

What's Up Transcript (Season 4, Ep. 20)

Grace Hollowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hollowell, and today my guest is Lauren McGrath, the emergency management coordinator for the city. Hi, Lauren. Welcome back.

Lauren McGrath: Thank you for having me.

Grace Hollowell: We were talking before we started about the weather forecast for this next little bit. It's going to be quite rainy and stormy, which gets us in the perfect atmosphere to talk about our topic today: emergency preparedness for stormy weather and tornado season. To start the episode off, tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Lauren McGrath: My name is Lauren McGrath, and I'm the emergency management coordinator for the City of College Station. My job is to basically prepare the city for an emergency. That is done through many ways, including planning, preparedness activities, training, and exercising. I am also involved in coordinating resources and information during an actual emergency to support those response efforts, and helping the community get back to normal during the recovery period post-disaster.

Grace Hollowell: That is a very important role because you never know when an emergency could happen. What is one thing that you wish people knew about emergency management, especially when it comes to a city?

Lauren McGrath: I wish people knew that a lot of what I do is not disaster response. That is a critical and very important part of my job, but the bulk of my work happens before an emergency. The planning, preparedness, training, and exercises are what I do most of the time on a day-to-day basis.

Grace Hollowell: Definitely. Preparation is very key. What is your favorite thing about your job?

Lauren McGrath: I love the relationship building. I enjoy working with people from all different types of backgrounds and bringing them together when we need to coordinate for something. It is really that coordination piece.

Grace Hollowell: Were you an Aggie? Did you come here for school and decide to stay?

Lauren McGrath: I did. I got my master's degree from the Bush School.

Grace Hollowell: Awesome. So what made you stay in College Station?

Lauren McGrath: What I loved about it here actually started during my time at the Bush School when I interned with Texas A&M Emergency Management. They have an office down in the Emergency Operations Center in downtown Bryan, which shares a facility with the City of College Station, the City of Bryan, and Brazos County. That is really unique. I don't think there

are that many joint emergency operations centers in the country. I loved the collaboration among the different jurisdictions and how they support each other.

Grace Hollowell: Because our communities are so close to each other, if there's an emergency happening here, it's likely spilling over into the next city or into the county as well. Having multiple people in the same office collaborating is very important. What you do really impacts our community, but how exactly does it make an impact?

Lauren McGrath: What I do very much impacts this community, but not in an obvious way. You can't look at something that happens in the community and say, "Oh, that's because of the emergency management coordinator." It comes down to the work we do before an emergency. All of that relationship building and the connections we make—not only with city departments but also with external partners like hospitals, school districts, the county, and the state—plays into a more organized response effort. It ultimately impacts the citizens in that way.

Grace Hollowell: Organization is very important, especially in an emergency. Having an organized plan and going into a situation with preparation is vital, even if plans have to change depending on the situation. Why are spring and summer such important times for us to start thinking about emergency preparedness?

Lauren McGrath: During the spring and summer in Texas, you have increased activity for strong to severe thunderstorms that can bring tornadoes, hail, strong winds, heavy rain, and flooding. We also have hurricane season starting June 1st, which can impact us. Additionally, Texas gets really hot, and extreme heat is a big deal that people need to be prepared for.

Grace Hollowell: Frequent listeners know I'm a northern girl, so I was used to different severe weather. When I moved here, the first rainstorm I experienced left me in shock because I didn't know it could rain that much for that long without stopping. I wish I had done some preparedness for myself to know how to take care of my yard differently, or that it could affect the power so I should have supplies ready. I know now, but when I first moved here, I was a little blind. When is tornado season typically at its peak in our area?

Lauren McGrath: For our area, it's usually the springtime, specifically the March to June timeframe. However, we can get tornadoes any time of year. While it is more active now and it's a good time to brush up on your plans and check your emergency kits, know that it can happen at any time.

Grace Hollowell: What weather conditions usually signal an increased tornado risk?

Lauren McGrath: It would be those storms that create instability in the atmosphere, such as the strong to severe storms we get in our area.

Grace Hollowell: What is the biggest misconception that people have about tornadoes?

Lauren McGrath: Many people think that if they happen to be driving, taking shelter under a highway overpass is a good choice. That is not true. It can create a wind tunnel effect that

increases the wind speed, and you can have debris flying in. The most recent *Twisters* movie shows a good example of the danger of hiding under an overpass.

Grace Hollowell: My family is a fan of weather disaster movies. I remember as a kid being scared to watch *Twister*, but they told me it was important to learn what to do just in case. While these can be scary situations, it is important to approach them without fear. How much warning do residents typically get before a tornado develops?

Lauren McGrath: Usually, there is not much warning; it's a matter of minutes. That's why it's really important that people pre-identify a safe location so they can go there and take action immediately.

Grace Hollowell: What is the difference between a tornado watch and a tornado warning?

Lauren McGrath: It can be confusing to remember the difference. A tornado watch means that conditions are favorable for a tornado. A tornado warning means that a tornado has been spotted or indicated on radar. My favorite explanation is the taco example. A taco watch means all the ingredients are laid out—the shell, meat, cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes—signaling that conditions are favorable for a taco. A taco warning means you have a fully assembled taco ready right now. It's the same thing with tornadoes. A tornado warning means there is a tornado. If anyone is curious, I highly recommend looking it up because there are many fun images of the taco example online.

Grace Hollowell: That is a great refresher. Whenever I see a watch or warning now, I will stop and think about whether I have the ingredients or a taco in my hand. What should residents do immediately when a tornado warning is issued?

Lauren McGrath: If there is a tornado warning, a tornado has been spotted or indicated on radar. People should take action immediately, go to their pre-identified safe location, and continue to monitor the weather from there.

Grace Hollowell: Where is the safest place in a home during a tornado?

Lauren McGrath: That would be the lowest level in an interior room. The idea is to avoid windows and put as many walls between you and the outside as possible.

Grace Hollowell: Up north, we all have basements, so that's where we would go. When we moved here, I didn't know where to go, so now we use our downstairs bathroom. I grab my cats, my husband, and some blankets, and we hang out until it's over. What should residents in apartments or mobile homes do during severe weather, since it can be a little different?

Lauren McGrath: My suggestion, no matter where you live, is to plan ahead. If you cannot identify a safe location in your own home, identify somewhere else you can go ahead of time so you can seek shelter there instead of remaining in a potentially dangerous situation.

Grace Hollowell: What are other common mistakes that people make during tornado season?

Lauren McGrath: It is commonly referred to as a "Southern thing" for people to go outside and look for the storm or tornado. That is not what we encourage people to do. We want them to take action immediately and seek shelter because you never know exactly where the tornado might be.

Grace Hollowell: Right, don't try to film it on your phone; just get to safety immediately. How important is it to have multiple ways to receive weather alerts?

Lauren McGrath: It's extremely important. We can experience power outages and technology can fail, so it's vital to have redundancy in how you receive emergency information.

Grace Hollowell: What alert systems or resources does the city recommend?

Lauren McGrath: When it comes to weather alerts, I recommend finding a preferred, trusted source and sticking with it. Some people love The Weather Channel, while others prefer AccuWeather or the KBTX app. I also highly encourage having a NOAA weather radio. For resources, I love the National Weather Service. The local office serving our area is the Houston/Galveston office. Their social media pages are great because they post a lot, respond to people, and interact with questions. Local media is also excellent.

Grace Hollowell: Whenever there's an emergency in College Station, the city tries to put that information out on its channels as well. Beyond tornadoes, what other summer weather threats should residents prepare for?

Lauren McGrath: The weather that comes with those strong to severe thunderstorms is just as important because it can produce hail, lightning, heavy rain, flooding, or high-wind events that aren't actually tornadoes. Extreme heat is another major threat.

Grace Hollowell: How dangerous can extreme heat be, especially here in Texas during the summertime?

Lauren McGrath: It can get dangerous very quickly and can even become deadly, especially if you are not prepared or aware of what heat-related illnesses look like.

Grace Hollowell: Speaking of those illnesses, what are the signs of heat exhaustion and heat stroke that people should watch for?

Lauren McGrath: Heat exhaustion involves dizziness, heavy sweating, nausea, and weakness. Heat stroke is an absolute emergency where you need to call 911 immediately. It can cause confusion, an altered mental state, or unconsciousness. The person may be dizzy, their skin is likely dry because they have stopped sweating, and they will be really hot to the touch.

Grace Hollowell: What precautions should people take before heading outdoors for summer activities or outdoor work?

Lauren McGrath: Staying hydrated is really important. Take breaks, preferably indoors in the air conditioning, or at least in the shade. You should also try to avoid peak heat hours, which usually end up being in the afternoon.

Grace Hollowell: I remember a children's show from growing up that had a song saying the sun is hottest between 11 and 2, so I always keep that in mind. How can residents prepare for power outages during severe storms or extreme heat?

Lauren McGrath: Similar to any other power outage, I encourage people to check their emergency kits. As it relates to extreme heat, make sure you have enough water to stay hydrated. You can also close your blinds to keep heat from coming into the house and avoid using large appliances that give off a lot of heat.

Grace Hollowell: What items should everybody store in their emergency kit?

Lauren McGrath: Water and non-perishable food items that can last for several days are essential. You also need flashlights, batteries, phone chargers, a first-aid kit, and medications. Important documents are good to include too. Ready.gov has a whole list of recommendations online, including things people might not normally think about.

Grace Hollowell: One thing we keep in ours is a battery-operated radio so we can get alerts if our phones die or the power goes out. How can families create an emergency plan together?

Lauren McGrath: Ready.gov is another great resource for this. They have a fillable form that families can complete together. The process involves identifying a safe location, making sure everybody knows the plan, establishing a communications plan, and practicing it.

Grace Hollowell: Make sure to include a plan for your pets as well. We talked about that last time, and I realized I only had one crate for my cats. I bought another one, so we are prepared to corral them if there is ever an emergency. What advice do you have for pet owners during severe weather emergencies?

Lauren McGrath: Have carriers ready, and make sure you have enough pet food, medication, and anything else they need on an everyday basis stored in your emergency kit.

Grace Hollowell: The Aggieland Humane Society can also provide resources and tips for keeping pets cool during extreme heat, especially for outdoor pets. What happens behind the scenes during a severe weather event from a city perspective?

Lauren McGrath: Leading up to potential severe weather, we monitor the conditions with the National Weather Service office in Houston/Galveston. We can ask them specific questions about the impacts on the City of College Station. We share that information so city departments can take necessary precautions. This includes checking generators, ensuring the fleet has fuel, and reviewing staffing levels. During the weather event, departments will check frequently flooded areas to keep our response efforts running smoothly.

Grace Hollowell: What role do residents play in helping emergency response efforts run smoothly?

Lauren McGrath: They play a big role. Being prepared ahead of time has a massive impact on our response. Residents should pay attention to city channels and local media, and practice neighbors helping neighbors by checking on each other.

Grace Hollowell: Are there any apps or websites beyond Ready.gov that you recommend residents use to stay informed?

Lauren McGrath: Ready.gov is great from a planning perspective because it has specific tips for heat, winter weather, hurricanes, and tornadoes. I also suggest having a couple of different weather apps based on personal preference, as well as following the National Weather Service social media pages.

Grace Hollowell: If you have a smartphone, make sure to enable those emergency alerts. We recently had a test of the emergency alert system, and enabling them is very important.

Lauren McGrath: We figured out during that test that some people did not receive it because they did not have test messages enabled in their settings. A lot of people disable notifications because they don't want an Amber Alert in the middle of the night, but it is really important to have them enabled so we can reach you to take action during an emergency.

Grace Hollowell: Moving beyond the storm, the clouds are gone and the sun is coming out. What should people do immediately after a tornado or severe weather event?

Lauren McGrath: The first and most important thing is to confirm it is safe to come out. Next, check yourself and the people you are with for injuries.

Grace Hollowell: What are some hidden dangers that people might not realize are associated with the aftermath of severe weather?

Lauren McGrath: Downed power lines are extremely dangerous. Debris and standing floodwaters can also hold hidden hazards. Just be careful and aware of those types of dangers when you are out assessing your property.

Grace Hollowell: How can residents safely report damage or hazards to the city?

Lauren McGrath: Depending on what the hazard is, they can use our non-emergency line or the city's standard reporting processes. If it is an emergency or a life-safety issue—like smelling gas—call 911 immediately and leave the area.

Grace Hollowell: We always like to reiterate that you will never be penalized for calling 911 if you think something is a true emergency. If a restaurant leaves the pickles off your hamburger, that is not an emergency. But if you suspect a real emergency and are unsure, call 911 just to be

safe. Before we wrap up, we have a fun little lightning round of questions related to emergency preparedness. Are you ready?

Lauren McGrath: I'm ready.

Grace Hollowell: What is one emergency item people often forget to pack?

Lauren McGrath: Entertainment for kids. If you have children, having books, coloring books, or puzzles can be really helpful to keep them occupied.

Grace Hollowell: Most important phone app during severe weather?

Lauren McGrath: A reliable weather app of your choice.

Grace Hollowell: Flashlights or candles?

Lauren McGrath: Flashlights.

Grace Hollowell: Your favorite non-perishable snack for emergency kits?

Lauren McGrath: I like protein bars. They are a healthy option and keep you full a bit longer.

Grace Hollowell: Finally, one preparedness tip everyone should know?

Lauren McGrath: Have multiple ways to receive emergency notifications.

Grace Hollowell: Thank you so much for joining me today, Lauren. This was a really great conversation. Where can people find more information?

Lauren McGrath: They can visit the city website, where there is a form they can fill out that comes directly to me. Just make sure to leave your contact information.

Grace Hollowell: And that's what's up!