

Docs Resilient after Wilma, but What About Running Your Office? Seven Lessons

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One pediatrician in Palm Beach County was lucky enough to get his power back one week after Wilma. But the building where his billing service was located had no power for two weeks, and managers locked out the tenants. The result: The pediatrician was forced to see patients amid chaos and uncertainty with no support and sporadic communication from his vendor.

Another doctor, a nephrologist in Dade County, didn't have power but wanted to see patients as soon as possible after the hurricane. His billing service was in contact with him immediately after the storm, and they hand delivered to his office a hard copy of his appointments and superbills for every patient. The doctor saw as many patients as possible and his back office maintained control – even without power.

It's this new generation of more sophisticated companies that will make it easier for medical offices to bounce back quickly after the inevitable next storm.

Hurricane Wilma was a reality-check for companies that provide medical offices with Internet-based practice management software (also known as application service providers, or ASP-model software). Billing and collection services and other firms that serve physicians were also put to the test. These companies all make big promises to protect your practice data, to provide reliable software, to protect your billing, and to support your office during and immediately following a storm like Wilma.

By most indications, the promises were kept and the planning paid off for those ASP-model companies who were prepared. Their client practices in the hardest-hit areas of South Florida had access to data from office and from home, and there was reliable customer support immediately after Wilma passed.

Internet reliability and security also scored well. Practices outside the tri-county area saw patients the same day Wilma hit, Monday the 24th, without a single flicker in service.

Still, for practices that use billing services or Internet-based software, some important early lessons emerged from the days that followed Hurricane Wilma:

Lesson 1: Your vendor must have a clear management hierarchy, and beware owner/operators. For any vendor your practice deals with, but especially a billing service, there should be clear responsibilities to the clients and defined lines of communication at all times – it's even more crucial following a natural disaster. Be wary of vendors where the owner is also your main point of contact within the company, or worse, when that

person also is doing most of the work for your practice. After the next storm, chances are this owner/operator will not be focused on your practice's needs.

Lesson 2: Your billing service must have a real, rehearsed Business Continuity Plan. Power outages were widespread after Wilma. Was your vendor prepared, or was their office closed for two weeks? What happens if power returns to your medical office, but your vendor's place of business is without power? What plans are in place for the billing company to continue serving you even if their workplace was damaged?

Lesson 3: Your vendor must have the resources to support you when conditions are worst, in the immediate hours and days after the next storm. Don't forget the chaos that followed Wilma, when everyone was trying to re-open businesses under less than perfect conditions (ie, power or phone is out, employees impacted, traffic nightmares). What can your billing service or software supplier do to help you? What kind of team is in place? Is their staff motivated and responsible?

Lesson 4: Your appointment schedule and superbills are "mission critical." Even under the worst conditions, you may still be able to see some patients and thus generate revenue – but you must have your appointment schedule, and you need superbills for each patient. How can your vendor help you with these? Without them, your office can't run effectively, so make sure your vendor is there to support you.

Lesson 5: Generators are easy to set up and cheap to run, so consider buying one. A small generator (5 KW) and 10 gallons of gas per day is enough to power a 1-2 doctor office (computer, a few lights, a small fridge, a couple of fans). If you can, buy one now and be prepared.

Lesson 6: Internet-based software comes in handy when doctors or employees must do some work from home. The Internet, for the most part, passed its first big natural disaster test in South Florida. From most reports, the Internet came back with the electricity, although a couple of local DSL dark spots remained. A strong ASP-model billing service will be prepared for any possible scenario. Make sure your vendor can help your office see patients and continue effective, error-free claims submission.

Lesson 7: Protect your practice data. Most practices are familiar with the ritual of the nightly back-up, but where are the tapes kept? Although I heard few reports of damage to computer servers located in medical offices that contained patient data, Hurricane Wilma should remind you that office buildings are designed to be comfortable for patients, not to protect computer equipment and data. A properly set-up ASP-model vendor will have your practice data stored on servers in a secure, professionally managed facility.

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