

Memories of February freeze prompt storm preparation

San Antonio residents stock up on generators and MREs — just in case

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



Josie Norris / Staff photographer

K.P. Power stacks bundles of wood in the garage Dec. 11. Power and her wife have been stocking up ev



Kin Man Hui / Staff

photographerEvan Strong now has a gas-powered generator for any possible power outage.His generator is able to run a refrigerator, internet router and a space heater.

Jeramey Sattler and his family struggled to keep warm during the February winter storm. They spent about two days without power before seeking shelter at a relative’s Leon Valley home.

But this winter, the 30-year-old’s family made a plan in case the power in their Northwest Side house goes out again.

Sattler and his wife equipped the two rooms in which their three sons sleep with new carpet and windows to provide better insulation. Their 2-year-old sleeps in a crib and has his own room, but the stay-at-home dad replaced the beds in his 8- and 10-year-olds’ shared room with trundle beds so that everyone can hunker down in one place if need be.

“It’s like a little thermal panic room,” he joked.

February's winter storm brought snow and ice to Texas, damaging the state's power grid and causing days-long, mass power and water outages for millions across the state. The National Weather Service said earlier this month that weather as severe as February's is unlikely this winter.

But an analysis by the Electric Reliability Council of Texas found that the state could experience electric outages if there is weather cold enough that many power plants go offline at the same time that demand for power goes up, according to the Texas Tribune.

Sattler and his family also stocked up on MREs, or meals ready to eat, which the military provides to its forces in the field. They contain an entree, side dish, cracker or bread, and a flameless ration heater to warm the food. Sattler got the MREs from his father, who is retired from the Air Force. He said if there's another storm, it will be nice to have the option of a warm meal.

New beds, carpets and windows had been on the to-do list even before February, but Sattler said the winter storm was a factor in moving forward sooner rather than later.

Sattler is concerned because he is fairly certain that the power will go out again.

"I'm nervous about it," he said of this winter. "But I think that we're prepared and it won't be as bad as last time."

Sattler is not alone. Whether it be buying extra firewood and supplies or getting a generator, many San Antonians are preparing for winter more than they have in the past as a direct result of the February storm.

'People are nervous'

This year, CPS Energy has seen an increase in people seeking distributed generation, which the utility website explains is a "smaller-scale power production located where the power is consumed." Solar power has been the most popular option, CPS spokeswoman Dana Sotoodeh said in an email, but backup generators have seen the most increase recently.

Sotoodeh said CPS Energy has received about 7,300 solar distributed generation requests this year, as of Dec. 20, compared with 5,270 last year. CPS received 650 applications for generators this year, as of Dec. 21, compared with 50 in the previous year. The vast majority of distributed generation applications are residential, she said.

Applications for generators are necessary only for backup or emergency generation systems that are connected to an electrical system, such as someone's main breaker panel, and have "the potential to back-feed electricity upstream of their meter and onto CPS Energy's larger distribution system," Sotoodeh said. Small, portable generators that power appliances that are directly plugged into the generator do not go through the CPS Energy distributed generation process.

Since the winter storm, Advanced Solar and Electric owner Don Dickey has noticed an increase in people interested in solar power systems that include a backup battery, which can store emergency backup power and works off grid if the power goes out. Advanced Solar installs systems all across Texas, but it primarily serves San Antonio and surrounding areas.

Dickey said that his company has sold more battery systems since February than in the past 10 years combined.

"Before the snow melted, my phone started ringing off the hook," he said.

Owner of Capital Power Systems Joe Rizzo has noticed a similar increase in people interested in generators. His company, which primarily serves Austin and San Antonio, installs generator systems that are hardwired in a person's building and automatically turns on if the power goes out.

Normally Capital Power Systems has a pretty even split in commercial and residential clients, but Rizzo said the number of residential customers he sees has tripled.

"Since the storm," Rizzo explained, "people are nervous about another storm coming. ... They're just concerned about being prepared for the next storm for their pools, for the heat in the house and just in general power to the house."

'Have a backup plan'

In the midst of February's storm, Evan Strong, 46, was purchasing a portable generator online. His family's far Northwest Side home sits just outside the city limits. It didn't lose power but did go without water and internet.

The three received help from some neighbors who have wells nearby, but after about five days without their own running water, they left to stay in a relative's home near Northwest Crossing.

With "all of the talk of the unstable grid, and just the way everything was going, we realized that we could have to go many days without power, in cold weather or even in hot weather," Strong said, "and we realized we needed to have a backup plan."

If he ever needs it, the generator will be able to power a fridge, the internet, a couple of fans and a space heater or two. Strong also changed his internet provider to one that some of his neighbors had better luck keeping service with in February.

Luis Colindres, 61, went with a more powerful backup generator for his far West Side home. He is ready to roll it out of his garage in case of an emergency. He said it can power about 80 percent of his home. He also had work done on his fireplace to make sure it was usable this winter.

Colindres, who lives with his wife and two 10-year-old grandchildren, said he does not care to wait on politicians "until they decide to upgrade whatever infrastructure they need to provide electricity for everyone during an emergency."

February's freeze left 38-year-old financial adviser Javi Pérez, his wife, their baby and Pérez's mother-in-law in the cold for about three days. It pushed the couple to invest in a solar power system with a backup battery.

"Getting solar power is good for the environment and everything like that," Pérez said, "but honestly our No. 1 priority was making sure that our child was taken care of and comfortable in that situation."

Pérez said his solar panels and a backup battery should be installed before the end of January.

Firewood piled up

Since October, K.P. Power and her wife have been stocking up on supplies to get them through if there is another storm this winter.

Power, 36, said they have about 15 bundles of firewood piled up in their house and garage on the Northeast Side. In February they didn't have any wood to use in their fireplace, but neighbors gave them some.

The couple also bought batteries, charcoal, propane, lighters, candles and a cellphone battery pack charger. They also purchased a handheld radio because their cellphone service was so poor during the February storm.

Power, a retail manager, said she moved to Texas from North Carolina about six months before the storm.

"I've never prepped this hard because I've never lived in a place that had such a bad power structure," Power said.

Working in retail and just being one to plan ahead also played a role, Power said, because she wanted to be ahead of the curve if people start stocking up at the last minute.

Weatherizing home

Though Dahlia and Seth Vance were fortunate enough to keep their power throughout the winter storm, the couple's 1951 South Side home proved to be quite cold. The building isn't insulated and has gaps that let a draft in. With their first baby due on Valentine's Day, the Vances were determined to fix up at least one room in time for winter.

Seth, 28, tore his and Dahlia's bedroom apart to insulate the walls and put in new flooring with an insulating layer. That makes it so a small heater can warm the area on low. Otherwise it runs on high and barely makes a difference.

Soon, they plan to go through CPS Energy's Casa Verde program for assistance weatherizing their entire home.

The couple said they aren't particularly worried going into this winter.

Dahlia, a 28-year-old body piercer who cans food, said she is confident in the measures they've taken to prepare.

Seth, an electrician, said if their power goes out, he thinks he can find an alternative source, maybe his car battery.

But he said he is still a bit nervous, especially since he and his wife will be parents soon.

“We're taking all the measures that we can to be prepared for pretty much anything,” Seth said.

Sy Boari, a 33-year-old banker, was at his 73-year-old father's Northwest Side home during the winter storm. They didn't make it out to the grocery store before the storm hit, so for several days they lived off chips they bought at a nearby gas station.

Boari said they didn't have power for about four days.

This year, Boari is trying to avoid a similar situation if the lights go out. In November, he started getting ready, buying an extra case of water, snacks and thicker clothing. He also got his car serviced to make sure things like the battery and heater work well. He said he never preps for winter, but February's storm changed that.

“I really hope that everything just goes normal, everybody has their power and we can just move on,” he said. “There's many other things that we need to worry about besides our electricity and water functioning.” *megan.rodriquez*

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