

Cicero Residents Reeling From Summer Floods Blame City's Poor Communicatio

As Cicero recovers from historic summer floods, some residents believe the city fell short in communicating support and town's majority immigrant population.



Efrain Soriano for Borderless Magazine

Cicero resident Moris Sanchez's home has flooded multiple times, including this past summer when eight inches of rain fell over three days.

By [Maia McDonald](#) | January 8, 2024 | [Environment](#), [Health](#), [Top Stories](#), [Trending](#)

Inside Moris Sanchez's home in suburban Cicero, a coat of paint conceals new drywall in some areas of the basement.

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He has slowly been working to restore the space, repairing the water heater and dryer. He's discarded some wooden furniture, storage boxes with winter clothes, blankets and Christmas decorations — all damaged months earlier by severe

Over the summer, more than eight inches of rain fell in Cicero between June 29 and July 2, flooding the town and leaving scores of families grappling with expensive property damage and the loss of personal items.

But this is not the first time Sanchez's basement flooded from heavy rainfall. Even so, it remains just as challenging to navigate with every storm. Previous attempts to flood-proof his property have failed, leaving the family with steep repair bills.

Sanchez received \$3,500 from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help with repairs, but he said it wasn't enough. He used a credit card to cover the remaining costs for repairs.

"I've had to pay every time that my house has been flooded," Sanchez said. "I've always had to repair the electric system, like a computer, the AC, the heater, and the water heater."



Moris Sanchez's block suffered severe flooding last summer in Cicero, Ill. Photo courtesy of Moris Sanchez



City leaders promised robust communication to help the predominately Spanish-speaking immigrant residents navigate the aftermath of the storms. The Town of Cicero initially hosted public meetings and worked to be declared a disaster area, allowing for the city and some residents to be eligible for federal relief money.

But months later, Sanchez and other Cicero families said the city's communication had disappeared, leaving them to find support from community groups as they grappled with thousands of dollars in repairs and an uncertain path navigating future storms.

"Please, tell me, how can I be helped?"

While the storm affected several Chicago-area communities, Cicero was among the hardest hit.

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Maia McDonald

In the following weeks, town leaders held public meetings and board hearings focused on its flood response. However, the discussions, hosted in English with some Spanish translations, highlighted widespread confusion about the city's plan and where to find help. Cicero residents told Borderless they were confused about the city's damage assessment form and federal assistance applications. Other residents felt city officials ignored their concerns during public meetings.

While Cicero residents scrambled for answers, dozens more were unable to enter a July 11 meeting that reached capacity where the town's president board of trustees passed a resolution to support Cicero Town President Larry Dominick's call for a disaster proclamation. During public comments at other meetings, Spanish-speaking residents felt their concerns were ignored and brushed aside by city officials.



Nearly 300 Cicero residents gather outside the front doors of Morton College to listen to an at-capacity public meeting on flooding with representatives from the town of Cicero and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District in Cicero, Ill., July 18, 2023.

Efrain Soriano/Borderless Magazine

The following week, a distraught Cicero resident tearfully pleaded with town officials for help during a July 18 meeting. She previously spent \$3,500 to install water pumps in her basement to prevent flooding, only to have her basement fill

Through town clerk Maria Punzo-Arias, who served as a translator for the meeting, the woman also talked about encountering unlicensed contractors trying to take advantage of Cicero residents during the fraught situation: "They are robbing us because they see our need."

"What I want to know is who can help us, so these people are not taking advantage of the situation of the need that we find ourselves in, and I want to know how what agency can provide us with some sort of help," she said.

"If this happens again, and again, I won't have a home," the Cicero resident pleaded with town officials. "My home is going to be lost to these damages. So please, please, tell me, how can I be helped?"

Representatives for the Town of Cicero did not return multiple requests for comment from Borderless Magazine on its response to summer floods and communication with residents.

At public meetings, the Town of Cicero defended its action, stating the police, fire, and water departments responded to the flooding.



Cicero Town President Larry Dominick listens to comments from the public at a town board meeting on July 11th following the floods. April Alonso/Cicero Independent

In the face of criticism, the city agreed to form a Storm Advisory Committee, [develop a storm management master plan](#), and amend its [previous Residential Flood Control Program to offer up to \\$2000 for home improvements related to flood damage, a \\$500 increase](#). The city has offered sparing details on its advisory board and how it plans to share information with residents.

Some Cicero residents, including Jose Contreras, felt the meetings were more of a to-do list for the city than an opportunity to listen to residents' concerns. Contreras, who received \$3,000 in FEMA assistance, said while there were translators at the meeting, he didn't feel there were enough opportunities to communicate with his local representatives to find meaningful solutions.

Moris Sanchez, who attended some town meetings about the flooding, felt the city could have hosted meetings after work hours, been more transparent with resource

"I have told them that we want transparency and an explanation about what is going on with the sewage water because it's not the first time that it [has happened] in the property that is [closer] by the train lines, and there's never an answer," Sanchez said.



Sanchez says the storm drain down his block in Cicero frequently gets clogged and overflows after just a few days of light rain.
Efrain Soriano for Borderless Magazine



Community groups fill information gaps.

In the wake of the floods, community organizations and local activists picked up the slack to address a lapse in the city's communication by providing residents with resources and ways to navigate pressing financial needs caused by the devastating floods.

Organizations like the People's Town Hall of Cicero, [Cicero Community Collaborative](#), and Catholic Charities in Cicero all worked to provide those most affected by the summer flooding with rental assistance, financial aid, food pantries, and clothing giveaways.

Ankur Singh, an organizer who has worked with the People's Town Hall of Cicero and former co-founder of Cicero Independiente, thinks Cicero should look at what other municipalities have done to address flooding in their areas, such as Calumet City, a Southern suburb of Chicago. When Calumet City experienced major flooding this summer, [its local government authorized \\$1 million in direct aid for its residents, opening approved applicants to up to \\$9000.](#)

Singh, whose own home flooded this summer, acknowledges it would take more than \$1 million to help Cicero residents with repairs and replacing damaged furniture. Still, he said, Cicero's government should consider this action for its constituents.



Ankur Singh, an organizer and former co-founder of Cicero Independiente, dealt with flooding at his home last summer, saying more could be done by city leaders to take more meaningful action.

Jesus J. Montero

Singh said that community groups have been stepping up by providing critical information to residents on how to access resources and raising money and donations to help families in need.

"Underresourced, smaller networks of people who are being forced to step up to fill the role that the local government and state government, the federal government, should be playing," Singh said. "

Groups like the Cicero Community Collaborative also worked to address the needs of its neighbors following the flooding this summer.

The Collaborative worked to clarify confusion about city information. For example, they explained to residents that the Town of Cicero's online flood damage form was to document damaged property and not financial assistance applications, said executive director Elida Ortiz.

Other residents had limited internet access or were unfamiliar with using computers and similar forms of technology. Cicero Community Collaborative helped community members fill out the forms at their office space.

The Cicero Community Collaborative also provided about \$500 in financial assistance to nearly 100 Cicero families with seniors whose basement apartments flooded and co-hosted an event with the Red Cross to give away free cleaning supplies to residents.

Ortiz believes the town's response was quick and sufficient but thought the city could do things differently should a similar disaster occur. It's important to be "clear from the get-go that the process is a long process," she said.

Many residents can be confused about how crises like Cicero's summer flooding are supposed to be handled by the local government, so being clear about the process is important, Ortiz said.

"I think that the response was overall good and quick, but if we want to be honest, there was a lot of frustration, and I don't think it was towards one particular person or entity," Ortiz said. "It was just the fact that it was so overwhelming that they



For Singh, who's lived in Cicero for the last five years, it's been frustrating for him and other Cicero residents to experience continuous infrastructural issues without meaningful action from their local government to prevent them.

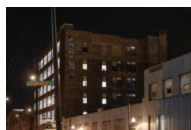
"The only thing [Cicero's] done is really small, Band-Aid solutions that doesn't actually adequately address issues, so people have been... really frustrated," Singh said. "This is a recurring problem that happens every year, and there hasn't been... any major effort, to solve the problem."



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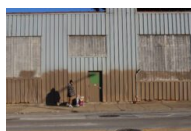
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