

## **TranStar Emergency Management Program**

### **Jack Whaley**

Director, TranStar, Houston, TX.  
Email: [jwhaley@houstontranstar.org](mailto:jwhaley@houstontranstar.org)

### **Hurricane Katrina**

On August 31, 2005, at 3:00 a.m., Harris County Judge Robert Eckels received a call from the Governor's Division of Emergency Management asking Harris County to open the Astrodome and other facilities for Hurricane Katrina evacuees. At 6:00 a.m. the county began to organize the Hurricane Katrina response using the structure set out in its emergency management plan.



Using the National Incident Management System (NIMS) model, Harris County set up the Area Command, which was designed to oversee the management of a very large or complex incident with multiple incident management teams.

We were initially asked to shelter 2,000; instead, we sheltered 17,500.

In a very short time, collaborating governments, including the City of Houston, Harris County, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO), as well as innumerable social service agencies, nonprofits and other organizations came together to feed, clothe and house the newly displaced New Orleans residents.

Because of the sheer numbers of evacuees arriving in Houston, the entire Reliant complex – the Astrodome, Reliant Center and the Arena – were all transformed into a mini-city/shelter, complete with health care, clothes distribution, sleeping, bathing and eating facilities, a barber shop and other essential functions.

During its \_\_\_ weeks of operation, the complex achieved some remarkable feats.

- 25,000 persons were safely housed, fed and clothed on site.
- A security team comprising the Houston Police Department, Harris County Sheriff's Office, METRO's police department and several other law enforcement agencies protected the inhabitants and people serving them. A wrist band ID system kept track of evacuees.
- Local schools pre-registered children who were not relocating outside the area.
- An on-site playground allowed children to release pent-up energy.
- A pharmacy dispensed medications, the dental facility treated inhabitants, the healthcare facility saw about 150 patients per hour, the Elderly and Disabled Center helped senior citizens and those with special needs, and social services agencies, particularly the housing department, were available for evacuees.
- An onsite job fair encouraged new Houstonians to investigate work opportunities.
- The volunteer team, led by the American Red Cross, served 30,000 people.
- Sister cities were contacted and arrangements made for relocation.
- The in-processing area was demobilized quickly and efficiently.

### **Hurricane Rita**



*Hurricane Rita*

Virtually on the heels of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita slowly began to intensify in the Caribbean. In the days before September 24, 2005, residents of the Gulf Coast region of Texas, drawing upon recent memory of New Orleans' devastation, became increasingly concerned about the path the new hurricane seemed to be taking. Many—some estimates place the figure at 2.5 million—packed their vehicles and started the drive out of town. But as the world watched, the mass exodus gridlocked highways until a “contraflow” plan was put in place, freeing vehicles that had been trapped for hours in one spot.

By then, Texas' September heat had already done its damage. The high temperature and lack of water caused an unknown number of passenger fatalities, and an overheated bus caught on fire, killing 23 nursing home residents. Some observers consider the

evacuation effort a real-life drill that allowed us to prepare for the next major hurricane and potential evacuation. In any case, the lessons learned from Hurricane Rita are clearly of good future use.

Some of the lessons learned are:

- In the emergency response effort, involve traffic management specialist who will understand travel patterns and consumer behavior.
- Develop a contraflow plan and review it regularly
- Maintain a list of construction zone sites and determine how they will affect a planned evacuation.
- Use Dynamic Message Signs to meaningfully communicate to the public and keep them updated
- Have a plan for fueling designated gas stations and public transportation systems.
- Identify shelters, their availability and occupancy, before the evacuees arrive.
- Provide in-route emergency medical services for stranded or ill travelers.
- Provide in-route access to water, food, and sanitary facilities.
- Messages to the public should include:
  - Have a personal disaster kit ready to go at all times during hurricane season and stay updated on the weather.
  - Know whether to evacuate or stay.
  - Limit the number of vehicles per family.
  - Availability of a 211 registry for people who need help getting out oftown during an evacuation
- Run buses along the evacuation corridor at 30 minutes intervals to pick up stranded motorists.
- All TxDOT trucks load up with 10 gal gas cans, water and ice and serve as Motorist Assist Vehicles.
- DSHS contract for Ambulances stationed at 5-mile intervals along evacuation route stocked with Ice and Water.
- A contra-flow plan will be designed and deployed at a designated time before the evacuation begins.
- Three helicopters will fly and monitor evacuation routes and report to DDC and Unified Command.
- Fifty wreckers will tow stalled or abandoned vehicles from the evacuation route.
- Issue Public notices that elderly and special needs individuals especially those ill or with hypertension need to be move in air conditioned vehicles. If air conditioned vehicles are not available then they should be take to staging areas and moved by air conditioned bus or by plane.
- Air-lift of special needs individuals with commercial and military aircraft begin at H-48 hours.
- DDC Chairs, RLOs, TXDOT Maintenance Directors, DDC members from each DDC along the primary evacuation routes and Shelter Hub areas need to meet in a dedicated annual workshop to review and coordinate.