

Intuitive Research and Technology Corporation's Human Resource Director, Juanita Phillips, is featured in the following article published by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) for the company's successful reaction to the recent tornado disasters.

Tornadoes Test HR's Preparations

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By Beth Mirza

On the morning of April 27, 2011, Juanita Phillips was one of thousands of Alabama residents glued to the radio as a line of violent tornadoes



Juanita Phillips,
HR director for
Intuitive
Research and
Technology Corp.
in Huntsville, Ala.

worked its way up through the southern part of the state toward her in Huntsville. As the director of human resources for Intuitive Research and Technology Corp., Phillips was just as concerned about the employees' safety as her own.

When officials began broadcasting tornado warnings over the radio, employees at the engineering and analytical services firm moved to safe places in the building. By mid-afternoon, company leaders told employees they could leave and try to beat the storms home, to be with their families.

Phillips' home is in Harvest, one of the worst-hit areas of the northern section of the state. Her commute usually takes 15 to 20 minutes. On the way home, her husband called and told her trees and power lines were blocking the roads—and she had 25 minutes before the next tornado was forecast to come through.

Phillips and her husband David spent the evening under the stairs of their home with a battery-powered radio as the storms passed through. The next morning, the couple drove several miles north into Tennessee, searching for cell phone service. That's when Phillips put her company's disaster plan into action.

Calls weren't going through, but text messages were. Phillips began texting employees. Those who didn't respond, and who lived in the hardest-hit areas, would soon be getting a personal visit from Phillips. She and her husband drove to five employees' homes, wending through debris-filled streets and using their GPS to find an unblocked route to each house. "One of those I knew was a single mom who had a child with epilepsy who needed medication," Phillips said. "All of those employees were fine, thank God."

"Where there was an employee outside the known damaged areas who had not been reached, we checked for a manager with their same ZIP code" to look in on the employee, Phillips said. "In almost all cases, we found a way to get it done."

No employee was injured or lost a family member, but three employees lost their homes, Phillips said. Two had been sharing an apartment that was demolished, and one saw his single-family home destroyed.

With all employees safe and accounted for, Phillips moved on to processing payroll. The company was able to pay its employees that week, even though Phillips and other HR staff couldn't enter headquarters—their electronic key cards didn't work when the power was out—or access the company's server. Conditions were dire at that point: The community was under a curfew, none of the area's traffic lights worked, and a special area had to be designated for the dumping of 44 tons of spoiled food. But employees got paid, just as if the tornado hadn't happened.

"I'm really proud of that," Phillips said. "It's not an easy thing to do. [But] companies are doing these types of good things all over [the Southeast]."

Company employees couldn't return to the office for a week. They spent the time away from the office volunteering and cleaning up, Phillips said. She washed dishes at a local restaurant that was grilling donated food for volunteers and displaced people, while her husband helped out at a small engine repair shop, fixing generators and chain saws. (See related story, [Tips for Safe Cleanup](#).)

Developing the Disaster Response Plan

The disaster response document is short and to the point, Phillips said. Company owners told her they didn't want something "off the shelf"—it had to be written specifically for the business's needs. The plan was developed in 2009, Phillips said, when she and other company leaders sat down over lunch and determined their priorities in an emergency:

- Find all employees.
- Make sure all employees get paid.
- Make sure all employees are taken care of.

Then the group brainstormed possible scenarios that could strike (What will we do if there is no phone service? No Internet service? No electricity? In case of a fire? A bomb threat?), wrote out a bulleted list of what to do in each circumstance and assigned responsibility for carrying out the plan. The HR department was responsible for collecting and maintaining employee contact information and having that information on a thumb drive and on paper in two employees' homes away from the office. That's how Phillips was able to track down employees without using electricity.

A presentation on disaster preparation that Phillips heard at a past Alabama Society for Human Resource Management state conference was instrumental in developing the plan, she said. Speakers from Home Depot talked about how their disaster plan worked well after Hurricane Katrina. A speaker from Ruth's Chris restaurant discussed how their plan failed to meet their needs.

"That conversation was important to me," said Phillips, who is also an Alabama SHRM state legislative co-director. "It was a thought-provoking presentation and served me well in my thinking about the writing of our disaster response plan."

Once back at work after the tornadoes struck, Phillips and company leaders reviewed their disaster plan and noted some areas for improvement.

"We will run our HR data—from which I worked during the emergency—more often so it is more up-to-date and will house it with more HR members," Phillips said, noting that one of the HR staffers who held emergency data in her home was on maternity leave with a

one-week-old baby. "We made sure she was OK but did not require any assistance from her since she was on leave—evidence you have to have redundancies built into any plan."

In addition, they will require employees to provide personal cell phone numbers. Managers will be asked to reach out to other managers for help if they can't find everyone in their group.

Moving Forward

With so much recovery work to be done, the company is setting up avenues for employees to donate to relief efforts, to collect items for displaced co-workers, and to volunteer. (See related story, [Lend a Helping Hand](#).) Phillips is saving stories from each employee detailing how they survived the storms, helped their community's recovery and reacted to the devastation. "I am not sure what we will do with the stories, if anything, but I am finding it is good for us all to write them down," Phillips said. (See related story, [Emotional Aftereffects](#).)

"It's going to be a long haul," Phillips added. Power was restored incrementally to hospitals, then residential areas and finally industrial areas. "Power line trucks, media trucks and relief agencies are everywhere you go."

And "we're going to get back to supporting our customers," Phillips said.

Beth Mirza is senior editor for HR News. She can be reached at Beth.Mirza@shrm.org.

Related Resources:

[Disaster Preparedness: Human Resources Hurricane Handbook](#), SHRM Online Templates & Tools Sample Policy

[Managing Through Emergency and Disaster](#), SHRM Online Templates & Tools Toolkit

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