



# PREPARING YOUR LAW FIRM FOR HURRICANES AND OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS

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rocket matter



# Introduction

I'm a pro at disasters. I've been in earthquakes and blizzards. I've changed a flat tire with tornadoes in the vicinity. I've tracked and prepared for far too many hurricanes making a beeline for my home in Florida.

Luckily, I've made it through each of these incidents unscathed and with little property damage, which unfortunately is much more than a lot of people can say. However, after each event, I learned some important lessons.

I not only learned how to protect myself and my family. I also learned how to protect my business. As the founder and CEO of a legal software company, I've always been very aware of how critical it is that our company never misses a beat (no matter what storm is headed our way). In fact, as you'll discover in this eBook, Rocket Matter stayed fully operational when Hurricane Irma targeted our hometown in 2017.

Short of personal harm, there is no reason why law firms and other businesses can't keep providing services to their clients in this day and age. Cloud and internet technologies allow lawyers to access data and communicate from anywhere at any time. Also, a little disaster preparedness and business continuity planning can go a very long way in protecting yourself and your firm. With this eBook as your guide, you'll learn the basics you need to know.

Larry Port

Rocket Matter Founder and CEO



## Have a Plan

Hurricanes don't just arrive out of nowhere...you can watch one for days, getting a decent idea of whether or not one is headed your way. If it seems like a hurricane might strike near your office, consider leaving town for a few days. In terms of evacuation, listen to your local authorities as to whether or not to leave your home and follow their advice. If you're going to evacuate, make sure you leave enough time to get to your destination safely. The last place you want to be during a hurricane is in your car, stuck in traffic. And don't forget to keep your gas tank filled at all times!

Also, you might want to get at least some key employees out of dodge, too. Where to go? Your best bet: The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) suggests heading at least 20 to 50 miles inland.

Develop an emergency plan with your staff and review it once a year. Know which employees will take care of which responsibilities and how you'll communicate with the staff. Make sure your staff knows you are there for them and reassure them that they can work remotely if need be.

[The American Bar Association Committee on Disaster Response and Preparedness](#) has a myriad of other resources on preparing your firm for hurricanes and other disasters. Take advantage of this great resource.



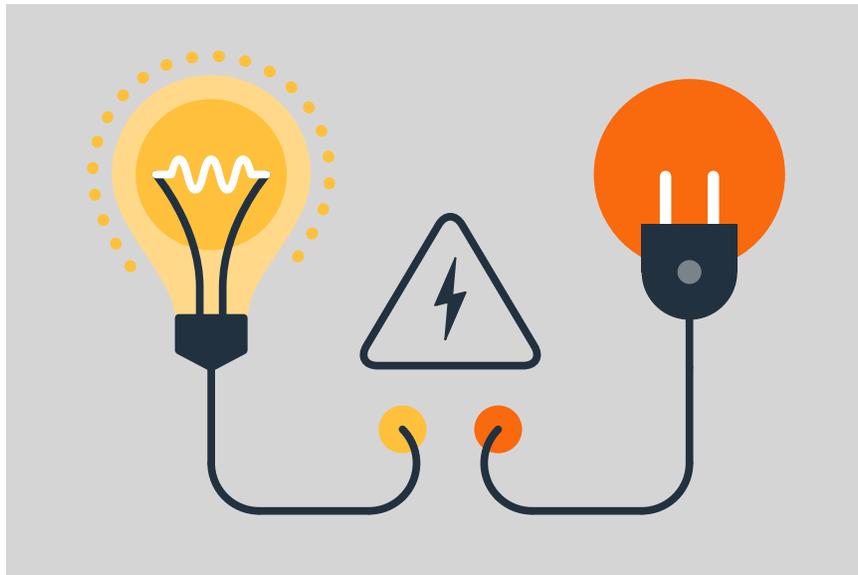
## Remember, Safety First

You'll want to keep your clients' data safe—and we'll get to that in this eBook. Of course, you've got to keep yourself and your employees safe, too. American Red Cross provides tons of [extremely helpful links](#) that cover everything from setting up an [evacuation plan](#), stocking up on supplies, protecting your home, and making sure that you have an [emergency kit](#) (including [a separate one for pets](#)) ready to go. [The Department of Homeland Security](#) and [FEMA](#) provide other useful information, too.

Don't forget about your office! According to the National Hurricane Survival Initiative, "An often over-looked segment of hurricane safety is the workplace." For instance, you'll want to have your roof evaluated to ensure that it can withstand a storm. You might sandbag any areas prone to flooding. [Here are some other steps to protect your physical business.](#)

During a storm, remember to always stay away from windows or any part of the building vulnerable to falling trees. Also, make sure you know a safe room in your office—usually an interior room that doesn't have windows.

Also, be very careful going outside after the storm. Electrical wires can fall and combined with rain water, this combination can be deadly. Trees will be down and traffic lights will be out. Emergency crews are going to need the roads, so stay off of them as best as you can and let them do their work



## Account for Power Loss

Even if a hurricane, tornado, or other natural disaster doesn't hit you directly, you could still lose power. Possibly consider investing in a generator at your office and/or home or finding a friend who has one (and crashing at their place) so you can still get some work done until the power goes back on. Or course, you must keep generators outside, at least 20 feet away from windows and doors. Keep them away from moisture and never attempt to power the house or office wiring by plugging a generator into a wall outlet. [American Red Cross has a lot of helpful info](#) on finding a generator and keeping safe when using one.

What about cell service? Even if your cell phone is charged, you might not be able to make calls if cell towers lack power, are overloaded, or have been damaged. One solution: You could get a landline without an answering machine. Your phone service might work if the power doesn't, and those old-school phones just need a phone jack, not an outlet.

Of course, even if the cell towers are functioning well, if the power is out you won't be able to use your phone indefinitely as your battery will eventually die. [Here are some other great tips on making your cell service last.](#)



## Get in the Cloud

Of course, one of the biggest concerns for lawyers during natural disasters is the possibility of losing all of your pertinent data. Luckily, one of the biggest benefits of using [legal practice management software such as Rocket Matter](#) is that all of your work is safe in the cloud. When you keep all of your documents on-premise, they are always susceptible to hurricanes, other natural disasters, and theft. In other words, you could lose all your work! However, when all of your work is stored remotely in the cloud, you don't have to worry. If the unthinkable happens and you're using Rocket Matter, for instance, you still have access to your calendar, tasks, and every bit of information regarding every single case you're working on.

Of course, it would be great if you chose Rocket Matter for your legal software. However, even if you go with another cloud-based option, that's so much better than using a desktop practice management solution and keeping tons of paper files in your office that can get destroyed. Seriously! Just get in the cloud.



## Back Up Your Work

One of the first attorney populations to start scanning their files were the New Orleans attorneys in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. They experienced firsthand the devastation of losing their original documents. But it's not enough just to scan: An equally critical part is getting those digital files to a different geographic location. Here are three options:

- You can use a dedicated cloud-based document management system, such as Dropbox, Box, or OneDrive. There are also legal-specific ones such as Worldox and NetDocuments, which are more sophisticated and include robust workflow and metadata support.
- Save money by leveraging a cloud-based practice management program with document storage built in. Products such as Rocket Matter have document storage built in to their legal workflows. Typically, digital files stored in these applications can be shared with clients through portals. Additionally, you should be able to leverage document automation features (such as Rocket Matter's document assembly) that allow you to quickly produce your standard documents.
- Employ a straight-up digital backup storage device. Services like Mozy, Crashplan, or Carbonite can monitor your folder structures and continually back up your files.



## How to Help With Disaster Relief Efforts

As a lawyer, you can help your community both before and after a natural disaster strikes. Consider the following: Businesses and individuals need legal assistance for continuity planning, securing title documents, complying with insurance, and a myriad of other reasons. And this is before anything happens.

After a natural disaster strikes, many people face numerous legal issues ranging from insurance disputes and FEMA appeals to landlord-tenant issues and consumer fraud. If you can spare your time and resources, consider joining the [National Disaster Legal Aid Advocacy Center](#), a group that connects advocates and volunteers with communities and individuals impacted by natural disasters.

Though it may seem like a no-brainer, you should actually refrain from donating items such as clothes, shoes, toys, and canned goods. This contributes to what relief workers call “The Disaster After the Disaster.” Various shelters have specific needs, and if they receive a lot of items they don’t really need then those donations can become more burdensome than helpful. Also, donations may end up discarded if they cannot be physically delivered due to distribution channels being shut down.

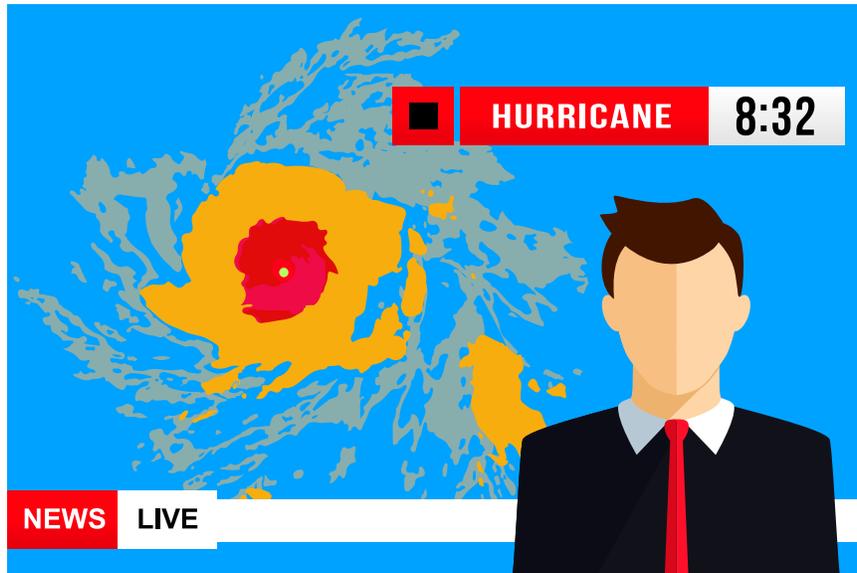
Still looking to make a difference but can't work pro bono? Here are some of your best options for helping with disaster relief efforts:

**Donate Money.** While the preferred emergency response agency of the U. S. government is the [American Red Cross](#), there are plenty of other groups that collect monetary donations after natural disasters. Just do some research first to ensure that you are donating to a reputable organization. [Charity Navigator](#) is a good place to start.

**Give Blood.** After natural disasters, the need for blood donations rises exponentially due to physical injuries people suffer. Not sure where to go to donate? [This site](#) from the American Red Cross will allow you to find the nearest blood drive center based on your zip code.

**Share Your Space.** If your office remains operational after a natural disaster, consider allowing less-fortunate friends and neighbors to use some of your resources, including office space, electricity, paper, and Wi-Fi.

**Volunteer Your Time.** Consider volunteering for events and activities that will help disaster victims. For instance, spend time working at a shelter, clean out damaged houses, or deliver meals to first responders.



# A Real-Life Story: How Rocket Matter Survived Hurricane Irma

*By Larry Port*

We at Rocket Matter first became aware of Hurricane Irma on Tuesday, September 5th, 2017. That was the day we released Atlas Gold, our second biggest product release in our ten-year history. Not only did we update our core application with massive new features, including an entire secure messaging framework, we launched brand-new mobile applications on both iOS and Android. I mention this not to showcase our work, but to point out that we had been planning this release since 2016 and were very excited to celebrate it as a team. However, instead of popping champagne, we had to shift gears and prepare for this dangerous storm.

With clients all over the world, we knew that we couldn't afford for our customer service team to miss a beat. So we asked for volunteers from work to evacuate for business continuity purposes and reserved them a rental home outside of the cone of danger. I rented a home for my family as well. By Tuesday night, we knew we were going to have a core operational team as well as our management team somewhere safe and online.

On Wednesday, we decided to let all Rocket Matter staffers work remote. Gas is hard to come by in situations like these, so I didn't want people burning their survival fuel getting to the office. People also needed time to prep their houses with shutters, remove any outside furniture and debris, and help out relatives. We instituted rotations so some

employees could prep for the storm while others manned the sales and support lines. Everyone was very anxious about Irma and what kind of destruction she might bring, but they still got their work done. I was amazed how everyone pulled together.

Anticipating disruptions to our standard methods of communication, which is primarily in person and via Slack, we prepared alternate means of getting in touch with people. We made sure we had everyone's contact information up-to-date and distributed it in a printable spreadsheet.

We finalized communication protocols on Wednesday, specifying who was supposed to check in, with whom, and when. Most critically, employees were to check in with their managers immediately after the storm.

That evening my family and I began our evacuation. Speak to anyone who evacuated Irma, which was by some estimates the largest evacuation in U.S. history, and they will express gratitude for the traffic app Waze—it got us through the worst of the traffic jams. Still, what should have been an 11-hour drive to Northern Georgia took 18 hours. (That's a lot of quality together time for two adults, two kids, and two dogs!) For the people who left on Thursday, the drive took 25 hours.

Even when we were safely out of Florida, we watched helplessly as the storm did not change its course nor let up in intensity. Every person in the warning cone obsessively checked the updates, issued every three hours, from the National Hurricane Center. It was becoming more certain with each unchanging update that South Florida was going to suffer greatly.

On Thursday, I called every one of my employees. For the bosses out there facing a similar situation, I would recommend taking the time to do this. It felt good to check in with everyone, and they greatly appreciated the call. The ones in the storm's path put on a brave face, but you could hear the concern in their voices. By Friday many wished they, too, had evacuated, but by then it was prohibitively risky to get on the road.

Then, we got a break. The Saturday advisories projected the track of the storm to shift to the West Coast of Florida. The relief felt by knowing we'd avoid a direct hit was greatly tempered by the sickening feeling for our friends and family on that side of the state. Also,

some of our staff had actually evacuated to Tampa, so they had to head out into the traffic jams again.

On Sunday night and early Monday, the storm made landfall. Shortly after it passed, I gradually started hearing from my employees. Reports trickled in up the chain of command, either directly or passed along. Some people could only eke out a broken call, as many people had poor (if any) cell reception. However, we were very lucky. Everyone was safe and uninjured.

Meanwhile on Monday, while Florida was still getting pummeled, we opened for business and were able to serve all of our clients. Because of Slack, Salesforce, and our VOIP system, to the outside world it appeared we were operating normally. Not only did we have our dispatched remote team in place, but some employees evacuated on their own nickel to places as diverse as Los Angeles, Paris, Wisconsin, and North Carolina.

The aftermath of the storm was trying. Irma was so large that while she might have hit the west coast of Florida, the east coast was certainly affected as well. Some of our relatives fared poorly, losing cars and income streams due to the power outages. Massive trees were down everywhere, and they brought down power lines and crashed through roofs.

Our building was without power for six business days following the storm. Teams clustered in different houses that had power and in a temporary office set up by my landlord. The people with power and internet were able to work from home. It was a frustrating period where we were entirely at the mercy of the utility company to fix the phases coming into our building. However, while we missed out on the camaraderie and collaboration that comes with working together in person, every team was able to get their work done.

But finally, on the second Tuesday after the storm, we were all back at Rocket Matter's HQ. Our staff, a very tight knit group, was reunited after almost two weeks of separation between storm prep and recovery. That Friday we closed early and celebrated our survival and, finally, our Atlas Gold release.

I'm proud of how our team prepared for the storm. We were able to keep serving our clients the entire time, even when at one point we thought a Category 5 hurricane was

headed directly for us. And while we did everything we could at the time to protect ourselves and our company, we certainly learned even more safety precautions we could have taken. Hopefully, we'll never have to put those in action.

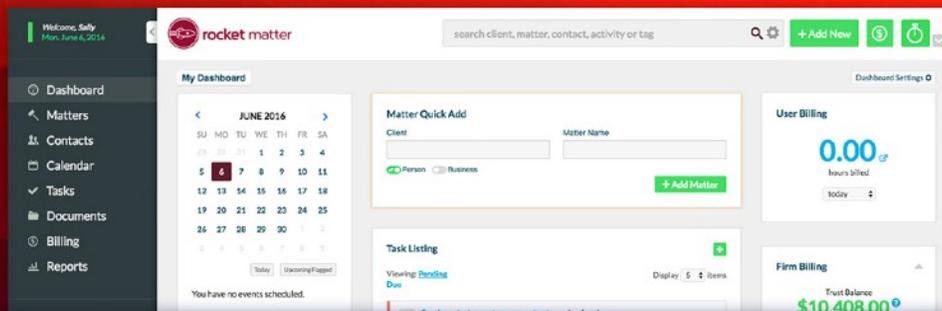
However, if we do, we'll be ready.



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## About Rocket Matter

Rocket Matter helps law firms offer better client service and also increase revenues by more than 20%. The company was the first cloud-based legal practice management software on the market, landing its first client in 2007. It has been a leader ever since.

Rocket Matter has the most powerful, easy-to-use time and billing software in the industry. Also, when law firms want to make more money, go paperless, or increase confidence in their trust accounting, Rocket Matter helps them achieve those goals. With award-winning customer service based in the United States, it's no wonder thousands of law firms swear by Rocket Matter.

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