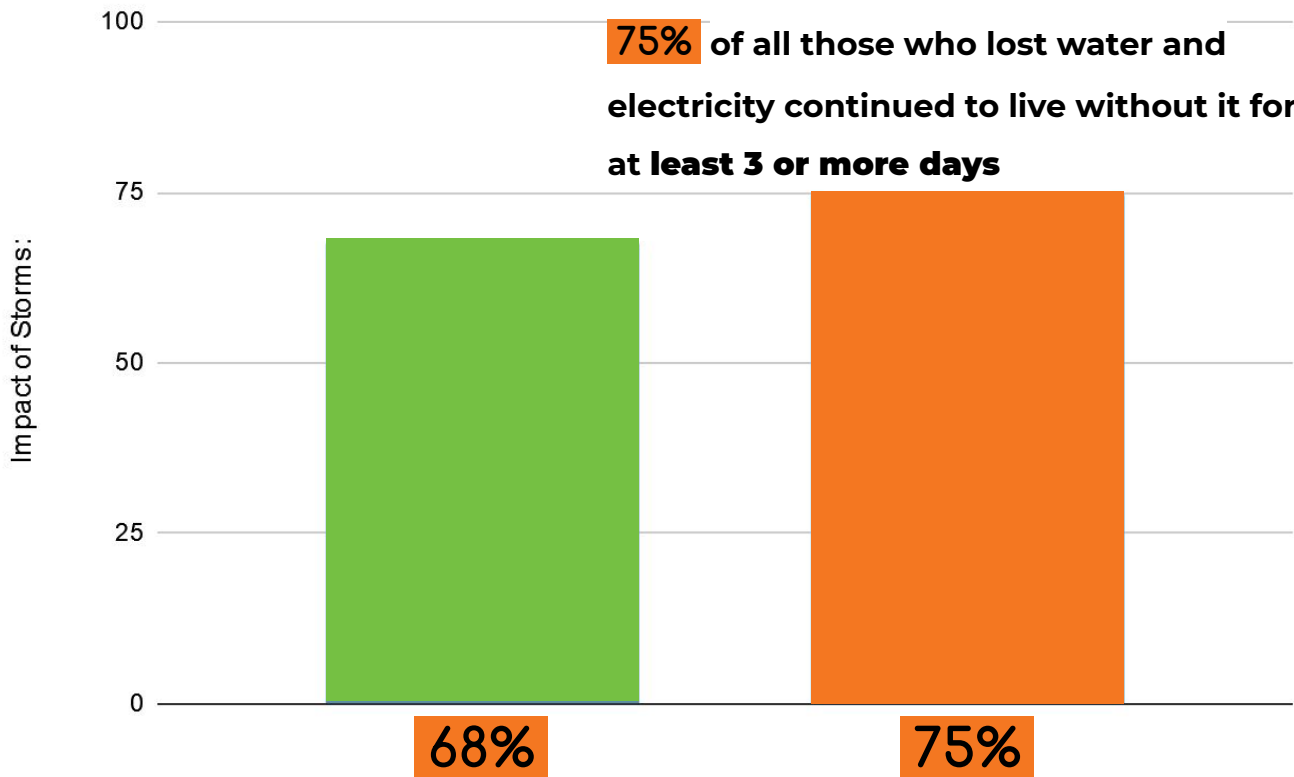
The open-ended interviews elicited alarming responses, revealing that Black and Latinx communities were disproportionately impacted by the storms.

- ❖ 68% of those we surveyed lost both water and electricity
- ❖ 77% of those interviewed reported they needed to evacuate. Moreover, 82% reported being unprepared for such an event, and 91% reported that their local and state governments were not properly prepared for the storms and the aftermath.
- ❖ 75% of those who lost water and electricity were without it for three or more days.
- ❖ The most pressing need recorded was water, followed by food, temporary housing, and medical/other needs.

IMPACT OF STORMS:

68% of all survey participants lost both **water and electricity**, both of which are basic human rights

75% of all those who lost water and electricity continued to live without it for **at least 3 or more days**



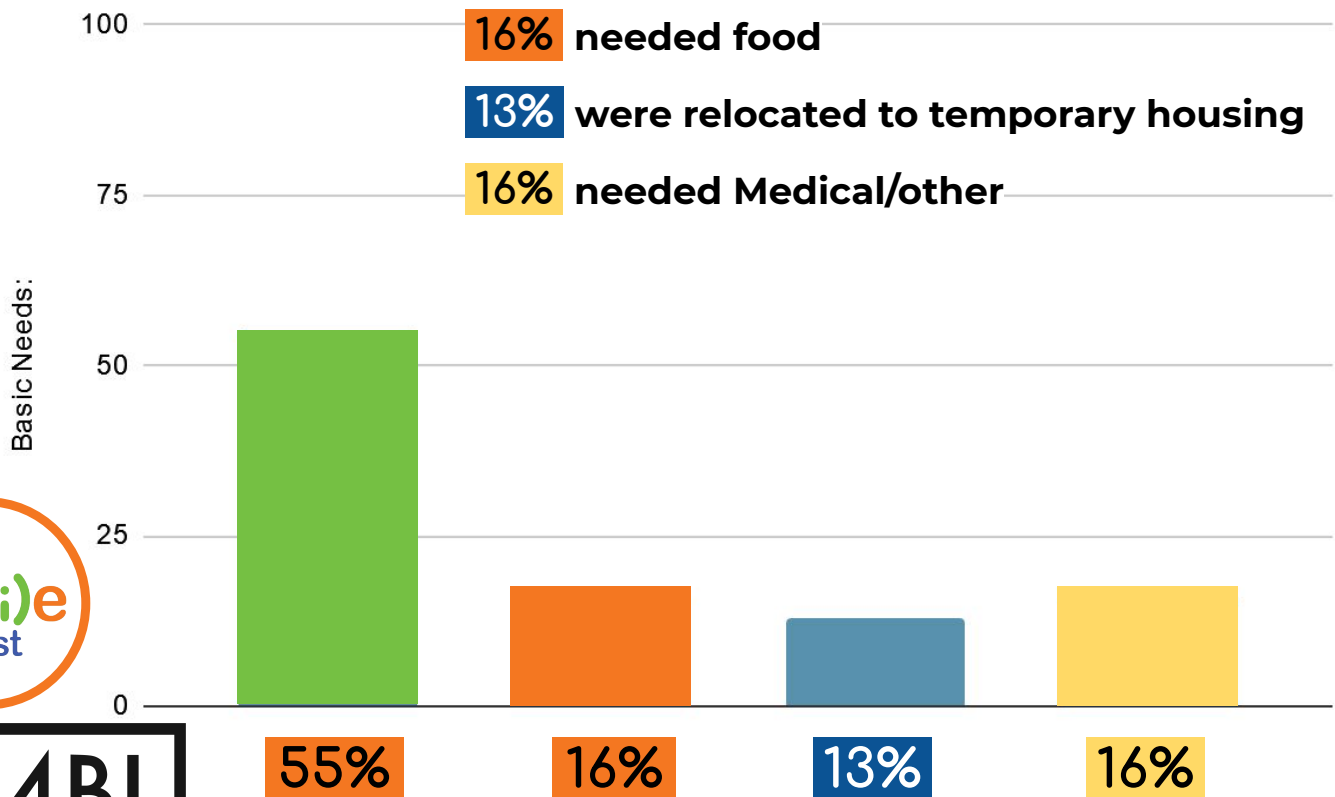
BASIC NEEDS:

55% needed water

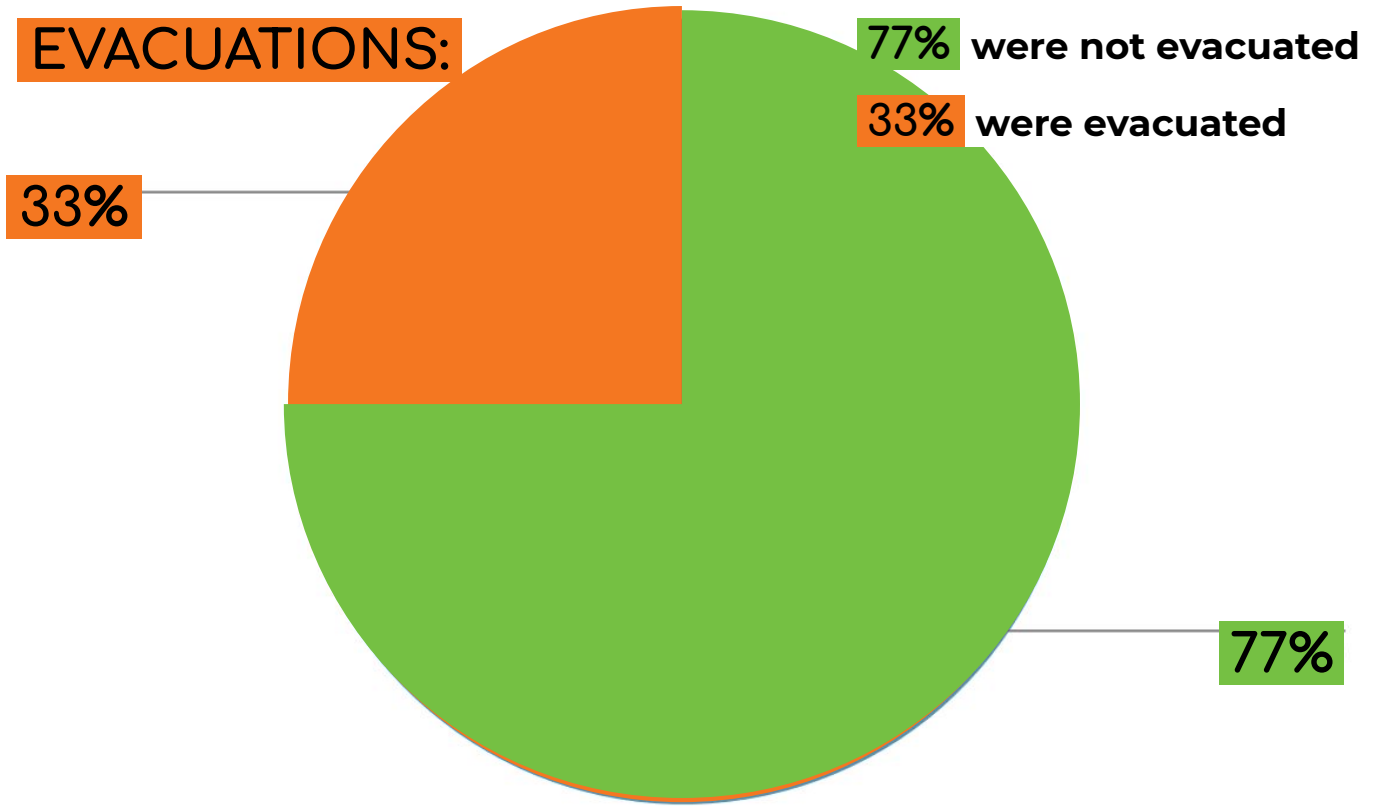
16% needed food

13% were relocated to temporary housing

16% needed Medical/other

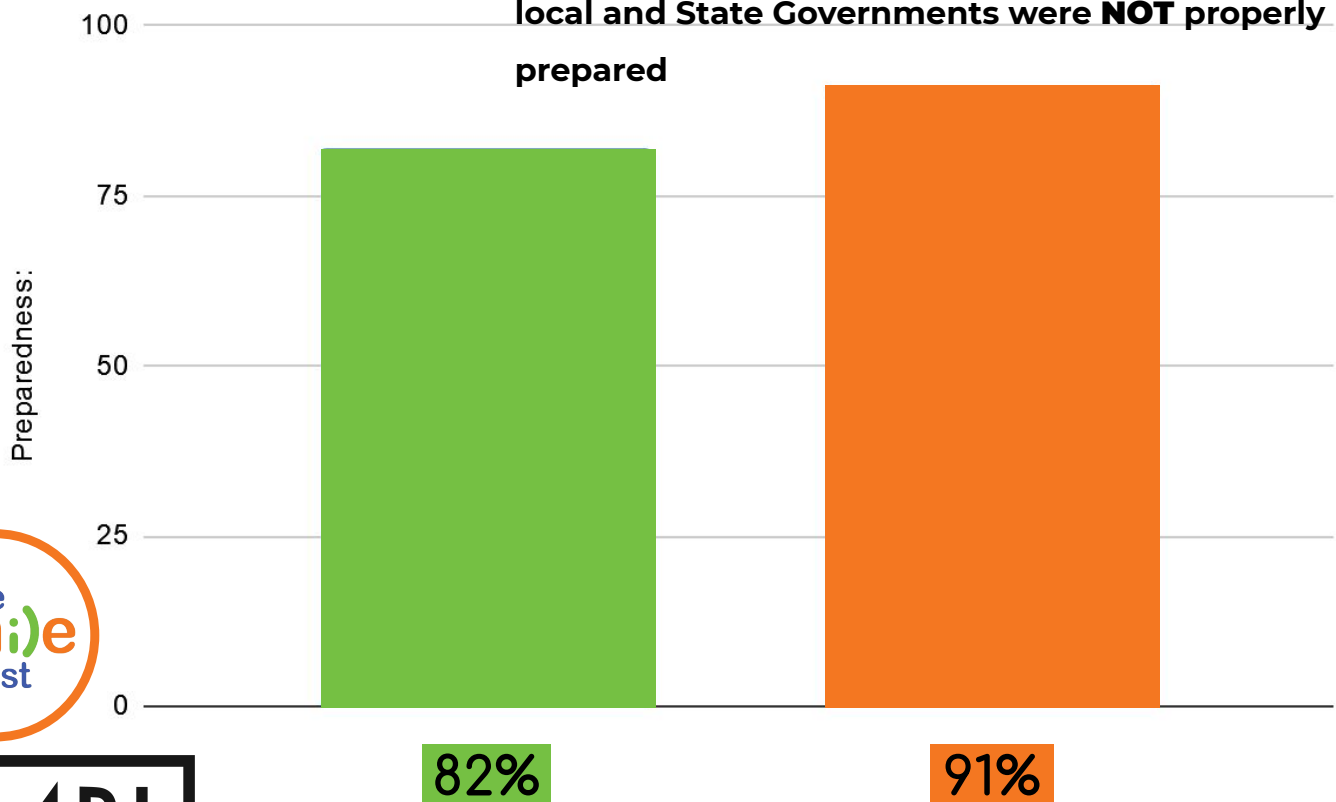


EVACUATIONS:



PREPAREDNESS:

82% of survey participants were not prepared
91% of survey participants believe that their local and State Governments were **NOT** properly prepared



RECOMMENDATIONS

Residents in many of the most impacted areas of the 5 Southern states polled made bold calls for full transparency and accountability of tax-payer funded storm preparedness and recovery efforts. Given the urgency of this moment, we specifically demand that all state governments and FEMA:

- 1 Provide safe housing and clean drinking water for all impacted residents.** Housing in low-income neighborhoods often have inadequate insulation, older piping, and are ill-equipped to withstand the frigid temperatures that have accompanied the recent unusually harsh weather events. FEMA and local disaster relief agencies must do more to supply resources like drinking water, generators, and portable heaters in the short term. In the long term, states must invest in updating water supply systems in both rural and urban areas.
- 2 Continue advocating for a Major Disaster Declaration in the wake of storms to access further federal assistance.** FEMA must provide more support to the many vulnerable populations of states from Texas to Alabama, including the elderly, houseless peoples, and low-income communities of color, who are consistently overlooked in recovery efforts after major disasters. Low-income communities also have diminished access to food, water, gas, and other resources required for survival during an extreme weather event, and thus require extra immediate and on-going support from FEMA and state disaster relief agencies.

3

Prioritize the needs of the low-income communities and communities of color that disproportionately bear the effects of extreme weather events and industrial pollution.

Many low-income communities in cities like New Orleans, Memphis, and Jackson are sited near power plants and are already exposed to the highest levels of toxic pollution, making them particularly vulnerable to further disruptions caused by extreme weather. Toxic leaks and air pollution from oil and gas facilities reportedly quadrupled in the aftermath of the February storms, threatening the health of surrounding communities — again, primarily Black and brown communities already suffering most from the outages — even further.

4

Ensure that communities most affected by this climate disaster have a say as to the best path forward. As states recover from this immediate emergency and look closer at what went wrong and how to plan better for the future, we must ensure that all voices are included in long-term planning for rebuilding and recovery, and, we must do this via establishing civilian oversight of funding and recovery management and processes for independent, community-informed investigation into the failures of the energy grid and early storm recovery efforts.

5

Establish a \$1 billion community storm recovery fund in each state to support community-driven recovery and mid- to long-term rebuilding projects with mechanisms to ensure equitable distribution and community oversight for all adaptation, recovery, and rebuilding efforts. Local control should be fostered for administering disaster insurance programs, such as the National Flood Insurance Program, rather than allowing private companies to control these resources, services, and processes.

6

Complete a full comprehensive audit to fully account for how all taxpayer-funded resources and personnel were allocated and procured during this past storm and all subsequent extreme weather events. This assessment must be informed by communities most impacted by the events with quarterly reports to the media and the general public so the states' preparedness for future emergencies is clearly defined and executed.

7

Determine damage and unmet need. FEMA and state agencies should develop an assessment that accounts for undercounting of damage borne by low-income people and people of color. This assessment should utilize and publicize data from FEMA, the state agency, and other sources that capture, to the fullest extent possible, the demographic and neighborhood distribution of disaster impacts on households and neighborhoods. FEMA and the state agency must also develop a detailed plan on how the state will direct disaster relief resources equitably including prioritization of low-income residents, public housing recovery, affordable housing recovery, houseless peoples, and other vulnerable populations.

8

Work directly with and invest in community hubs and community-based support organizations on the frontlines of recovery efforts. Heating centers were critical for people during these past weeks as were the massive mobilization efforts of mutual aid groups and grassroots organizations to provide basic necessities to people in need. With this in mind, FEMA and state disaster relief agencies should dedicate at least 20% of recovery funding to support these community-based organizations and mutual aid groups directly serving impacted communities.

Furthermore, the practices of private energy providers are to blame for the widespread power outages across impacted states. For example, Entergy, Louisiana's largest energy producer and distributor, increased their profits by 50% in 2020, while thousands of their customers currently languish without power. Allowing the market to dictate how energy providers behave has been devastating. We demand that the State immediately:

9

Put in place a moratorium on all utility shut-offs including water and electricity - even before the catastrophic storm, utilities have been shutting off critical services for nonpayment, posing a threat to the lives of families during an unprecedented pandemic. Many states across the South had moratoriums on utility shut-offs that expired during 2020. There should be a federal moratorium on utility shut-offs for the duration of the pandemic.

10

Each state must investigate their respective widespread power failures and make recommendations for regulations that will prevent future power failures. Each state must form investigatory committees that have the power to recommend regulatory changes that will minimize the risk of future catastrophic failures. These committees must also determine the responsibility of energy producers for creating the conditions that enabled this disaster and require them to pay damages.

11

Require energy producers to winterize their equipment. Lack of regulation and the infrequency of extreme cold weather in the South means that utilities have little incentive to spend on protecting equipment from freezing temperatures. State Legislatures and state environmental regulators must pass regulations to require energy producers to winterize their equipment to ensure a continued flow of power during extreme weather events.



12

End the dependence on fossil fuel consumption and move to publicly-controlled renewable energy systems. States and utilities must take aggressive steps to build infrastructure for wind and solar in order to immediately reduce dependence on coal and natural gas, consumption of which releases large amounts of carbon that leads to warming. This can be achieved by investing in democratic, equitable, and publicly-controlled energy systems. There should be incentives for distributed renewable energy production such as rooftop solar and community-owned energy production to build a more resilient and diversified power grid.

With hurricanes, snowstorms, and other climate emergencies quickly becoming the new norm, we have an obligation not just to rebuild housing and physical infrastructure, but to invest in people and strengthen communities. Leaving out renters and communities of color further destabilizes not just families but entire neighborhoods.

We call on FEMA and our city, county, and state governments to implement these measures, to ensure that our energy providers are properly regulated, our most vulnerable communities are protected from the effects of future extreme weather events, and our communities are kept habitable for future generations.

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SUMMARY REPORT

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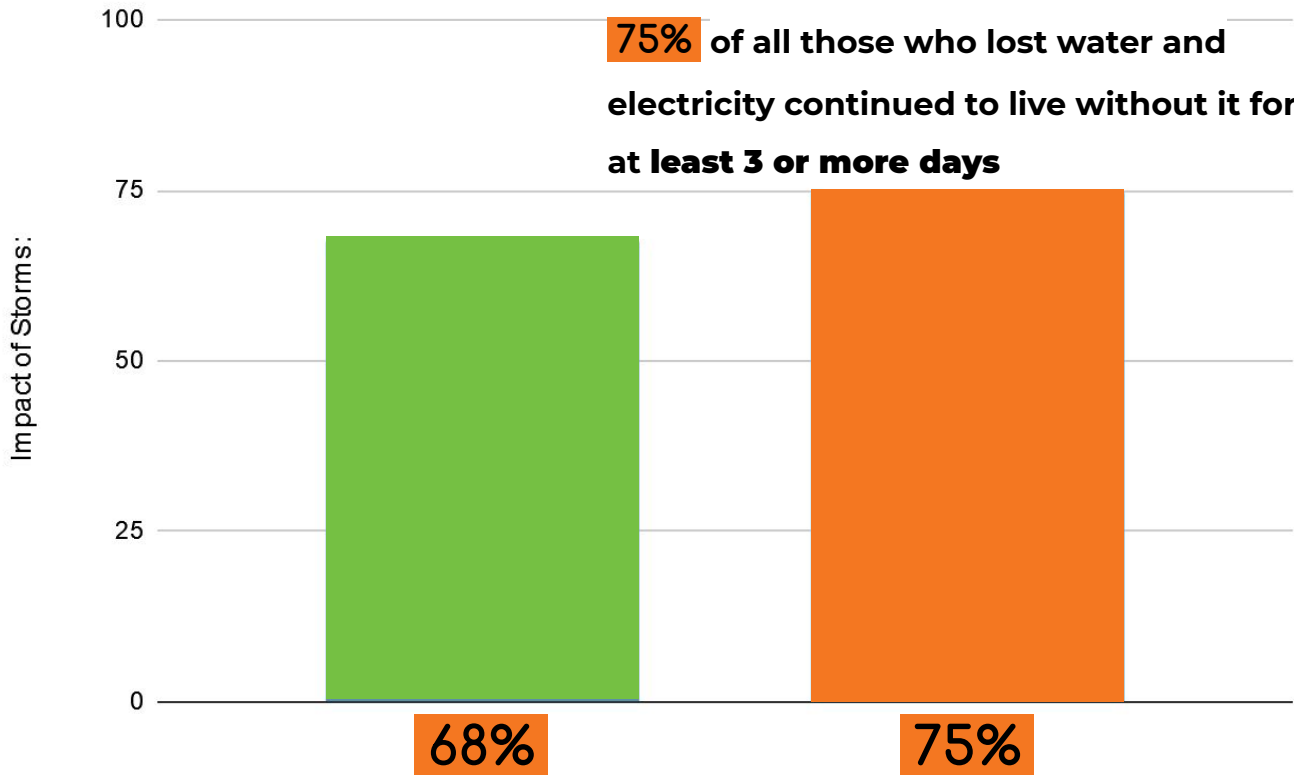
- 1** Provide safe housing and clean drinking water for all impacted residents.
- 2** Continue advocating for a Major Disaster Declaration in the wake of storms to access further federal assistance.
- 3** Prioritize the needs of the low-income communities and communities of color that disproportionately bear the effects of extreme weather events and industrial pollution.
- 4** Ensure that communities most affected by this climate disaster have a say as to the best path forward.
- 5** Establish a \$1 billion community storm recovery fund.
- 6** Complete a full comprehensive audit.
- 7** Determine damage and unmet need.
- 8** Work directly with and invest in community hubs and community-based support organizations on the frontlines of recovery efforts.
- 9** Put in place a moratorium on all utility shut-offs including water and electricity.
- 10** Each state must investigate their respective widespread power failures.
- 11** Require energy producers to winterize their equipment.
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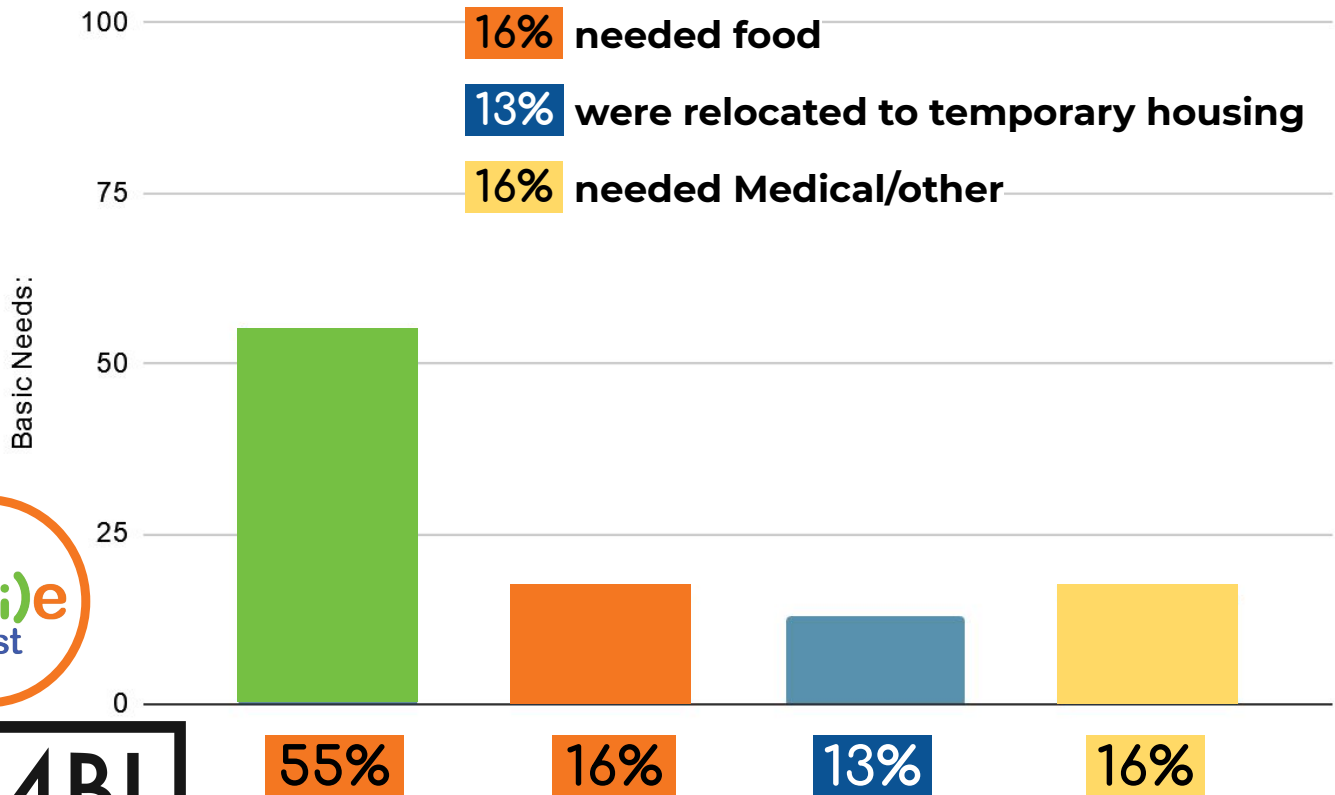
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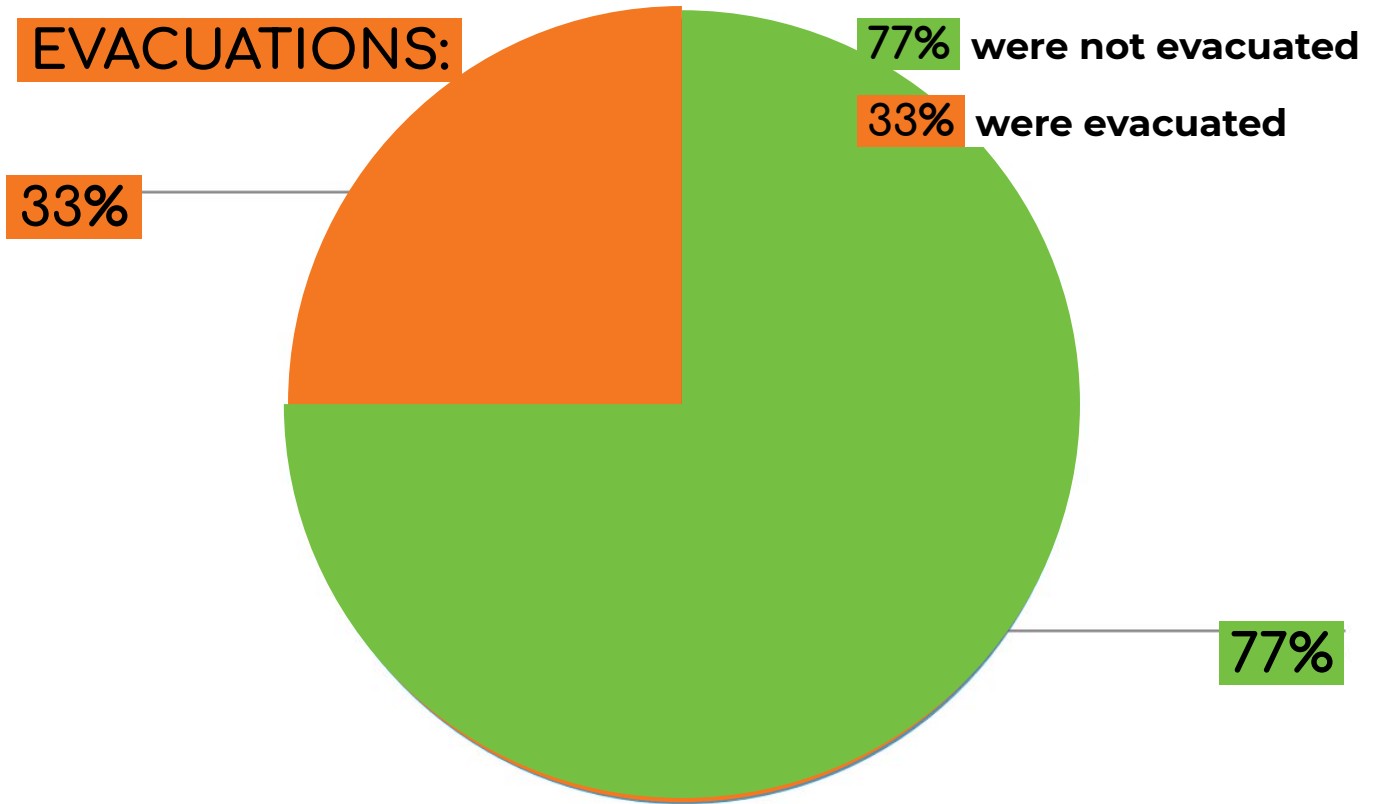
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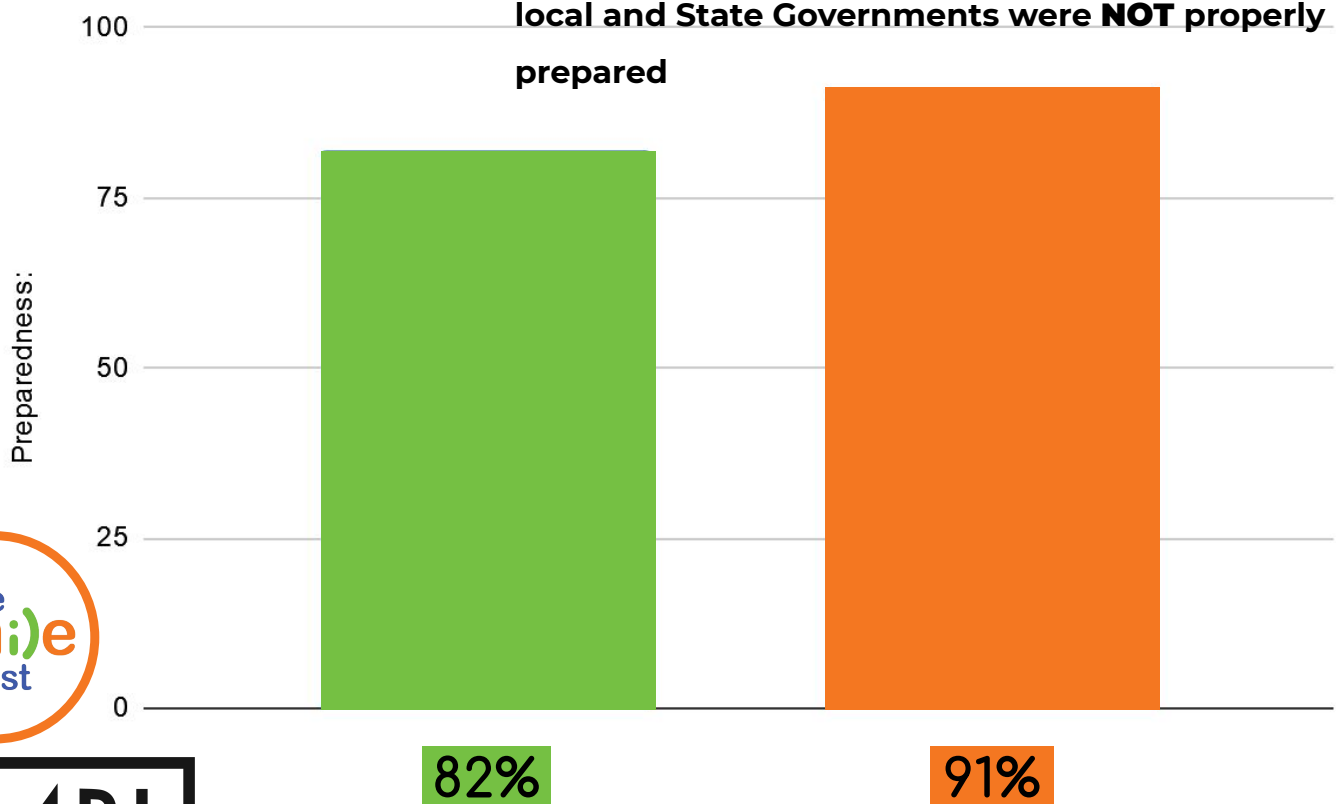


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