



**Sunset Advisory Commission
Testimony on Department of Public Safety Hearing**

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May 23, 2018**

New Issue

Department of Public Safety (DPS) should better coordinate the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry (STEAR) and provide greater guidance to local jurisdictions

The State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry (STEAR) was intended to help local emergency management to identify and locate individuals who would need assistance during a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Harvey. The STEAR system has great potential to make a difference in the safety and well-being of vulnerable individuals across Texas with access and functional needs, transportation challenges, or disabilities during such a disaster. The STEAR system provides for registration of vulnerable individuals into a centralized database, so that local officials may incorporate a strategy for meeting the needs of these individuals into their local emergency plans. Hurricane Harvey provided a real life look at how STEAR did and did not work.

The decentralized process established for the STEAR system creates an inconsistent and often confusing process at the local level. The way STEAR data is utilized is left completely up to local management and therefore varies by jurisdiction. While some jurisdictions successfully utilize STEAR data, there are others who do not have clear instruction about what their role is with regard to the registry and could benefit from greater guidance. There is also no clear process for STEAR registrants to get information on how their local jurisdiction will use this data. As a result, consumers are left with the impression that they will be rescued during an evacuation, when their local jurisdiction may not be utilizing the STEAR list in this manner. To further complicate matters, many individuals register for STEAR past the start of hurricane season. This makes the data even more difficult for local jurisdictions to use effectively for planning, as it may be largely incomplete.

Currently, 57,000 Texans are registered with the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry. These individuals have all self-reported as having transportation challenges, access or functional needs, or disabilities. Given the special needs of this population, it is important that jurisdictions receive guidance on how to best use this data tool and consumers are able to access information that helps them understand what being on this list will mean for them.

Recommendations:

- DPS Provide Best Practices for Utilizing and Integrating STEAR into Local Emergency Management Plans

AARP recommends that Texas Department of Emergency Management (TDEM) create a best practices template or tool book describing how STEAR data may be incorporated into local emergency planning. This template or tool book should be easily accessible and placed on the STEAR webpage.

Currently, there is no best practices template or tool book for local emergency management teams to reference on how to best incorporate STEAR into their planning. Because the way STEAR data is utilized depends upon local emergency management teams, it is incorporated more effectively in some locations than others. Providing a tool book will greatly assist local jurisdictions with less experience in emergency management in incorporating and utilizing STEAR data effectively. It will also create a space in which to report information about STEAR gained from past experiences and disasters, such as Hurricane Harvey.

- Require Jurisdictions to Provide DPS with Information on How the Jurisdiction Plans to Use STEAR and require DPS to Make this Information Publicly Available

AARP recommends that jurisdictions include how they choose to use STEAR data in the emergency preparedness documents they report to DPS. This would allow prospective STEAR registrants and those assisting them to understand what they can expect from STEAR and how their information will be used.

Registrants often misunderstand the role of STEAR, believing it is a guarantee of evacuation assistance during a disaster. This is especially true of home health clients. Currently, home health agency providers are required by law (HB2558, 81R 2009) to inform clients about STEAR and if the client wishes to register, assist them with the process. However, providers cannot give their clients accurate information regarding how the client's particular jurisdiction uses STEAR data. This is due to the fact that local jurisdictions are not required to report this information. This often leads to unrealistic

expectations on behalf of clients. It is important for these individuals to understand (for example) if during a natural disaster, the jurisdiction plans to evacuate all those on the STEAR list, or if they only plan to do so in the event of a mandatory evacuation. Reporting this information will also give DPS (and therefore TDEM) the opportunity to see how jurisdictions across Texas are using STEAR data and whether any of them could use guidance with the process.

- DPS Should Conduct a Public Education Effort to Increase Awareness of STEAR and Encourage Timely Enrollment

AARP recommends a public information campaign to raise awareness about STEAR, including when and how to register for it. These efforts should be primarily concentrated in coastal regions which are more at risk for natural disasters such as hurricanes. That being said, it is still important that public awareness efforts extend across the state, as STEAR information is used for all types of disasters.

It is important that individuals register with STEAR prior to the start of hurricane season (June 1st), or during annual registration in March, as this gives local emergency management teams time to incorporate the data into their plans. However, both coastal and non-coastal emergency management departments report that a number of individuals currently register with STEAR immediately prior to an impending disaster. For jurisdictions that use STEAR data to inform their emergency operations, this kind of last minute registration slows down emergency management response during a disaster. A concerted public education effort in this area will help ensure that individuals register with STEAR prior to the start of hurricane season.

For More Information, Contact:

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