

Opinion How to lessen suffering after the worst hurricanes? Outfit restaurants with solar panels and batteries.

By Devin De Wulf

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When Hurricane Ida hit southeast Louisiana late last month, it devastated Chauvin, Houma, LaPlace and Grand Isle, and battered New Orleans, my home. In Bywater, my neighborhood, the power went out Sunday, Aug. 29, and returned Wed., Sept 8. Every day we lacked electricity, the heat index surpassed 100.

My wife is an ER doctor at a local hospital, so we had to stay. Everyone else with means evacuated, but those without the means — around half my neighbors — couldn't.

Because this is New Orleans, we knew this day would come. So my wife and I had prepared — by outfitting our house with solar panels and two batteries. On my block, I helped Mr. Roy plug in his oxygen machine when he needed to. Mr. Joe and his partner hooked up their fridge to our system during daylight hours. We had a cellphone charging station on my front porch, supplying power for people's only means of communication with the outside world.

Thanks to the solar panels and batteries, my block was more resilient. The rest of the city fared much worse.

At least eight people were reported to have died of heat exhaustion. Access to food was difficult. Feeding stations were set up at rec centers, churches and other sites, but for many people, these were too far away; gas for cars was in short supply, and the heat made it dangerous to walk.

So people ate what they could from warming fridges and freezers. Because of my prior community organizing, I started getting calls from neighborhood restaurants: Could we redistribute their frozen meat? (In last year's [Hurricane Zeta](#), one restaurant, Boucherie, lost around \$10,000 of meat, cheese and produce. Much of that food ends up in trash bins, where it decomposes and releases methane. Multiply that by every restaurant in our city.)

The scariest part — the dark thought I keep from my young children — is that we still have two more months of hurricane season.

But my hurricane experience led to an idea. If solar panels installed on one house could help this many people, consider the possibilities if structures all over the city — especially restaurants — were similarly outfitted. Now, fellow organizers and I have launched an effort, "[Get Lit Stay Lit](#)," to make this happen.

Imagine a system of neighborhood restaurants that could operate off-grid, using solar panels and batteries to enable freezers and fridges to stay on — no matter what the larger electric grid does. Solar panels collect the sun's energy and convert it to electricity. Combine panels with one or two suitcase-size lithium-ion batteries, and you unlock the ability to store that energy and use it whenever you want. When the grid goes down, the battery powers your home or business as if the grid were still up.

In a storm's aftermath, restaurants storm-proofed with solar panels and batteries would serve as hubs providing food, cooling stations, ice and charging stations for their neighbors — a decentralized network of resilience giving each block a better chance to survive. Particularly in our most impoverished neighborhoods, like Tremé, the Ninth Ward and New Orleans East, these climate-hardened restaurants could provide communities with healing and sustenance on their worst days.

This solution could address food insecurity, solve supply-chain issues, provide charging stations and keep ice cold. Adopted at scale, it could also help fight climate change.

When it's not hurricane season, solar systems could save each restaurant hundreds of dollars a month on utility bills — savings that could be reinvested in a program to expand the solar network, creating evergreen funding.

The batteries are crucial. Without them, solar panels connected to the energy grid do nothing when the grid is down. Each battery costs around \$10,000, and the cost per restaurant would probably be \$40,000 to \$60,000 — a hefty sum, but one that could be offset with tax credits.

The idea of creating microgrids in New Orleans isn't new. In 2016, the nonprofit [Alliance for Affordable Energy](#) proposed building microgrids across the city. But Entergy, the local utility, resisted the plan, and although the city won millions of dollars in federal funds to invest in microgrids, [no building has begun](#).

What is new is our focus on restaurants. By leveraging tax credits, donations and the evergreen funding streams created by installing solar systems on hundreds of restaurants, we can create a system of resiliency stretching from community to community. One "Stay Lit" restaurant will help create the next.

The people of New Orleans can no longer wait for the overwhelmed city government to act, and we don't need outside nonprofits flying in supplies. We just need batteries connected to solar panels in a thoughtful, systematic approach. And if it works? The model could be applied in other towns and nations being devastated by climate change's effects.