



On October 25th, Typhoon Yutu slammed into part of our own Red Cross Pacific Islands Region with 180 mph winds and gusts up to 235 mph. Escalating quickly from a Category 1 to 5 in just one day, the eye passed directly over Saipan and Tinian, decimating concrete structures, downing concrete utility poles, killing one person and injuring over 100 with spraying glass and flying debris. Tens of thousands of these Americans were left without electricity and running water, likely for months.

Would Hawaii fare much better? We may have a more modern infrastructure, but Hawaii is the most isolated population on the face of the earth, and far more densely populated than Saipan. About 25-30% of our homes were built before 1995 with single wall construction that could be unsafe during a strong hurricane, without hardening. Homes perched on mountains or near shorelines would be exposed to high winds and storm surge inundation. An estimated 425,000 people would need to evacuate and there is not enough capacity in shelters to accommodate all that may come.

Our infrastructure is fragile and our supply chain is complex. We import 90% of our goods and 100% of fuel, and almost all commodities arrive by sea. There is only 4-7 days of food and 7-day supply of prescription drugs and medical supplies because of “just in time” delivery due to lack of warehouse space. Even if the ports weren’t damaged, it takes up to 14 days to receive shipments from the mainland – and that’s just to Honolulu, not to neighbor islands. Electricity, water, and sewage could be out for 7-9 weeks if spare parts need to come from out of state, and restoration might take many more months in some areas. Debris removal on an island state is a huge challenge, and blocked roads could hamper first responders’ effort to save lives.

Hawaii’s diverse population makes us even more vulnerable, with about 25% speaking non-English languages at home, 12% children nine years or younger, 14% over 65, 11% with a disability, and 1 in 6 living in poverty, one of the highest poverty rates in the nation. Our homeless, working poor, and over 200,000 tourists on any given day lack sufficient emergency food and supplies.

Iniki made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane with 145 mph winds – what happens if a 180 mph Category 5 roars through our islands for 7 hours, like it did in Saipan? We better be prepared.

Do you have at least a 14-day supply of food, water, medications, and other necessities for you and your pets? Are all of your important documents in one place in case you have to evacuate? Do you have cash since credit cards won’t work if the electricity is out? Can you install hurricane clips, window film, or build a safe room so you can shelter in place?

Living in a high rise complicates matters even further. Without electricity, water pumps won’t work. Hauling drinking water up and down the stairs is one thing, but how will you shower and flush the toilet? It might even be a fire hazard to stay. During Hurricane Lane, we responded to 3 brush fires and 5 home fires, a reminder that fires will continue to happen even in the middle of a hurricane.

Small businesses have a 90% chance of failing within 2 years of a major disaster. How will our economy survive?

We have been lucky so far, but we are still in hurricane season, and luck is not a good preparedness strategy. Better late than never. Better safe than sorry.