



Severe weather is increasingly causing widespread power outages in Pittsburgh. This organization wants to fund solutions.

Henry L. Hillman Foundation’s ‘Powered & Prepared Initiative’ seeks proposals from nonprofits and municipal organizations



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Nate King got an unexpected call at 5 a.m.

The power was out on a cold February day in 2025 at Family House, a 121-room Shadyside complex that provides housing for patients and their families traveling to Pittsburgh for medical care.

Many patients rely on around-the-clock electricity to power medical devices, such as oxygen machines. Others who use wheelchairs need access to working elevators.

King, Family House’s chief operations and administrative officer, said Duquesne Light assured him that power would be restored quickly. But four hours in, an equipment failure 100 feet underground still had them in the dark.

“It was just trying to go through plans A, B and C,” he told the Post-Gazette this week as he recounted the harrowing hours without power in the 88,000-square-foot facility last year.

“There’s a lot of crucial items that we have to have, and electricity pretty much fuels all of it.”

A lack of power can jeopardize the lives of people that organizations such as Family House serve.



Shannon Hefferan and Chris Leonardi of the National Weather Service in Moon look over storm damage in Wilkinsburg on April 30, 2025.

(Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette)

It can also hinder their ability to provide essential services to the community during natural disasters — including when there are [widespread outages](#) like Pittsburgh saw in April 2025, when 95 mph winds caused more than half a million residents to lose power, some for weeks on end.

“A lot of organizations don’t think about it until something happens, and then they realize [they] needed to prepare better,” said Alexandra Taylor, program officer at the Downtown-based Henry L. Hillman Foundation. “There’s a real gap.”

The foundation is trying to close that gap.

As [severe weather events across the Pittsburgh region](#) become increasingly common, the fallout from power outages puts some of the region’s most vulnerable populations at risk.

That’s upping the urgency to enhance critical energy infrastructure and develop emergency plans, Taylor said.

The foundation on Wednesday announced a \$4.5 million “Powered & Prepared Initiative,” seeking proposals from nonprofits and municipal organizations for backup power solutions and emergency preparedness plans.

Up to 15 selected applicants from 10 counties across southwestern Pennsylvania will each receive \$300,000 toward installing backup power generators.

“After last year’s storms, our team heard from organizations that had suffered significant setbacks because of power outages,” David K. Roger, president of Henry L. Hillman Foundation, said in a statement.

“Our hope is that the Powered & Prepared Initiative gets organizations thinking now about investments in backup power so they don’t have to worry about major setbacks the next time severe storms roll through the area.”



*Administrators at Family House and representatives of The Henry L. Hillman Foundation look at the stained glass windows at the family room at the Family House, Tuesday, May 26, 2026.
(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)*

Exposing vulnerabilities

By 6 p.m. on that February night more than a year ago, temperatures were dropping in the dark outside the Family House.

King began calling nearby hotels in an effort to relocate the building's residents. Three hours later, everyone was safely evacuated.

But those 30-some hours without power cost Family House upward of \$65,000, not including the hotel expenditures, King said. The nonprofit was out \$40,000 in spoiled food alone.

"We really noticed that day how much vulnerability we had," King said. "Not only as an organization, but for our guests, too."

King soon started talking with the Henry L. Hillman Foundation about a solution.

By this past January, the foundation provided \$500,000 for the purchase and installation of a 500-kilowatt backup generator.

It was put to the test in March, [when hundreds of thousands lost power](#) as tropical storm-force winds tore through the region again.

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“When our lights blink, I look to the heavens and say, ‘please, God, no.’”

“As soon as that power went off, this went on,” King said this week, pointing to the generator outside the Liberty Avenue building. “There was zero impact to us at all.”

After working with the Family House and in the wake of the [deadly derecho last spring](#), Taylor said foundation leaders began thinking about how they could support more organizations and help them better prepare for potential dayslong power outages.

The derecho, which marked the farthest north a weather system of that magnitude has been recorded since the turn of the century, left swaths of damage across the city.

And the National Weather Service’s Pittsburgh office had issued 111 severe thunderstorm and tornado warnings through Wednesday, fourth-most on record through that date since it began tracking alerts in 1986.

“Most essential service providers know how to operate without electricity for a day or two,” Roger said. “When the outage lasts longer, the negative impact on the community increases significantly.”

Year-round threats

The worst of the weather generally hits the region from May through July, but weather-related outages can occur year-round.

This winter, the Merakey Allegheny Valley School, which provides homes and a range of services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, experienced a snow-related outage at its Robinson location for roughly 24 hours.

Like at Family House, Merakey Allegheny Valley School residents depend on life-sustaining equipment that requires electricity, and some take medications that need to be refrigerated.

The bitter cold also compounded the risks to residents.

“You know what can happen,” said Karen Hunter, health services supervisor at the facility serving about 105 individuals, many who are nonambulatory and nonverbal. “Interruptions can really take a toll on people.”



*A man walks down Warrington Avenue in Allentown during a snowstorm Jan. 25, 2026.
(Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)*

The above-average snowfall and, at times, extreme cold this past winter spurred more action.

The Polk Foundation, a sister foundation to Henry L. Hillman Foundation, is installing five emergency generators to ensure the facility has uninterrupted power during the next outage.

It was the collaboration with Family House and Merakey Allegheny Valley School, Taylor said, that proved the program could work on a larger scale — and demonstrated the fallout nonprofits could face without it.

When Hunter goes home at night, she said she thinks about the health and safety of the people she cares for every day — and how that can be swept

away by the next storm.

“When our lights blink, I look to the heavens and say, ‘please, God, no,’ ” she told the Post-Gazette as she recalled the emotions she felt during the outage several months ago. “Those are my first words.”

But once the new generators are up and running at the Merakey Allegheny Valley School, Hunter won’t have to worry when the lights flicker.

“This is a godsend to us,” she said.

The derecho’s aftermath

More than 325,000 Duquesne Light customers lost power during the April 2025 derecho — more than half of the utility’s customer base across most of Allegheny and Beaver counties — as crews replaced more than 500 utility poles and 300 transformers.

The [company rethought some of its operations](#) in the wake of the storm, including scaling up its workforce.

“The April storm spotlighted the importance of resiliency, both for our organization and for the communities we serve,” Duquesne Light spokeswoman Kristy Stone said.



A Duquesne Light worker responds to a downed power line on the North Side on Thursday, May 1, 2025.

(Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

As it stands, Duquesne Light’s power restoration process falls into four tiers, she said.

First, that means resolving immediate threats to safety, before restoring power to critical infrastructure related to public safety and health, she said.

Then crews address the largest circuits affecting the most customers before turning to smaller circuits and clusters of outages.

Some nonprofits and municipal organizations could be considered critical to public safety and health, Stone said, which may make them a greater priority in the restoration process.

“An extended outage can disrupt critical operations, forcing leaders to make difficult decisions that strain resources, staff and infrastructure,” Stone said. “These disruptions often create a ripple effect across the community, limiting access to essential services such as healthcare, food assistance, childcare and emergency support.”

Taylor said it quickly became clear from conversations with emergency managers, utilities and nonprofits that they could benefit from backup

power solutions and more extensive emergency planning.

“If people in their houses lost power ... they might not have the income available to completely replace the contents of their fridge on short notice,” she said. “But if the food pantry down the street lost power and they had to throw away all of their food, too, it just becomes this escalating challenge.”

Applicants for the grants are required to develop an emergency plan. Interested participants must [register](#) for the initiative by 5 p.m. Aug. 26 and submit an application by 5 p.m. Sept. 17.

Applications for the grants will be evaluated by a panel of experts, including representation from Duquesne Light, with final awardees selected by Henry L. Hillman Foundation and announced by next spring.

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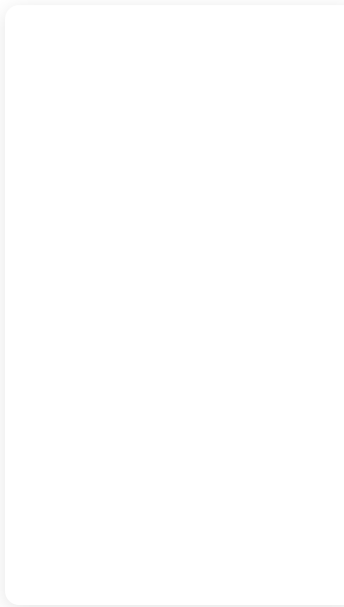
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