

Much of the damage from Hurricane Ian will be from flooding, but will homeowners be covered?

Marketplace

Ian has now regained hurricane strength after exiting the state of Florida. It's now threatening the Carolinas.

A lot of destruction from the storm is from water. Massive storm surges inundated cities and towns along the Gulf Coast, and there's been heavy rain across much of the state.

Anyone who has flood damage from storm surge or other water that came in from the ground up will only be covered by flood insurance – not by a regular homeowner's insurance policy, said Karen Collins at the American Property Casualty Insurance Association.

"If somebody did have water-related damage from wind-driven rain, rain that came through wind-damaged windows, a door, or a hole in the wall or roof, this is considered wind storm damage, not flood damage," she said.

And that is covered by regular homeowner's insurance. But there are going to be a lot of homes in Florida with flood damage.

And only about 20% of homeowners in the state have flood insurance, according to the nonprofit Insurance Information Institute. And, that's actually more than in other states.

"Anybody whose property is located in a high-risk flood area and has a mortgage has to have it," said Amy Bach at the nonprofit United Policyholders, who added that means a lot of people in Fort Myers, and other cities and towns right along the Gulf Coast do likely have it.

“But, it’s everybody else that we worry about, where it’s not been mandatory for people to buy flood insurance, it’s just an expense most people can’t afford.”

People without flood insurance will be able to apply for grants from FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Bach said, but they max out at about \$38,000.

Florida’s Insurance Consumer Advocate Tasha Carter said she expects there are hundreds of thousands of homeowners who’ve been affected by the storm.

“Given the strength and size of Hurricane Ian, and its catastrophic effect on Florida, I am very concerned about the length of the potential recovery period,” she said.

This is a traumatic time for people whose homes were just damaged.

“It’s almost unbelievable, and you can’t believe this happened to you,” said Chip Merlin, a lawyer in Tampa. He said it can be hard in the midst of that trauma for people to take the necessary steps to get what they’re entitled to from their insurance company.

But – it’s important to do a couple of things quickly.

“Video everything in terms of the damage. Very shortly, it’ll start getting cleaned up and things like that. But they want to take the initial assessment of all the damage and get that all documented as soon as they possibly can,” Merlin said.

And then, Merlin said, they should get that video – and claim – into their insurance company as soon as possible, too.

“It’s so important to do because there’s gonna be this mad rush to get from everybody that’s been damaged,” and it’s going to take awhile to get everyone through the process.