



FEMA

## WINTER STORMS (DR-4586-TX)

### EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

### MEDIA ANALYSIS REPORT

THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

### MEDIA ANALYSIS/SYNOPSIS

- Dallas-area radio stations live stream with **FEMA** to get answers on how Texas residents affected by last month's winter storm can apply for **FEMA** assistance.
- San Angelo is still recovering from February's winter storm and looking to move forward with needed water infrastructure repairs and plans to winterize pumps. The city is looking to **FEMA** to help pay for the damages.
- Frustration builds for Austin renters who are still struggling with water problems more than a month after the winter storms.
- Winter storm repairs force Fort Worth apartment tenants to vacate. City officials say the Disaster Assistance Program can assist income-eligible Fort Worth and Tarrant area residents with hotel vouchers, security deposits and rent.
- More than 3,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine spoiled in Texas due to power outages from the winter storm in February, according to new data released by the Department of State Health Services. That number is more than double the number of wasted doses initially reported.
- Katy Independent School District is faced with millions in damages left behind by February's winter storm. School District officials say about 80 of the district's 84 facilities sustained at least some damage.
- Tomball and Magnolia areas are picking up the pieces more than a month after winter storms swept through Texas. Tomball Independent School District reports close to \$650,000 in damages, while Magnolia ISD damage estimate is \$150,000.
- The Texas House gave final approval to a group of bills to address the energy crisis caused by Winter Storm Uri, including a bill that ensures that board members of the PUC and ERCOT live in Texas, and a bill that requires the PUC to set a rule that power generators weatherize equipment so that it can withstand winter storms.
- Both the Texas Senate and House have written bills that attempt to prevent another massive power failure in extreme temperatures. But parts of their legislative proposals are drawing criticism for not going far enough to prepare electricity infrastructure for increased risks posed by climate change.
- Opinion: It was the corporations, utilities, and regulators who failed during February's winter storms, but it's ordinary folks who bore the brunt of losing power who are being forced to pay.
- Texas-based Whataburger has given out more than \$90 million in bonuses to employees to thank them for their hard work during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the deadly winter storm last month in Texas.
- Mennonite volunteers and Long Term Recovery Group are offering free plumbing repairs for Crossroads residents still working to recover after the February freeze left countless homeowners with burst pipes and no water.
- Nonprofit and community organizations in Cy-Fair, such as Northwest Assistance Ministries and Cypress Assistance Ministries, are looking for donations to help Texas families with food, supplies



and financial assistance while recovering from last month’s winter storm as well as the pandemic.

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## ARTICLES

### FEMA

#### How Texas Residents Impacted By The Winter Storm Can Apply For FEMA Assistance

[KMKT-FM\(Denison, TX\)](#) / March 31, 2021

Thousands of people in the Lone Star State are still trying to recover from the winter storm in February of 2021. Join Mad Rock, Katy Country & KLAK at 9:30am on Wednesday, March 31st for this LIVE STREAM where we talk with Nate Custer from FEMA about how Texas residents can apply for assistance & find other resources to help them through the difficult process of getting back on their feet.

VTR 20:37

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#### Our Water: San Angelo preparing estimate for FEMA reimbursement

[KLST-TV\(San Angelo, TX\)](#) / Victor Glenn / March 31, 2021

SAN ANGELO, Texas – San Angelo is in the midst of recovering from the recent winter storm. This means moving forward with needed water infrastructure repairs while juggling existing improvement projects. San Angelo Water Utility Director Allison Strube says the city had a lot of damage during the winter storm, including main breaks and surface leaks.

Currently the city is generating estimates to submit funding requests to FEMA. Beyond the underlying repairs, the city also aims to winterize other infrastructure such as pump stations, to prevent similar damage in the future. Despite juggling these issues, the city says they are still on track with capital improvements.

With no clear idea how long it will take to potentially secure FEMA funding, the city is trying to come up with other ways to make up the costs. “If we do not receive the federal funding or the assistance for FEMA or TDEM, we will just have to figure out how to pay for them and fund them through our own city funds,” explained San Angelo Director of Finance Tina Dierschke. “You know with streets that would come out of the general fund. The biggest source of revenue for the general fund would be property and sales tax and so that’s how we budget. But with an emergency like this we may have to look at other ways of funding some of the expenditures that are at a higher level.”

Dierschke also said it is the city’s hope to raise those funds without increasing fees or taxes, and without issuing debt. There are minimum thresholds that need to be met before that federal funding is granted, for Texas that number is almost \$39 million. Currently, the city hasn’t yet been able to put down a concrete estimate for reimbursement.

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## RECOVERY

### 'I'd been showering in the pool' | Winter storm problems still plague these Austin renters

[KVUE-TV\(Austin\)](#) / Erica Proffer / March 31, 2021

AUSTIN, Texas — Austin Code Enforcement took nearly 4,000 3-1-1 complaints since February's winter storms. More than 100 of those are storm-related damages at the Mueller Flats Apartments.

In an apartment complex with hundreds of neighbors, it didn't take much to feel alone.

"I'm glad you came out because I looked for something online to see if somebody could help me. I need my story heard," Rose Tealer, a Mueller Flats Apartments resident, told KVUE on March 10.

It didn't take much to feel exposed.

"I'd been showering in the pool," Tealer said.

It didn't take much to feel stripped of dignity.

"Cold water – I had to take my soap and my towel. It's not right. It's so embarrassing. I had my clothes on, but still. The water was cold. When I got in there, my legs went numb," Tealer said.

Tealer was out of water following the February winter storms. Water started to flow by March 10, but she said it was cold.

"We had no water whatsoever," Jackie Mann, a Mueller Flats Apartments resident, said.

Mann called the KVUE Defenders when the storms' impact lasted weeks at the complex.

"They've opened a fire hydrant across the street. You go get water there. I don't know how that's manageable for anyone," Mann said.

Mann showed us the messages from her complex. The messages said showers were available at the next-door hotel. However, the 30-minute windows were full until at least May 9.

"The links weren't working," Mann said.

Frustrations continued.

"You got to go online, but it was filled up for three months," Tealer said.

Tealer said clothes could be washed at the complex's laundromat.

"You have to have a special card with money on there. I don't have the money," Tealer said.

Tealer is on a fixed income. She said she gets a little more than \$700 a month in disability insurance. It and the other government assistance barely covers her rent, utilities and food.

All complexes must be kept up to city codes. Those codes include hot, running water.

Austin Code Enforcement data took 3,855 complaints between Feb. 14 and March 30. Of those, 166 complaints came from Mueller Flats Apartments.

"This unprecedented weather event [left] immense damage in its wake throughout the state," Daniel Armstrong, division manager at Austin Code Department, said.

Violation reports taken from Feb. 23 to March 24 for Mueller Flats show issues such as mold-like substances, rats and general structure maintenance.

"However, I will say there are other buildings or other structures in that area, built relatively at the same time, that perhaps didn't have the same issues," Armstrong said.

If an apartment owner does not fix damages, the City can force fines or shut a place down.

"What I can tell you is that we strive for voluntary compliance ... We really want to spend more on education than we do enforcement. Enforcement is a tool. It's a last-resort tool," Armstrong said.

Mueller Flats carries a history of complaints. The KVUE Defenders found 27 complaints from Jan. 1, 2018, to Jan. 1, 2021. Of those complaints, seven violations ended in compliance. Half of them show "no violation(s) found/inspection performed."

Gabby Garcia, organizer with Building and Strengthening Tenant Action (BASTA), said code complaints do not reflect the true count of complaints.

"A lot of people don't even use code. They don't even know that that's something that they can do



when they're in these situations,” Garcia said.

Garcia said those “no violations found” can happen if the person who made the report doesn’t let the inspector in to see the damage. Armstrong said an inspector will try three times at various times in the day. Because of the pandemic, inspectors offered virtual inspections using a video call with complainants.

“If there's no way to validate the complaint after a third attempt, that would be closed,” Armstrong said.

“It's crazy,” Taylor Landhart said.

Landhart is engaged to Tealer’s son. They opened their South Austin home to Tealer until their apartment also lost water.

“Unfortunately, we were in the same predicament,” Landhart said.

During our interview with Landhart, a man identified himself as the manager for Mueller Flats Apartments. He told us to leave the complex property and said he would call Austin police.

The complex manager would not talk with us. We noticed he was on the phone, ignoring our attempts to get his attention. He refused to answer any questions. He refused to say when issues would be fixed. He refused accountability. We left the property as asked.

The complex manager made good on his threat. Police met us in front of the complex and told us to stay on the sidewalk. We did, but data shows problems remain.

Heading into April, City records show inspectors have at least 118 open cases at the location.

“These people need to be held accountable,” Tealer said.

For three weeks, the KVUE Defenders tried talking with Mueller Flats. We reached out in-person, by phone and through email. They refused to respond.

“The property has qualified for ROP [Repeat Offender Program] and has been mailed a registration letter. They will have 10 days to appeal. The property has not been suspended. Management is allowed to rent out vacant units,” Lucero Aréchiga, senior public information specialist at Austin Code Department, said on March 30.

As of March 31, Tealer said she still needs repairs so she can wash clothes and cook meals.

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## **Fort Worth Apartment Tenants on Notice to Vacate for Winter Storm Repairs; Rights & Relief Tips Available**

[KXAS-TV\(Dallas\)](#) / Maria Guerrero / March 31, 2021

It has been six weeks since the February storm which led to thousands of bursting pipes, displacing families across North Texas.

And even now, residents are still being impacted by the damage left behind.

Some Fort Worth apartment residents are being asked to leave their homes so that repairs can be made.

Texas Sky Ranger flew over the Bellevue Chase Apartments in West Fort Worth on Wednesday, showing visible damage to some buildings.

Approximately 40 residents have been put on notice to vacate in seven days, according to the city of Fort Worth.

“They put a letter on my door, and it says that I had to be out of the apartments,” said Delene Johnson.

NBC 5 first interviewed Johnson a week after the winter storm.

She, along with her neighbors, suffered power and water outages as well as bursting pipes.

In the weeks since the storm, Johnson claims running water, particularly cold, was unreliable.



She was happy to leave.

“If you seen the mold that was in that apartment, it wasn’t live-able. The city code told me that,” she said.

Attorney Eric Cedillo says, generally, apartment management can give as little as three days-notice to vacate.

However, “if people have been living there all along, they would have to do more than provide notice. They would have to actually file paperwork with the JP Court and get an eviction order,” he said.

It is rare for landlords to be required to provide financial assistance or be required to help affected tenants find a new home.

Renters should look closely at their rental agreement.

“Generally, under the property code, which is statutory, they don’t have that obligation, so you look to the lease,” said Cedillo.

Fort Worth’s Neighborhood Services Department assistant director says the city is working with the landlord and stresses there is immediate and long-term help available for affected residents.

“If their tenants need emergency hotel voucher, we can provide them with that if they meet our income guidelines,” said Sonia Singleton, assistant director of the city’s Neighborhood Services Department. “We also have a lot of emergency rental assistance in our city right now and in our county.”

The city’s Disaster Assistance Program can assist income-eligible Fort Worth and Tarrant area residents with hotel vouchers, security deposits and rent. [Click here for more information.](#)

There is also available money through the city’s Emergency Rental Assistance program, said Singleton.

Johnson says she’s fortunate to have found a new home about two weeks ago, but she worries about those with no place to go.

“I worry about those people,” she said.

Apartment management personnel told NBC 5 to contact their corporate office with any questions.

No one has responded, despite several attempts to contact a representative.

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## **Texas had to throw out thousands more vaccine doses during winter storm than first reported**

[KVUE-TV\(Austin\)](#) / Brad Streicher / March 31, 2021

More than 3,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine spoiled in Texas due to power outages from the winter storm in February, according to new data released by the Department of State Health Services.

Following the storm, the KVUE Defenders found DSHS added the category "Natural disaster / power outage" to its weekly report on wasted doses. Back in early March, Texas providers reported a total of 1,477 doses wasted in that category.

Weeks later, DSHS data shows 3,123 doses wasted due to that storm, which is more than double the number first reported.

Austin Public Health (APH) did not report any wasted doses from the winter storm, but has wasted 291 doses total: 55 due to a "mechanical failure," 38 due to "spoiled – other," and 198 due to "other." That amounts to .14% of doses shipped to APH.

APH ranks sixth in Texas for providers who have wasted the most doses of the vaccine, according to the data from DSHS.

In total, Texas providers have reported 9,229 wasted doses of 11,630,345 doses that have been shipped, which is less than 1%.

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## **Katy ISD assesses millions in damages after February freeze**

[Houston Chronicle](#) / Tracy Maness / March 31, 2021

After February's big freeze, Katy Independent School District could be looking at around \$2.6 million to \$2.9 million in facility damages.

Chief Financial Officer Christopher J. Smith presented the estimate to the board of trustees on Monday, March 29, and said about 80 of the district's 84 facilities sustained at least some damage. He said Katy ISD is still working to get quotes for some of the repairs but has so far spent about \$900,000.

Without a budget amendment yet, the repairs are currently being supported by the districtwide contingency, as well as the district's maintenance and operations operating budget, Smith explained. To continue repairs into the summer, he said there will likely be a budget amendment coming in April. The district did not have enough information to put an amendment before the board in March.

"We had hundreds, thousands really, of people throughout the Houston area that struggled with broken pipes, all related to the freeze, but then in addition made worse by the fact that the power was down for multiple days," said Chief Operations Officer Ted Vierling. "You don't see pipes freezing up necessarily at your house in the intensity, or in our schools, in the intensity that you do unless the power's out, the water stops flowing, the heat stops running, and the pipes freeze."

On [HoustonChronicle.com](#): Katy ISD seeks feedback on starting a virtual high school

Some of the repairs and their approximate estimated costs that Vierling noted include:

Chillers at Cimarron Elementary and Paetow High School, \$814,900

HVAC coils frozen and damaged at 22 campuses, \$734,700

Gym floor replacement/remediation at West Memorial Junior High, \$172,500

Gym floor replacement/remediation at Paetow HS, \$190,000

Gym floor repair at Cinco Ranch High School, \$19,800

Water damage in classrooms and hallways at Schmalz Elementary, \$86,800

Water damage in a literacy library at Exley Elementary, \$25,600

Main backflow devices at Cardiff Junior High, \$22,500

Irrigation backflow devices at campus across district, \$54,800

Damage to fire alarm components at Beckendorff Junior High and Morton Ranch Elementary, \$59,600

Replacement of cooling tower valves at Kilpatrick, Davidson and Shafer Elementary, \$34,100

On [HoustonChronicle.com](#): West Houston rabbi discusses Passover's relevance amid pandemic

Vierling said he was onsite after the freeze as district crews quickly put classrooms at Schmalz Elementary back together so that students could return to campus. Smith said he appreciated the "boots on the ground," who were there at campuses to prevent further damages.

According to Smith, the district has a \$100,000 insurance deductible for each campus. Since most of the repairs are below that amount, he believes only about eight campuses will have claims.

He hopes Katy ISD will see more funds coming from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but for now its emergency protective measures are available. This includes reimbursing costs related to staff members working to protect campuses during the winter storm. The district has approximately \$350,000 in that category of expenses, which Smith said should be reimbursed at a 75 percent cost share (75 cents on the dollar).

The district has filed in FEMA's other categories in the hopes that they will open up.

The Texas Education Agency also has a survey focused on both COVID-19 and winter freeze damages that is set to close in early April.

Smith explained that district staff members are working on multiple levels to get as many dollars as



they can from available resources.

“But we did want to let you know the extent of the damages that we have and the fact that we do have a tremendous amount of people doing a lot of work trying to get all this stuff in order, on top of their regular jobs, to be able to get as much recovery as we can out of insurance, FEMA, etc.,” Smith said.

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## **'Nothing's been as bad as this:' Winter storm sends shivers through Tomball, Magnolia area as state efforts continue**

[Community Impact Newspaper](#) / Eva Vigh, Matt Dulin, Shawn Arrajj, Ann Lotz / March 31, 2021

When winter storms brought record-low temperatures to Texas the week of Valentine's Day, millions of people lost power for extended periods of time, and tens of thousands of homes experienced plumbing damage caused by frozen pipes.

According to state officials, temperatures dropped inside homes and businesses due to the power outages, indirectly causing water in pipes to freeze and expand. Once electricity was restored and temperatures rose, the once-frozen pipes thawed, leading to water damage.

Tomball and Magnolia ISDs reported \$647,240 and \$150,000 estimated in damages, respectively.

“I've been in Tomball for 18 years; I've seen the physical impact of tornadoes, four hurricanes, two major flooding events, a wildfire to the north of the district ... and two major arctic ice storms,” TISD Chief Financial Officer Jim Ross said March 8. “I'll tell you, as far as all of them combined, nothing's been as bad as this.”

Among the residents and businesses affected by the storm's turbulence was the Magnolia Exotic Bird Sanctuary, which provides refuge for 150 exotic birds, Communications Director Candace Tanner said.

Despite moving some birds inside, setting up heat lamps, and blanketing the aviaries, Tanner said the sanctuary lost two birds—in addition to dealing with a lack of water and busted pipes. The center is now raising funds to build a larger building, obtain generators and install an on-site well to be self-sufficient.

“We really thought that we did everything we could possibly do to protect them,” Tanner said. “Part of our mission statement is to protect and prevent the suffering of captive parrots. And when this storm came and there was no electricity and no water, we didn't protect them.”

Although a portion of the Magnolia area is serviced by a separate grid, the isolated energy grid that services most of the state was cited by critics as a contributor to the devastating outages that have since led to a political reckoning.

### **Maintaining the grid**

The Tomball and Magnolia area is serviced by three electricity providers: CenterPoint Energy, the San Bernard Electric Cooperative and Entergy Texas. CenterPoint and San Bernard are in the state's grid and coordinated by the Energy Reliability Council of Texas. Entergy Texas, which serves most of Montgomery County, is part of the Eastern Interconnection, and its reliability coordinator is the Midcontinent Independent System Operator, which delivers power to 15 U.S. states.

On Feb. 14, every county in Texas was under a winter storm warning, according to the National Weather Service.

ERCOT alerted generators and distribution partners that the storm would bring “record-breaking demand” to the system, but some lawmakers pointed out the decisions that set up the grid for potential failure were made years in advance, such as failing to protect facilities from harsh cold conditions.





Entergy winterized its power plants and transmission grid prior to and during the storm, including the addition of wind breaks, heaters and insulation, said Allison Payne, senior communications specialist of Entergy Texas. Still, the company will be conducting a post-event review of the steps it took and what could have been done better.

“[We will be] investing in improving our system not just for reliability but [also] further investment in grid resiliency,” Payne said.

Despite this preparation, nearly 60,000 Montgomery County customers of Entergy Texas were out of power Feb. 15, according to Entergy’s outage map. Comparatively, across the CenterPoint service area, 1.42 million customers were in the dark by 8 p.m. Feb. 15, according to data from the transmission provider. Billy Marricle, president and general manager of San Bernard, which provides energy to a portion of Montgomery County southeast to Lavaca County, said his members saw rolling outages of about an hour at a time.

“I think we were prepared. We go through an [Energy Emergency Alert] simulation once a quarter,” Marricle said. “We had already picked out the locations that we would not shed any [circuits].”

Officials statewide are calling for a reform and investigation into ERCOT and the Public Utility Commission of Texas, the state agency that regulates electric, water and telecommunication utilities. Yet there is no apparent investigation underway into MISO, Entergy or San Bernard from state or local elected officials.

“There’s no excuses for [the failures],” Montgomery County Judge Mark Keough said of Entergy. “[But] they worked as hard as they could in the time that they had.”

#### Storm aftermath

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, Gov. Greg Abbott made ERCOT reform an emergency item during the 2021 Texas legislative session.

The Legislature began hearings Feb. 25 with ERCOT, the PUC and other energy providers.

Freezing weather has only led to two other incidents in ERCOT’s history: once in December 1989 and again in February 2011. Following ERCOT’s challenges in 2011, the House Committee on State Affairs penned a report outlining the committee’s “serious concerns with the regulatory initiatives taken by” the PUC and ERCOT.

But while ERCOT has come under fire—CEO Bill Magness was fired, its board of directors resigned, and Texas House and Senate hearings were held to investigate the grid failure—it is not clear if any action will be taken against MISO.

When asked, state Rep. Will Metcalf, R-Conroe, did not say if similar scrutiny would be applied to Entergy or MISO but said there will be future discussions.

“ERCOT is 90% of the state of Texas, so that’s why they’re the first in our committee hearings,” he said. “We will definitely be continuing [conversations with Entergy and MISO].”

#### Local effects

Beyond power outages, many residents found themselves without water for several days.

Tomball and Magnolia city officials said prior to the mid-February storm, the cities had never lost their water systems.

“As far as we know the system has functioned properly since it was built,” Magnolia City Administrator Don Doering said. “The problem is when you get down to 7 degrees temperature for more than a couple hours, a lot of our pumps and pump motors are outside—they’re not housed in the building.”

Both cities issued boil water notices following a lack of water pressure from systems freezing up.

“The initial reports on the weather was that this storm was going to be heavily an ice-accumulation storm. ... We geared up a lot for the ice accumulation, which it turned out we didn’t get any of that,”



Tomball acting City Manager David Esquivel said. “I don’t know if in hindsight we could have done much else that we did. ... Our stuff is not built for this.”

Following the storm, Magnolia City Council members approved a proposal to use mass-notification system Blackboard Connect for future emergency outreach March 10 instead of its current Nixle program. Police Chief Kyle Montgomery was also appointed emergency coordinator.

With providers outside of the city also without water, MISD could not open its Magnolia Event Center as a warming center, Superintendent Todd Stephens said March 8. As such, the district is exploring adding a water well at the event center so the facility can be self-sufficient.

“One of the things that we did with this center was add a generator to it so we could open it as a shelter. The next step would be to put a well because if you don’t have water, it kind of makes it difficult to do one of the purposes that we built this for—to serve the community,” trustee Travis Moffatt said.

Hunter Marrow, Adriana Rezal and Ben Thompson contributed to this report.

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## INFRASTRUCTURE

### Texas Legislature recap: Broadband expansion among bills passed Wednesday

[KVUE-TV\(Austin\)](#) / Ashley Goudeau / March 31, 2021

AUSTIN, Texas — The pace inside the Texas Capitol is picking up.

On Wednesday, the members of the House of Representatives gave final approval to a group of bills to address the energy crisis caused by Winter Storm Uri, including House Bill 10 that ensures the board members of the Public Utility Commission (PUC) and Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) live in Texas.

Lawmakers also passed House Bill 1,1 which requires the PUC to set a rule that power generators weatherize equipment so that it can withstand winter storms.

In an effort to fight human trafficking, the members of the House also passed House Bill 390, which requires staff training on how to spot human trafficking for workers at hotels, motels and inns with 10 or more rooms.

Sweeping legislation to overhaul state’s electricity market in response to winter storm heads to Texas House after Senate's unanimous approval

Texas Gov visits Southeast Texas to announce plans to increase broadband access across state

The members of the Texas Senate also passed numerous bills Wednesday. Among the bills passed was one of Go. Greg Abbott's emergency items – expanding broadband.

The Senate unanimously passed Senate Bill 5, which aims to expand broadband internet to the hundreds of thousands of Texans who don't have access. SB5 creates the State Broadband Development Office which will come up with a statewide plan to expand broadband and establish a program to distribute grants, low-interest loans and other financial tools to expand broadband.

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick (R) addressed the passage in the following statement:

"Expanding broadband across Texas has long been my goal and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic made expanding our broadband infrastructure even more urgent. Broadband is essential to bridge the digital divide across our state, grow our thriving economy and ensure that Texas remains the best place to live, work and raise a family. I congratulate Senators Nichols, Hancock, Perry and West for passing this critical bill."

Lawmakers are also trying to stop the hiring of officers who get in trouble in one department then resign and are hired by another agency. Senate Bill 24 requires law enforcement agencies to review the past conduct of officers before hiring them and certify that they reviewed files with the Texas



Commission on Law Enforcement. The heads of departments can lose their licenses if they fail to follow through with the review and certification.

Members also passed Senate Bill 30 to allow discriminatory language in property deeds and restrictions to be removed. All of the senators signed on to sponsor the bill and Lt. Gov. Patrick made the bill one of his top priorities for the session.

After it passed, Patrick released a statement on the bill, writing:

"I want to congratulate Sen. West on the unanimous passage of SB 30, one of my top priority bills. Removing the racist language found on many deeds in Texas is the right thing to do and I am proud that the Senate has taken action to correct this offensive language. I look forward to seeing this bill signed into law."

But not all bills passed with unanimous support. After much debate, the senators passed Senate Bill 155, which requires the attorney general to review the lists of non-citizen and non-residents in relation to the voter rolls quarterly and allows the AG to investigate voters who opt out of a jury duty summons because they do not live the county where they are summoned. The Senate will have to take another vote on the bill before it moves to the House for consideration.

Texas nursing homes could soon be legally required to report disease outbreaks

Texas' George Floyd Act seeks to reform violent police behavior. But a sticking point centers on protecting officers from lawsuits.

The Senate also passed Senate Bill 650 to prohibit local governments from providing logistical support to a woman seeking an abortion.

Senators also passed Senate Bill 930, which makes information about the spread of a communicable disease inside a nursing home public. As the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged Texas, nursing homes failed to give families, the public and the media information about the spread of the virus inside facilities. KVUE News led an effort to have the Texas Attorney General weigh in and he ultimately required the release of that information, but this bill will put it in the law.

Wednesday evening, the Senate started debating Senate Bill 7, a controversial voting bill that aims to do numerous things, including creating a paper trail for ballots, allow voters to track their mail-in ballots, limit late-night voting and ban drive-thru voting. You can watch the debate on the bill here.

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## **Texas lawmakers want to prevent another power crisis. But the legislation doesn't go far enough to do that, critics say**

[Texas Tribune](#) / Erin Douglas and Mitchell Ferman / March 31, 2021

Both the Texas Senate and House have written bills that attempt to prevent another massive power failure in extreme temperatures. But parts of their legislative proposals are drawing criticism for not going far enough to prepare electricity infrastructure for increased risks posed by climate change.

And critics are also wary that some measures would leave enforcement of the mandated upgrades to the Public Utility Commission without increasing its funding or resources to do the job.

House Bill 11, sponsored by State Rep. Chris Paddie, R-Marshall, was part of a package of bills that the lower chamber approved Wednesday. It defines extreme weather conditions in the winter as a time when temperatures remain below 10 degrees Fahrenheit for more than a day and are expected to remain that low for the next 24 hours. For the summer, it defines it as when the National Weather Service issues a heat advisory.

Michael Webber, an energy resources professor at University of Texas at Austin, said the House legislation importantly provides a target for regulators and industry to design around, rather than leaving it too broad. He said it's a step in the right direction because it provides more clarity than the current



weatherization measure in Senate Bill 3, the omnibus electricity legislation the upper chamber sent to the House this week.

“[The temperature threshold] is not as extreme as what we just experienced, and it could go further,” said Webber, “but, it’s something.”

Jeffrey Jacoby, deputy director of Texas Campaign for the Environment, opposed HB 11 because he said it would not have required power plants to be weatherized to a degree that would have prevented disruptions during the February storm.

“It doesn’t go far enough to truly protect Texans from the next winter weather calamity,” Jacoby said during a committee hearing on the bill on March 18.

More than 4.8 million customers in Texas were left without power during a winter storm that plunged large parts of the state into single-digit temperatures in February. At least 111 people died — more than half of them from hypothermia.

The series of standalone bills the House approved Wednesday included legislation that mandates that power plants prepare for extreme weather, reform the governance of the state’s grid operator, ban wholesale index electricity products, pursue the creation of an emergency alert system and form a new disaster electricity committee.

Texas Speaker of the House Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, called the slate of bills “important first steps” in the aftermath of Winter Storm Uri.

“The actions taken by the house will help restore confidence in our critical infrastructure after the catastrophic mismanagement of our electric grid last month,” he said in a statement.

The two chambers’ legislation is collectively similar, but not identical. So, each chamber could soon have a chance to tweak the others’ bills. But members of both chambers will at some point have to iron out the differences in their respective legislation before anything can become law.

Jacoby remained opposed to HB 11, although he said in an interview with the Tribune that the group supports the intent of the legislation.

“Under this definition of an extreme weather emergency, these mandates would not apply,” Jacoby said during the committee meeting. “Frankly, most of the state would not have actually been experiencing an extreme weather emergency during the recent freeze.”

Other environmental groups, meanwhile, including the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club and Environment Texas, endorsed the bill, alongside industry groups including the Texas Association of Manufacturers and the Advanced Power Alliance, which represents the renewable power industry.

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, proposed an amendment to require the weatherization rules be based on information from the National Weather Service and the office of the state climatologist regarding climate variability and projected changes in weather, but withdrew it. She told the Tribune that she withdrew it because the bill already references the National Weather Service and the weatherization rules would be regularly reviewed.

Critics of the quickly moving legislation were also concerned that the burden of enforcing any potential new mandates on weatherization will fall on the Public Utility Commission, which in 2020 disbanded its oversight and enforcement division. The PUC also does not have any field inspectors.

Michelle and Stan Brannon, whose son, Will, was killed by a fallen power line in 2017, warned legislators in a prior committee meeting that they believed the bill to weatherize power plants did not go far enough. They said that in the years since another piece of legislation was passed in response to their son’s death to require utilities to inspect power lines, they found that the Public Utility Commission did little to enforce the requirement.

In response to the concerns, Andrew Barlow, a spokesperson for the PUC, said that the agency’s enforcement function was enhanced by the change by increasing the number of attorneys available to



work on enforcement matters. He also said the agency “admires and respects the Brannons for the courage and passion for change they have shown,” and added that the agency is in the process of auditing the reports for the purpose of reporting violations.

But the gaps identified by the Brannons caused them to warn legislators that keeping regulators accountable for enforcing the mandates will be as important as passing them.

“We do not believe that new laws requiring utilities to winterize their infrastructure will solve the issues that caused the winter storm failures without having a Public Utility Commission empowered to monitor and enforce compliance with these laws,” said Michelle Brannon during a House State Affairs Committee hearing on March 18. “The utilities cannot be trusted to follow standards unless there are strict requirements.”

### Emergency communications

In the days leading up to February’s winter storm and during the widespread blackouts that left millions of people with no access to electricity or drinking water in subfreezing temperatures, Texans were never warned or notified by the state about the disaster. The same agency — the Texas Division of Emergency Management — that failed to deliver that critical emergency information to Texans would be responsible for studying the feasibility of establishing a statewide alert system, and then implementing it, under House Bill 12, which also got approval in the House on Wednesday.

“A lot of people didn’t know what was happening and I think sometimes the fear of not knowing what’s going on is just as bad as the crisis itself,” said state Rep. Gene Wu, D-Houston. Wu also added an amendment to the legislation, which was approved, to ensure that if the alert system is created, it would include languages other than English.

The House unanimously approved to the legislation, though members were disappointed that they had to create the legislation in the first place.

“Regrettably, had it been in place previously, it might have helped a lot of people in the state of Texas and save a lot of lives,” said state Rep. Rafael Anchía, D-Dallas.

Lawmakers Wednesday also moved forward House Bill 16, which would prohibit retail electric providers from selling products based on wholesale power prices in the market and House Bill 10, which would restructure ERCOT’s board of directors.

They also approved House Bill 13 which would create a new committee made up of leaders from the PUC, ERCOT, Texas Railroad Commission (which regulates the oil and gas industry) and Texas Division of Emergency Management. The committee, modeled after an existing voluntary body, would meet semi-annually to coordinate power, natural gas companies and utilities for reliable electric service. The body would be required to convene as soon as possible prior to or during a disaster to address extended power outages, said Paddie, lead author on the bill.

Jolie McCullough contributed reporting.

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## **Texas: A Study in Private Gain at Public Expense**

[Good Men Project](#) / Denita Jones / March 30, 2021

We used every coat, blanket, sweater, and pair of socks in the house — even when we slept.

We only cooked once a day. We couldn’t bathe or do laundry. Unlike many families, we had water — but it looked almost like milk coming out of the tap.

It was the Texas freeze, and we were cold and dirty and hungry and parched.

In some ways, we were lucky. At least 80 people died, and possibly many more. And even now, we still have neighbors without water coming over to shower and use our bathroom.

Our state is a cautionary tale about power generation that’s privatized and poorly regulated. The big



companies who run so much of the grid in Texas failed to winterize their infrastructure, leading to massive blackouts and tremendous suffering.

We knew this could happen, because it already did. These same failures wreaked havoc after a winter storm back in 2011, but politicians — often with industry donations in their pockets — failed to fix the problem.

A decade later, the blackouts were five times as destructive — and could have been even worse. Reports now say we were just four and a half minutes from a total grid failure in Texas, which could have caused blackouts for weeks and even months.

Unfortunately, we have a governor and conservative legislators who seem to care more about private profits than our lives and health. They care more about golfing and going to resorts in Cancun than whether my children have heat or drinking water.

It was the corporations, utilities, and regulators who failed. But it's ordinary folks who bore the brunt of losing power who are being forced to pay — literally.

The state's grid manager overcharged Texans by at least \$16 billion during the storm, leading to power bills that ran thousands of dollars during the blackouts. And authorities are now saying they won't even bother to sort out the over-charges.

Why are they doing this? Because they can. Our deregulated, privatized utilities in Texas are designed for private gain at public expense.

This was true even before the freeze. This summer they charged me so much for electricity that I had to choose between eye appointments, doctor visits for my kids, and power enough to run the air conditioner in the unforgiving Texas summer.

And this is hardly the only crisis we're living through right now.

Last May, my boss reopened my place of employment without any safety precautions. I'd been promised the opportunity to work from home to help my kids with their online schooling. They went back on that promise, so I was forced to quit.

Now, the governor has gone ahead and thrown out every single remaining COVID-19 safety measure — even with every new aggressive virus variant now present in Texas. This will force millions more of us to make dreadful choices.

Is this leadership?

All of these issues are interlocked — jobs that don't pay enough, utilities that cost too much, the lack of basic public health protections at work. These bad policies hit us in the Black, brown, and immigrant communities the hardest. But no matter where we come from or what we look like, all of us deserve better than this.

That's why I organize with the Poor People's Campaign — to help other low-income parents fight for a \$15 minimum wage, paid sick leave, and affordable health care and housing. If there's something worse than not being warm or bathed or properly fed for weeks, it's having lawmakers who bring home huge paychecks and ride out storms in resorts while we suffer.

We need to use our collective voice to make them change. It's you and me that will make the change, together.

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## CHARITY

**Whataburger handed out over \$90 million in bonuses to employees during pandemic**

[KEYE-TV\(Austin\)](#) / Jerrod Kingery / March 31, 2021

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas favorite Whataburger has given out more than \$90 million in bonuses to employees to thank them for their hard work during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the deadly winter



storm last month.

On Wednesday, the burger chain announced they also handed out "Extra Mile" bonuses and emergency pay to employees, and a doubled of their 401(k) plan matching for 2020.

"The past year reshaped how we live, work and play, with the restaurant and hospitality industry being heavily impacted by the pandemic and this year's crippling winter storms. We are so humbled and grateful for the loyalty of our customers during this time," said Ed Nelson, Whataburger CEO. "And we wanted to help ensure that our Family Members and their families were taken care of and thank them for continuing to go the extra mile to serve our guests with great Pride, Care and Love. Our Family Members and guests are the foundation of our success, and we are grateful for both."

Whataburger says their employees--known as Family Members--helped set company performance records from March of last year to this year.

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## **Mennonites, Long-Term Recovery Group offer free plumbing repairs**

[Victoria Advocate](#) / Editorial Board / March 31, 2021

Some Crossroads residents still are working to recover after the February freeze that left countless homeowners with burst pipes and no water.

Because of the large numbers of Crossroads residents in need of repairs, the situation has been dire for many trying to get plumbers to their houses to complete the necessary work. The situation has been even more dire for those who cannot afford the expensive repairs.

From old pier-and-beam houses with exposed piping to newer homes, nobody was immune from the damage wreaked by the freeze. Victoria's plumbing companies have been working around the clock.

"I've seen little freezes before where we'll go and fix a couple things, but not a thousand things," said Ben Caraway with Caraway Plumbing. "We're working dark to dark, six days a week."

Mennonite volunteers with Mennonite Disaster Service traveled to the area for the Texas Freeze Response project to offer free plumbing repairs for residents recovering from last month's winter storm in partnership with the Victoria County Long-Term Recovery Group.

"They (Mennonites) called us after the winter storm and said, 'We know you need help, so we're sending plumbing supplies, and we're working on getting volunteers to help you,'" said Rick Villa, executive director of the Long-Term Recovery Group. "They said, 'You coordinate it.'"

After an article about the free plumbing services published in the Victoria Advocate, the Long-Term Recovery Group received 22 calls asking for plumbing assistance. They also are getting referrals from St. Vincent de Paul, Lutheran Social Services and Community Action Committee.

As of Tuesday evening, the 10 Mennonite volunteers, divided into three teams, had repaired plumbing for almost 60 homeowners in Cuero, Goliad, Refugio, Edna and Victoria. They also are serving Lavaca, Gonzales and Calhoun counties. The Regional Disaster Response and Recovery Center is providing their lodging while the Long-Term Recovery Group warehouse is storing their supplies.

Mennonite Disaster Service also donated more than \$50,000 in plumbing supplies while Good360, a Virginia-based charitable organization, donated about \$25,000 in supplies, Villa said.

Villa has submitted applications for two grants to help with recovery efforts. One is a \$30,000 grant, which can go toward any type of home damage, from the Texas State Affordable Housing Corporation. The other is a \$110,000 grant from the Center for Disaster Philanthropy that would be earmarked for plumbing contractors once the volunteers leave the area.

"At some point, I will not have volunteers, and I hope it's not too soon," Villa said.

Ed Keens, a Mennonite volunteer driver for the "horse-and-buggy" Mennonites, said they travel all over the country to offer help after winter storms, hurricanes, fires and floods. They usually work at a



location for about four days.

Keens is not a conservative Mennonite, so he drives cars and motorcycles. He said the conservative Mennonites are good at what they do; they have the tools to fix the problem; they do it quickly and they move on to the next one.

“It’s like a vacation. We have a good time, like a big road trip. We get here and enjoy the work, enjoy helping people, learning new skills,” Keen said. “Part of Christian teaching is to help your fellow man and do good works, and we get a lot of enjoyment out of it. People are sometimes hesitant when we first arrive, but when we finish up, they take us out to eat or give us cookies. It’s fun making people happy.”

Most of the repairs take from an hour to an hour-and-a-half. The volunteers might replace a section of pipe, install a new valve or fix a leak, Keens said.

“It’s a huge value when someone has suffered a loss to have someone to listen to them tell their story, even when the trauma was suffered weeks, months or a year ago,” Keens said. “Some are good at fixing the plumbing, and some talk to the homeowners while the others are working. It’s a team effort to make friends wherever we go, and it’s really enjoyable.”

Those interested in receiving assistance can call 361-894-6264 and leave a voicemail. They should include their full name, physical address and phone number.

The Mennonite volunteers have been a godsend to many people in our area. Before they offered help with the aftermath of the winter storm, they helped with recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey. We thank them and the Long-Term Recovery Group for all they have done and wish them well in their continued work to make sure Crossroads residents receive the care they need.

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## **Cy-Fair Resource Guide: NAM offering COVID-19 vaccine**

[Houston Chronicle](#) / Chevall Pryce / March 31, 2021

On March 10, the statewide mask mandate and business capacity restrictions were lifted by Texas Governor Greg Abbott. On Monday, March 29, COVID-19 vaccines became available to all adult Texans.

In the midst of a pandemic, millions in the Harris County area found themselves without power during one of the most intense winter storms in Texas history, Winter Storm Uri, compounding the economic effects of COVID-19 in February.

Nonprofit and community organizations in Cy-Fair, such as Northwest Assistance Ministries and Cypress Assistance Ministries, work to fill in gaps for local families with food, supplies and financial assistance while recovering from the storm themselves as well as the pandemic.

### Food Assistance

Cypress Assistance Ministries, a nonprofit for low-income families in need of assistance is seeking donations and volunteers in order to continue providing for the local community, including financial donations and help with food distribution.

As a way to bring the community together while building a new site to help the most vulnerable people in the area with all of their services connected, Cypress Assistance Ministries invited community leaders to a ceremonial beam signing for their future facility on March 25.

The \$2.4 million, 21,000-square-foot building at 12930 Cypress N. Houston Road, and will be constructed by J.A. Greene, with an anticipated opening day of Labor Day, Sept. 6. The building will feature room for case managers, the food pantry, classes and donations from the public.

CAM plans to host a grand opening event for the community when the facility officially opens, provided COVID-19 vaccines go as planned, Ryan said.





Janet Ryan with CAM said the nonprofit was seeing more walk-in clients soon after the winter storm. Residents needing assistance can come during walk-in hours from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Thursday and Friday for aid. Appointments are required for help Monday through Wednesday.

CAM will also be reopening more services, such as their Operation Jobs program that connects clients to employers.

“Our employment services counselors will still work with clients over the phone if that’s what is preferred, but we are again meeting in person if that is best for the client,” said CAM Director of Development Janet Ryan. “We’ve reopened fax services and copy services as well.”

CAM is accepting Operation Jobs clients in person, requiring they register online or by calling 281-955-5895. Operation Jobs helps clients learn how to write their resume, sign up for receiving job leads and how to interview well.

CAM will still require clients and staff to wear masks in the building, Ryan said.

“Even with the governor rescinding the mask order, we do not plan at this time to change our safety measures,” she said. “Everyone entering the premises, whether staff, volunteers, clients, or shoppers, will be required to wear a mask and those visiting the administrative offices and Client Assistance offices will have their temperature checked as they enter. Keeping everyone safe and healthy is a priority.”

CAM is also in need of financial donations to help clients with bills and food.

The CAM food pantry is located at 11265 Huffmeister Rd. in Cypress.

For more information, visit [www.facebook.com/cypressassistance](http://www.facebook.com/cypressassistance).

Cy-Hope is a nonprofit benefiting low-income students in Cy-Fair ISD. Cy-Hope is in need of volunteers for bagging food each month. For more information, visit [www.facebook.com/CyHopeTx](http://www.facebook.com/CyHopeTx).

Cy-Hope Executive Director Lynda Zelenka said the nonprofit is seeing a need for plumbers, water and food from clients in the aftermath of Winter Storm Uri.

Cy-Hope will be hosting their annual Clay Shoot event at Westside Sporting Grounds, 10120 Pattison Road in Katy, on April 14 from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Participants can register at [www.cy-hope.org/events/cy-hope-clay-shoot](http://www.cy-hope.org/events/cy-hope-clay-shoot).

The Cypress Market at Cy-Hope will host a vendor show at Cy-Hope, 12715 Telge Road in Cypress, with a VIP event on April 30 and a public event May 1. For more information, visit <https://app.donorview.com/v6XkG>.

Cy-Hope is in need of volunteers for their backpack program. Sign up can be found at [www.signupgenius.com/go/805054aa8aa2ea7fd0-backpack](http://www.signupgenius.com/go/805054aa8aa2ea7fd0-backpack).

Cy-Fair Helping Hands , a nonprofit dedicated to homeless and low-income communities, also provides food for Cy-Fair area families.

On [HoustonChronicle.com](http://HoustonChronicle.com): Claw machine in Andy’s Kitchen gives directly to Cy-Fair Helping Hands

On Monday, Thursday and the first and third Saturdays of the month Cy-Fair Helping Hands accepts donations of nonperishable foods from 9 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. at the back door of their office.

The next annual Metta’s Local Eats Dine Out for Charity event, which donates portions of sales from various local northwest Harris County restaurants directly to Cy-Fair Helping Hands, begins April 1 at participating restaurants.

For more information about Cy-Fair Helping Hands, including how to donate, visit [www.facebook.com/CYFAIRHELPINGHANDS](http://www.facebook.com/CYFAIRHELPINGHANDS) .

Northwest Assistance Ministries , or NAM, serves hundreds of in-need families a week through their onsite food pantry with both nonperishable and perishable foods and is using a drive-thru model.

NAM is still accepting rent and mortgage assistance applications online at [namonline.org](http://namonline.org).

“We can use volunteers to call clients and help in Meals on Wheels and our food pantry,” said Brian



Carr, chief advancement officer for NAM. “We can always use financial and food donations.”

NAM is providing food assistance Monday-Friday from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. at their main building and accepting donations between 8 a.m.-3 p.m. NAM is in need of food and financial donations. Frozen meat, fruit and vegetables, and canned and dry goods are needed for the food pantry.

“Northwest Assistance Ministries has seen a consistent increase in requests for rent and food assistance,” Carr said.

NAM will be hosting a COVID-19 vaccine distribution at their building from April 7 to April 9. Registration is required at [www.namonline.org](http://www.namonline.org), as no walk-in appointments will be accepted. Recipients must stay in their vehicle. Registration begins April 2.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. NAM will be hosting multiple events and resources discussing the topic. April 6, NAM is inviting the community to a Zoom screening of “I Am Evidence,” a documentary about sexual assault.

April 7, NAM will post information meant to create a dialogue on their Facebook page. April 8, NAM will host the Clothesline Project at their building from 10 a.m.-2 p.m., where staff will wear jeans to promote Denim Day on April 28.

April 9, NAM will host a Zumba class and a self-defense class from 1 p.m.-2:30 p.m. For more information, visit [www.namonline.org](http://www.namonline.org).

The NAM Resale warehouse is also accepting donations, such as furniture and household appliances. NAM Resale warehouse will be accepting donations from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, and from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday. The NAM Resale Boutique, at 15555 Kuykendahl Rd., is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday.

NAM is also accepting registration for fall classes until June 14. For more information, visit [www.namonline.org/learning](http://www.namonline.org/learning).

NAM is located at 15555 Kuykendahl Rd. in northwest Houston.

#### Financial services

NAM also provides financial assistance for clients needing help with bills or other expenses after losing their job due to COVID-19.

“Because of the way our funding is structured, our advice to our clients is to use the unemployment (payments) for your utilities, for your prescriptions, for some groceries and allow us to subsidize the rent because we can make that one payment to the landlord and get that caught up,” Carr said.

NAM has launched an online application process for rent and mortgage assistance, where applicants can submit all appropriate documents without visiting the nonprofit.

The Training and Learning Center is also registering students for spring 2021 online classes. To check qualifications for a scholarship call 281-885-4523. Registration for the Training and Learning Center fall classes begins June 14. For more information, visit [www.namonline.org](http://www.namonline.org).

The Cy-Fair Houston Chamber of Commerce has a community resources page, [www.cyfairchamber.com/wearecyfair](http://www.cyfairchamber.com/wearecyfair), where small businesses can apply for SBA loans, catch up on the most recent mandates on COVID-19 from the state government and individual instruction for navigating loan and benefits applications.

For more information, visit [www.cyfairchamber.com](http://www.cyfairchamber.com).

#### Mental health assistance

Shield Bearer counseling sessions are being held through remote teletherapy sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The nonprofit works with different financial situations to provide counseling for a variety of mental health challenges including grief, abuse, addictions and relationship issues.

Shield Bearer will be hosting a Zoom session about self-care April 6 from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. for the public, led by LeFleur Leadership Institute.



According to the organization’s Facebook page, Shield Bearer has experienced an increase in the demand for mental health services and is seeking financial donations to help the organization continue meeting clients’ needs.

For more information, visit [www.shieldbearer.org](http://www.shieldbearer.org).

Igniting God’s Vision Ministry Senior Pastor Floyd Smith said the 19-year-old Cy-Fair area ministry has continued to operate the recently launched Turning Peer Pressure to Peer Power program and counseling for the local community.

“We’ve launched this ministry enough to where we’re already dealing with the issues they are struggling with,” he said. “Our goal is to save money to get our own building or land so we’ll be able to bring them and go through the counseling process. My concern is on the counseling side and what people are going through at this time not only with the teens but also with the pandemic.”

Igniting God’s Vision Ministries regularly hosts sermons and other events on their Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/Igniting-Gods-Vision-Ministries-Inc-193290454073044](http://www.facebook.com/Igniting-Gods-Vision-Ministries-Inc-193290454073044).

Cy-Hope also offers counseling and speech therapy both in-person and through telehealth. In-person appointments require clients to wear a mask, practice social distancing and wait in their car until the beginning of the appointment.

To schedule an appointment, call 713-466-1360. For more information, visit [www.cy-hopercounseling.org](http://www.cy-hopercounseling.org).

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