



Disaster Resilience and Disability Inclusion Project Needs Assessment

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Your stories and recommendations are the centerpiece of this work and the foundation of the disaster resilience efforts we will work on together.

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- **American Legion Post 33, Beaumont, TX**
- **College of the Mainland, Texas City, TX**

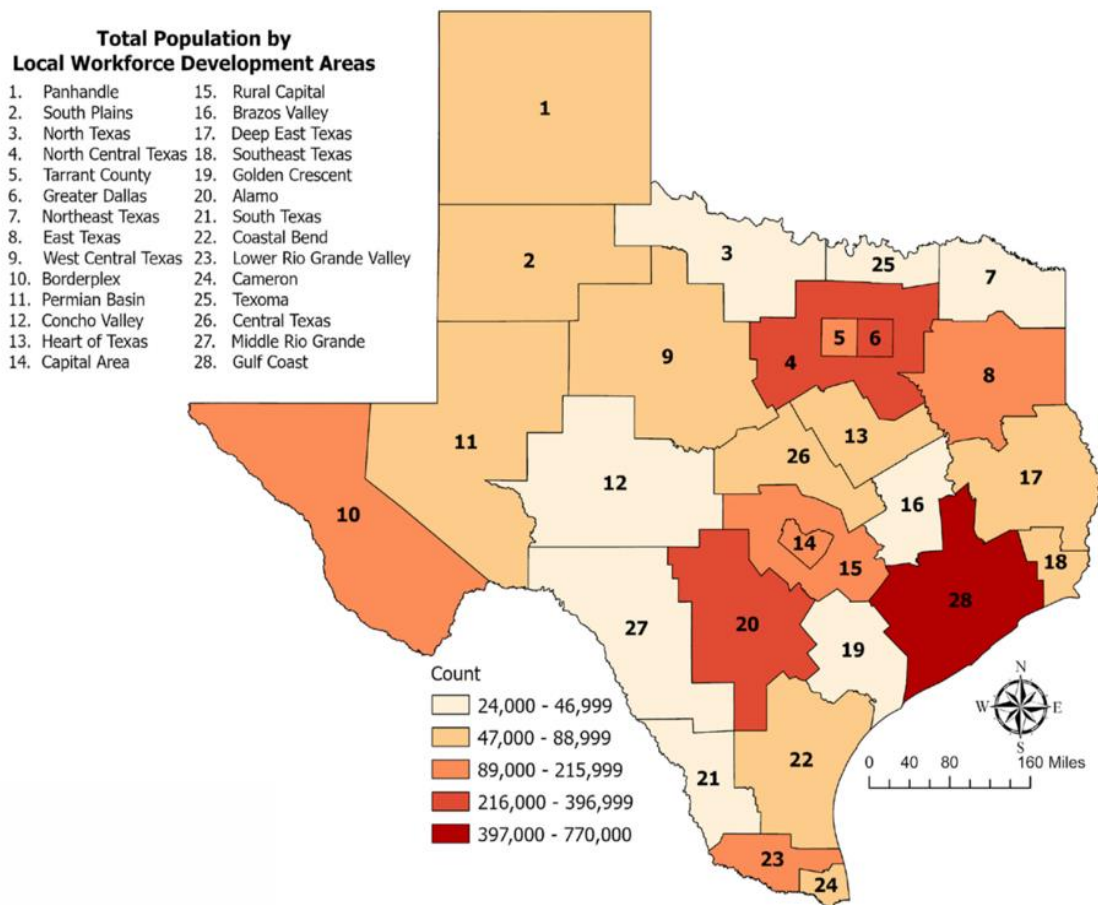
Texas SILC is grateful to the Moody Foundation for supporting this project. We know there were many strong candidates for this grant opportunity, and we are deeply honored to have been selected.

Introduction

The Texas State Independent Living Council (TXSILC) was awarded funding from the Moody Foundation of Galveston, TX, to collaborate with Centers for Independent Living (CILs), disability organizations, and emergency management partners to strengthen disaster preparedness, response, and recovery for Texans with disabilities. Through a peer-led, consumer-informed model, the TXSILC will build tools, systems, and networks that increase safety, equity, and resiliency across the Gulf Coast region.

The CILs participating in the project include Coalition for a Barrier Free Living, Inc. (Houston), RISE Center (Beaumont), Mounting Horizons Center for Independent Living (Galveston), and Coastal Bend Center for Independent Living (Corpus Christi). These CILs serve urban and rural Texans across 29 counties on the Gulf Coast. According to the Texas Workforce Investment Council, the Gulf Coast Region has approximately 760,000 residents living with disabilities, which is the densest population of people living with disabilities in Texas (TWIC 2025).

Figure 1: Total Population of People Living with Disabilities by Local Workforce Development Areas, Texas Workforce Investment Council (2024)



Focus Group Design

Delivery Method

The focus group method was designed to capture authentic, first-hand experiences of people living with disabilities along the Gulf Coast. Participants were recruited independently by the Executive Directors of the CILs in Houston, Beaumont, Galveston, and Corpus Christi by email, in-person invitations, and registration forms. The focus groups were offered to community members who utilize CIL services in a hybrid format, allowing in-person and online participation.

American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation services were provided for three of the four groups, and Closed Caption services were provided for all four groups. This design was chosen to increase participation for those who could not attend in person and to provide access for in-person and online interpretation services.

Focus Group Questions

The participants were asked the following questions:

1. What are your experiences with natural disasters while living in your community?
2. Have you ever had to shelter in place or evacuate during a disaster? Describe your experience.
3. How does your community or city communicate with you during a disaster? Has it been effective? How would you prefer communication?
4. How did organizations in your community help and support your recovery after a disaster?
5. How could organizations and agencies in your community help you better prepare for future disasters?

Demographics of Attendees

A sign-in sheet or online registration was utilized to track the number of participants and how they identified as members of the disability community. There were 74 attendees across the four focus groups, with 81% of participants being consumers, 12% caretakers/family members of people living with disabilities, and 7% organizational/local leaders who support people with disabilities. Of the 74 attendees, 10 participated online.

Analysis of Responses

The responses from the focus groups were captured using audio/video recording and closed captioning. These responses were then organized using Microsoft Excel to identify major themes across all four focus groups using thematic analysis, a method to identify patterns or themes in group discussions. After these themes were identified, they were consolidated into three major themes that appeared most across the focus groups.

Major Themes from Focus Groups

Public Systems Failures

Historical Evacuation Failures and Individual Hesitancy

When asked to describe their experiences living through disasters, residents across the region shared stories and feelings of fear, confusion, and frustration regarding the evacuation processes they've experienced in the past. Many residents of the disability communities in this region choose not to evacuate and stay in their homes during disasters because of the lack of opportunities to evacuate safely. One participant in Corpus Christi shared that they have been sheltering in place during storms for decades due to a lack of trust in the area's emergency response systems. Participants expressed distrust in the evacuation systems that cause harm to their belongings or themselves.

One resident of Galveston shared that during Hurricane Laura, buses sent to help evacuate the residents living with disabilities were not accessible for those using wheelchairs or walkers, leading to volunteers dropping one resident when loading the bus and many wheelchairs being damaged while stored under the bus during transit. Another resident in Houston noted that during one incoming storm, weather reports indicated that a storm was going to be stronger than it was, leading to blockages on highways that led to people they knew personally having health issues while stuck in traffic, resulting in death. These experiences undermine the trust people with disabilities have in the disaster response systems.

Challenges Accessing Disaster Recovery Resources

While evacuating for disasters can be challenging on its own, returning to a damaged residence and beginning the recovery process can present additional barriers for people living with disabilities. Residents in Galveston noted that after Hurricane Beryl swept through the region in 2024, they had to live in a hotel because the residence was not habitable or safe to occupy. They are still staying in the same hotel today, unsure of when they will be able to return and fix their home. Another resident in Corpus Christi shared experiences from their time in North Carolina during Hurricane Matthew, where home repair contractors entered the community with little oversight and provided poor-quality repairs to benefit from the quick payouts individuals received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This resident also helped their neighbors navigate these individual assistance programs to ensure their access was easier for people living with disabilities.

Inaccessible Emergency Communications

Communities across the region can access a variety of emergency notification systems to warn of storms, such as siren/horn systems, mass text programs, and social media posts. However, these methods often are not accessible and exclude individuals with disabilities. Residents of Corpus Christi who are deaf or hard of hearing have difficulties accessing emergency notifications because they are not offered in ASL or other formats, putting them at higher risk of late or no notification of hazardous situations. Houston residents also

shared that at times, the only way to receive updates on power restoration in their areas was the utility providers sending out text notifications, which weren't always current or reliable. This was noted by CenterPoint as a shortcoming in the aftermath of Hurricane Beryl in 2024, where they stated "...follow up communication was sporadic and inconsistent..." (PA Consulting 2024).

Individual Capacity to Prepare

Ability to Shelter in Place

Residents from across the region expressed hesitation to evacuate or have experienced poor evacuation planning, and they are also unsure of their ability to shelter in place. Some residents in Corpus Christi and Houston noted that they had to prepare cold storage containers for food preservation. However, they had difficulty finding ice to sustain the storage after the storm. Potable water for cooking and using the restroom was also hard to obtain, with one Houston resident noting they used lake water nearby just to flush their toilet.

The ability to shelter in place for people with disabilities can be affected by compounding factors such as prolonged power outages, those experiencing homelessness, caring for children with disabilities, and caring for pets. One resident in Corpus Christi shared their experience with homelessness while caring for their grandchildren during Hurricane Harvey and finding someone locally who would provide shelter to avoid being stuck outside in the storm. They noted that while finding shelter was challenging, the hardest part was finding creative ways to entertain and calm their grandkids during the storm. Along with children, pets influence the ability to shelter in place as well, and can deter evacuation if residents are not aware of what shelters allow pets. Residents in Houston and Galveston detailed how they had to protect their animals during and after storms, including taking them to their workplace to stay cool due to power outages and lack of air conditioning.

Disability and Power Dependency

Most people with disabilities have adapted their living spaces to accommodate their needs, which allows them to feel more comfortable sheltering in place. However, not every person with disabilities has a support network or disposable income to provide them with the resources and provisions they would need to sustain themselves during a storm. This can become increasingly dangerous for people sheltering in place, especially if they lose power or air conditioning in their homes or apartments.

Texas's power grid has had numerous problems over the years, especially during Winter Storm Uri in 2021, which placed people with disabilities sheltering in place at high risk of hypothermia and exacerbation of comorbid conditions when they lost power. The power grid is also highly susceptible to damage in hurricanes, leaving people with disabilities in affected areas without the ability to store food, medicine, or durable medical equipment (DME) safely. This impacted residents in Beaumont and Galveston, who shared that they rely on power to store medications or use DME for their children with disabilities.

Sheltering in place may be a preferred method of disaster preparedness and response for people with disabilities along the Gulf Coast, but it comes with its own challenges.

Perspectives on Disaster Preparedness

People living with disabilities in the Gulf Coast region have lived through numerous disasters, and the lasting effects of these storms influence their behaviors for how they prepare, respond, and recover for subsequent disasters. Residents of Corpus Christi mentioned how they oftentimes don't want to rely on local systems of support because of their history of inaction and poor planning. Through decades of storms, people with disabilities along the Gulf Coast have either built their own support networks in their neighborhoods or developed apathy towards preparedness, accepting the consequences of storms that impact them. Another resident in Houston shared that after struggling to recover from earlier storms and experiencing personal trauma, they've decided to move away once their education is complete to avoid future distress.

Residents of these communities shared numerous stories of how they experienced "preparedness fatigue". Purchasing supplies on fixed incomes, preparing for storms that were not as severe as forecasted, and the inability to access weatherization supplies to protect their homes influenced members of these communities to prepare very little or not at all.

Community Supports

Local and Regional Support

Local and regional organizations have played a vital role in the lives of people with disabilities living through disasters. Many residents across the region noted how churches, community centers, and the Centers for Independent Living in their communities supported them before, during, and after disasters. A resident in Galveston shared how their local church served as a Red Cross shelter site and resource distribution center. Another resident in Beaumont praised the way organizations, such as their local American Legion post, Wesley Methodist Church, and the RISE Center, came together to purchase muck-out buckets that assisted people in cleaning out flood debris from their homes. One resident in Corpus Christi shared that Coastal Bend CIL helps people find recovery resources with other local/state agencies. Local coalitions that support recovery efforts are the backbone of recovery in most places, and it is evident in the Gulf Coast region as well.

A resident of Houston noted they used to have emergency preparedness resource fairs where people could get some starter supplies for go-bags or stay kits for free from local organizations. They also had demonstrations that showed innovative ways to preserve food, create air conditioning with dry ice and fans, and other methods of staying safe during disasters. The residents of Houston and other communities shared they would appreciate having these again so they can prepare easier in the future.

State and Federal Support

While FEMA can provide federal support during the response and recovery phases for a presidentially declared disaster, most residents did not feel positive about their experiences working with them. As previously shared by a resident in Corpus Christi, some of the contractors provided poor home repairs with little oversight and received the financial benefits of disaster survivors. Accessing federal or state programs can also depend on zip codes, as one resident in Galveston shared. They had issues accessing recovery programs because their zip code was outside the declared state of emergency zone.

At the state level, the Texas Division of Emergency Management has a voluntary registry program called the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry, or STEAR. Residents across the state can register as an individual living with a disability, access/functional needs, or require transportation assistance into this database that local emergency management can access. However, as residents have shared during the focus groups, there is confusion about how local jurisdictions utilize this information in planning and response measures. Local leaders in Corpus Christi shared that STEAR participants must re-register annually and update their information if they move from their current residence. This process is challenging for residents to keep up with, as many were uninformed about the re-registration requirements. The state also does not guarantee that support services will be provided to registrants, which has discouraged residents from signing up.

Recommendations for Action

Recommendation: Advocacy

- This recommendation addresses concerns about **Public Systems Failures**

The disability community is active in advocacy and leadership across the Gulf Coast region. Local and regional disability awareness committees exist throughout the Gulf Coast, such as the Houston Commission on Disabilities, the Committee for Persons with Disabilities in Corpus Christi, and the Aging and Disability Advisory Committee that advises the Houston-Galveston Area Council. These councils and committees provide spaces for consumers and Centers for Independent Living to interact with their local leaders and recommend inclusive emergency planning for their community.

Along with the Councils or Committees, CILs and consumers could create relationships with Offices of Emergency Management (OEMs) to communicate the needs of the disability community. Communicating with the emergency management leaders directly creates a dialogue that can drive future partnerships to ensure that preparedness and response plans are fully inclusive.

Action:

- CIL directors will identify their local disability awareness committee if they are not already involved in their respective committees. CIL directors will also identify information regarding the committee, their meeting schedule, and how consumers can become involved.
- In Beaumont, which does not have such a committee, it is recommended that the CIL executive director and interested consumers meet with the mayor's office to discuss the development of an awareness committee for their area
 - Council/Committee Contacts
 - Houston (Houston Commission on Disabilities)
 - Phone: 832-394-0814
 - Email: angel.ponce@houstontx.gov
 - Corpus Christi (Committee for Persons with Disabilities)
 - Phone: 361-826-3452
 - Email: annikag@corpuschristitx.gov
 - Galveston
 - Phone: 713-993-4522
 - Email: Deborah.duke@h-gac.com
 - Offices of Emergency Management
 - Houston: <https://houstonoem.org/>
 - Beaumont: <https://www.beaumonttexas.gov/712/Emergency-Management>
 - Corpus Christi: <https://www.corpuschristitx.gov/department-directory/office-of-emergency-management-oem/>
 - Galveston: <https://www.gcoem.org/>
- The findings of this needs assessment will be shared by the CIL executive directors with their local disability awareness committees or other relevant entities to further emphasize the urgency of prioritizing regional emergency preparedness priorities for people with disabilities in their community

Recommendation: Education

- This recommendation addresses concerns about **Individual Capacity to Prepare**

Centers for Independent Living are congregation points for many consumers to receive support services and connect with other people living with disabilities in their communities. Training consumers to become disaster preparedness educators not only encourages community members to train each other on household emergency preparedness skills, but it also promotes autonomy within the disability community to proactively protect each other before disasters strike.

Action:

- CILs will serve as a host site for inclusive emergency preparedness trainings for consumers and identify resources within disaster networks, such as Offices of Emergency Management, American Red Cross, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOADs), and other community-based organizations
- CILs will support the continued training and skill development of Disaster Resiliency Specialists
- CILs will review opportunities to identify how they can integrate disaster preparedness into their existing programs

Recommendation: Capacity Building Through Collaboration

- This recommendation addresses concerns about **Community Supports**

By engaging with this project, the participating CILs have demonstrated a commitment to improving the outcomes for people with disabilities before, during, and after disasters. CILs become a force multiplier in emergency preparedness and response when they strengthen communication and resource accessibility.

Action:

- CIL executive directors in the Gulf Coast region will develop a meeting schedule during hurricane season to meet regularly and share resources as they pertain to emergency preparedness for consumers.

Citations

1. Texas Workforce Investment Council. *People with Disabilities: A Texas Profile*, September 2025, Sept. 2025, gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/twic/People-With-Disabilities-2025.pdf.
2. PA Consulting. *Hurricane Beryl After-Action Report for Centerpoint Energy, Inc.*, 25 Oct. 2024, www.centerpointenergy.com/en-us/Documents/GHRI%20Tracker/CenterPoint_Beryl_After_Action_Final_Report.pdf