

Louisiana Aims to Recharge Neighbors' Battery-Powered Life Support Equipment

In February 2021, a deadly winter storm killed more than 200 Texans and wreaked havoc in Northern Louisiana, triggering power outages and dangerous icing on roadways. As a result, emergency medical service crews were unable to respond to calls for assistance in a timely manner. This situation endangered people with disabilities who relied on ventilators and other life-support equipment in their home, leaving many people with only a few hours of battery life for their device at a time when safe and expedient evacuations were not an option.

The Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) seeks to address this challenge through a first-of-its-kind program to recruit owners of stand-by residential generators to recharge the batteries of neighbors' life support equipment during power outages. The concept for the initiative was initially developed by [Powered for Patients](#), which was created following Hurricane Sandy and is focused on enhancing emergency power preparedness for critical healthcare facilities and boosting power outage planning for people who depend on life-support equipment in their homes.

Recharged batteries can extend life-support equipment users' time to safely remain in their home during evacuations or power outages. If rescuers know that a life-support patient has more time to safely remain in their home, they can quickly evacuate other people who may be in more immediate danger. The battery recharging program may also minimize the number of life-support equipment users who flock to hospital emergency departments simply to plug in their electric-powered [medical devices](#), a problem documented in an article published by the [Pew Trust](#) about the impact of Hurricane Sandy. The significant strain these medical device users place on limited hospital resources led to the development of the HHS [emPOWER program](#).

Outlining the Operational Approach

LDH officials launched the Power Outage Partners pilot in Baton Rouge and New Orleans with initial battery recharging support slated for in-home ventilator users since they would face the greatest danger compared to users of other medical devices if utility or backup battery power failed. LDH actively engaged disability advocacy organizations and government agencies charged with supporting people living with disabilities to ensure that their needs shaped the program's approach.

A priority in developing the operational approach was minimizing the risk that a ventilator patient seeking battery recharging would not receive it in a timely fashion. To this end, LDH worked closely with emergency managers from Orleans and East Baton Rouge parishes to determine the best way to incorporate the Power Outage Partners initiative into existing programs that support electricity-dependent people during power outages. These discussions led to identifying a source of qualified volunteers who could pick up depleted batteries from a ventilator user's home, bring them to a generator owner's home for recharging, and return charged batteries to the ventilator user.

In Orleans parish, the City of New Orleans uses a special-needs registry to allow durable medical equipment (DME) users to sign up for evacuation assistance, providing a built-in infrastructure to more easily incorporate the Power Outage Partners initiative. While East Baton Rouge parish does not currently operate a similar registry, they are establishing community recharging facilities. Discussions are underway to determine whether such facilities can support battery recharging for ventilator patients as an added resource beyond the assistance provided by owners of standby residential generators.

LDH officials and the project consultant addressed other important operational considerations in their planning, including:

- Ensuring privacy for donors of emergency power support and recipients of battery recharging assistance by using credentialed volunteers for transport.
- Establishing eligibility guidelines requiring ventilator users to have at least two external batteries so no one was left without an external battery during the recharging process.
- Identifying a source of Medicaid funding that allowed ventilator users to purchase multiple batteries to expand the group of users eligible for recharging support.

Key Considerations for Jurisdictions Contemplating a Similar Initiative

- Find a champion to introduce the program. Initially, this person—staff, consultant, or volunteer—should be able to devote 15-20 hours per week to the program.
- Enlist the support of a broad group of disability advocacy organizations and government agencies that support people living with disabilities. This group should include the jurisdiction’s Medicaid director who may be able to provide supportive Medicaid funding.
- Work with a jurisdiction’s emergency management agency to explore federal grant options to help launch the program.

As of August 2022, work remains underway to finalize the operational approach for the Power Outage Partners program. For additional details about the Louisiana initiative and how the lessons learned can inform a similar initiative in your jurisdiction, email specialist@astho.org.

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