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“We can’t afford to leave”: No cash or gas to flee from Ida

One man who didn’t have enough money to evacuate said the majority of people in his low-income neighborhood are in the same predicament



Gerald Herbert, The Associated Press

A man takes pictures of high waves along the shore of Lake Pontchartrain as

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Robert Owens was feeling defeated and helpless Sunday as he waited in Louisiana's capital city for landfall by one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to strike the U.S.

The 27-year-old had spent anxious days watching long lines of cars evacuating from Baton Rouge, bound for safer locations out of state as Hurricane Ida approached. He had hoped he and his wife, his mother-in-law, roommate and four pets would be among them. But leaving would have required money for gas and a hotel room — something they didn't have.

Out of desperation, Owens went to ACE Cash Express on Saturday and submitted documents for a payday loan. He was denied, after being told he didn't have enough credit history.

By Sunday, it was clear they would be riding out the storm at home in his family's duplex apartment.

"Our bank account is empty – we can't afford to leave," he said.

Owens said the majority of people in his low-income neighborhood are in the same predicament. They want to leave to protect families, but have no choice but to stay.

"A lot of us here in my neighborhood have to just hunker down and wait, not knowing how bad it's going to get. It's a terrifying feeling," he said.

"There people who have funds to lean on are able to get out of here, but there's a big chunk of people that are lower-income that don't have a savings account to fall on," he continued. "We're left behind."

He said the neighborhood was eerily quiet on Sunday and winds picked up speed and rain started to fall.

Owens said he spent the day hurriedly placing towels under leaking windows in his duplex and charging electronics. He tried to go to Dollar General and Dollar Tree to pick up food, but they were closed. His family has lights glued around the walls of the house. They planned to hide in the laundry room or the kitchen

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Owens said his mother-in-law is on disability. His roommate both work for Apple iOS tech support. His wife works scheduling blood donations. All of them rely on the internet to work from home, and if it goes out, they won't be able to bring in any money.

"We might be without work, and rent, power, water, all of those bills will still be needing to get paid," he said. "We are a little bit concerned about losing our utilities or even our house — if it's still standing — because we're not going to have the money for any other bills."

He said it's hard to feel so vulnerable, like his family is getting left behind.

"The fact that we are not middle class or above, it just kind of keeps coming back to bite us over and over again, in so many different directions and ways — a simple pay-day advance being one of them," he said. "It's like we're having to pay for being poor, even though we're trying to not be poor."

Leah Willingham is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

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