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LESSON LEARNED

Joint Information Centers: Increasing Personnel to Operate a Phone Bank after an Incident

SUMMARY

Emergency managers should consider establishing procedures that enable them to access additional personnel to operate a phone bank at a joint information center (JIC) after an incident. This will ensure that the phone bank can manage a high call volume, can provide emergency public information, and can deliver clear and consistent messages to callers.

DESCRIPTION

Hurricane Ike originated from a tropical wave that formed off the west coast of Africa in late August 2008. It made landfall as a Category 2 storm near Galveston Island, Texas, at 2:10 a.m. on September 13, 2008. The storm produced rainfall of over 3 inches across much of southeastern Texas and caused as much as 18 inches of flooding just north of Houston. The Texas coast experienced maximum storm surges over 10 feet, while the coasts of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi had maximum storm surges ranging from 3 to 6 feet. As it traveled through Harris County, Texas, Hurricane Ike had sustained winds of over 110 miles per hour and brought rainfall totaling 6 to 8 inches. The hurricane caused 11 deaths in Harris County, flooded over 3,700 homes, and inflicted \$103 million in damages to the county's infrastructure.

Harris County, Texas, had 3,984,349 residents in 2008. The county is approximately 1,728 square miles, and the metropolitan areas include Houston, Sugar Land, and Baytown.

Hurricane Ike caused 20 deaths and \$19.3 billion in damages, making it the third most expensive hurricane in US history.

Prior to Hurricane Ike's landfall, Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HCOHSEM) worked with media representatives to deliver emergency information to the public. After the hurricane made landfall, however, HCOHSEM encountered difficulties delivering information to the public through the media. HCOHSEM issued press releases and took other measures to deliver information, but these efforts received less coverage in the media than they did prior to hurricane landfall. As a result, many Harris County residents were confused about safety issues, such as the proper maintenance of generators. HCOHSEM activated a phone bank within its JIC that operated 24 hours a day and handled thousands of calls daily at its peak. Harris County's Hurricane Ike after-action report notes that the county should document steps required for creating a dedicated space and process for smooth information flow to the phone bank. This will ensure that the call center is providing the same information to the public that it is releasing to the media.

HCOHSEM has also begun to establish procedures that enable it to access additional JIC personnel to operate a phone bank after an incident. This may require providing additional training to public information officers who may be selected to work in the phone bank.

Further, HCOHSEM plans to supplement its phone banks efforts with other activities, including utilizing reverse 9-1-1, text messages, and blast faxes.

Emergency managers should consider establishing procedures that enable them to access additional personnel to operate a phone bank at a JIC after an incident. This will ensure that the phone bank can manage a high call volume, can provide emergency public information, and can deliver clear and consistent messages to callers.

CITATIONS

Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. *Harris County Hurricane Ike After Action Report*. 01 Mar 2009.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=37139>

Sanchez, Jr., Francisco. Public Information Officer, Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Interview with *Lesson Learned Information Sharing*, 26 Aug 2009.

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