



SAFETY FROM THE SIDELINES



Thuy La brings strong work ethic and safety best practices to HPW — and beyond

Thuy La moved to Houston in 2014 and started working with the City of Houston as a temporary employee. It was only as she became a full-time employee and moved from the Mayor's Office of Trade and International Affairs to the Office of Special Events that she saw firsthand safety and emergency work. It lit a fire in her and led to a career shift.

Now she is a deputy emergency management coordinator with Houston Public Works and an integral part of a team with Brian Mason, above center, and Byron Oujesky, above right. They not only work with HPW employees but also cross department lines to help with events and emergencies — in other words, to make the city safer.

Thuy took some time with the ZIP newsletter to share her background and her winding path to her emergency safety role. Here is our conversation:

ZIP: *Can you tell us a little about yourself: Where you're from, your education, previous jobs and/or military service, and what you did before joining the city?*

Thuy: I'm from upstate New York, where my family all still lives. My parents own a nail salon where my siblings and I grew up working. This is where I learned about entrepreneurship and the hustle of working hard to earn your money.

My parents didn't care for my sister or me to have an education. They believed females should be married and taking care of the family instead. But they encouraged my brother to further himself. That's what they believe men are supposed to do.

This mindset pushed me to get my MBA and my sister to get her Ph.D. This allowed me to have a base to the start of my career. I moved to Houston in 2014 for something new. I started as a temp with the Mayor's Office of International Trade and Affairs for a few months, which led to a position with the Mayor's Office of Special Events for five years, before landing the position I'm in now with HPW.

ZIP: *Please list and briefly describe your tenure with the city: What is your job title and how long have you been in your current role with HPW?*

Thuy: My job title is deputy emergency management coordinator and I've been here for two years now.

ZIP: *Is your job primarily safety related, or are your primary duties related to something else with safety on the side?*

Thuy: Being in the emergency management field, we work with police and fire by supporting them during incidents, emergencies, special events and the like. We could provide traffic control devices for street closures, provide heavy equipment such as gradalls, dump trucks, bulldozers and so on.

I coordinate HPW's services, i.e., traffic control equipment, street sweepers, dump trucks, etc., for special events such as the Chevron Houston Marathon, Rodeo Run and Rodeo Parade, Thanksgiving Day parade and more.

I also maintain HPW's Standard Operations Guidelines for incidents such as emergency evacuation, hurricane and high water, and winter weather. During the past year, I've been working with our fire wardens to prepare them for situations such as evacuations and active threats.

ZIP: *How were you introduced to safety? How did you become interested in it?*

Thuy: It was my time with Special Events that I wanted to do something more for the city before I even knew about the emergency management world. I had no



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clue what it entailed. It was my experience with Hurricane Harvey when working with police and fire that I got a glimpse of what it was like to be a part of that world. Then when COVID hit, I got to be a part of that world again where I got to work with the Health Department and with HPD for anything COVID-related.

ZIP: *There have been a lot of emergencies in the news lately — both nationally with mass shootings and locally with people protesting Supreme Court rulings, the National Rifle Association convention in Houston just days after the Uvalde tragedy, the Houston LGBT+ Pride Celebration, July Fourth celebrations and fireworks. Seems like an extremely busy time for you. What is your involvement in safety and security support efforts?*

Thuy: With the recent incidents, we've been working with HPD and HFD to get our HPW fire wardens ready for drills and trainings to prep them for a building evacuation exercise that we plan on executing at the end of the year. For protests and demonstrations and for special events, we provide dump trucks and traffic control equipment to support police and fire.

ZIP: *What is the most interesting or exciting aspect of your job?*

Thuy: Every day is unexpected and not always the same. Our team has to be flexible and ready for anything that comes up.

ZIP: *Why is safety important?*

Thuy: Safety should be important to everyone across the board. The whole point of coordinating with different teams, departments and agencies is to prepare for what can or may happen. Being prepared is a base platform to help guide us in emergencies. Otherwise, we're all running around in chaos with little to no direction.

ZIP: *What key message do you want COH employees to understand about the importance of safety? Seems like some employees are committed to doing their jobs and so preoccupied that safety is an afterthought.*

Thuy: Safety is definitely an afterthought for many employees because if it's not happening to us, it's out of sight, out of mind. At some point, we as people have to take the responsibility of being prepared and knowing the expectations.

ZIP: *Working in safety can be stressful as you try to make the workplace safer and eliminate injuries and incidents. Do you care to share what you do to unwind, relax, or for entertainment?*

Thuy: I take kickboxing classes three to four times a week. If I'm not in class, I'm either out with friends or trying out new places. Anyone who knows me knows how much I love food. And at least once a week, you'll find me at home drinking whiskey and listening to my music.