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Austin medical registry assisting vulnerable residents during power outages

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AUSTIN (KXAN) — With record-breaking heat in Austin and calls for conservation efforts statewide, the possibility of controlled outages is top of mind for many residents. But what happens if you have a medical condition that requires electricity access?

Austin Energy's medically vulnerable registry services 375 customers in Austin with a qualifying medical condition that requires life support equipment, such as a feeding pump or dialysis machine. As part of the program, Austin Energy works with registered customers to identify backup plans in the event of a power outage to help connect them to air conditioning, electricity and other necessary medical resources.

"The registry is for us, Austin Energy, to know what residential customers are in our service territory who have medical needs or medical equipment — even more importantly, in their home," said Ronnie Mendoza, manager of customer assistance programming with Austin Energy. "And electricity is a life or death type situation."

On Sunday, a car crash involving an electric pole cut off power for approximately 20 registry customers. Mendoza said he and his team work on figuring out backup plans for when situations like that happen. Backup plans can include coordinating trips to cooling centers or hospitals to reconnect customers with necessary equipment.

Beyond customers using life support equipment, other qualifying conditions include people with health conditions such as multiple sclerosis, or those who have been in an accident and are have trouble paying for their utility bills in addition to medical fees.

While small-scale outages warrant backup plans, more severe outages like the February 2021 winter storm require assistance from Austin Energy's community partners to keep customers safe. Austin Energy works with 56 community-based agencies, churches and nonprofits stationed throughout the city to coordinate transportation services, shelter, electric access and medical care as

needed.

Summer power outages are an especially challenging situation, Mendoza said, given the dual concern of power loss paired with potential health complications spurred by extreme heat. Amid the Electric Reliability Council of Texas' (ERCOT) calls for energy conservation, he said the immediate goal becomes transporting customers to cooling centers and making sure they have backup medical supplies secured.

“In this heat-type situation, for somebody who has a medical piece of equipment in the home, we make sure that they have backup supplies,” he said. “A lot of this medical equipment can stay self-sustained for up to 24 hours, some of them 48, 72 hours, depending on the medical equipment.”

Other heat-related resources include financial assistance for high energy bills and HVAC replacement and repair services for medically vulnerable customers, Mendoza added.

To [join the registry](#), customers can call 512-494-9400 and request an application. From there, the customer fills out the form, which includes their doctor's certification to confirm customers have a qualifying medical condition. Once signed by both the doctor and customer, the registrant is enrolled in the system and pulled from general billing into specialty billing.