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Harris County, Texas Citizen Corps' Response to Hurricane Katrina

SUMMARY

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Harris County, Texas, Citizen Corps—under the leadership of Harris County Judge Robert Eckels—coordinated a massive volunteer effort to provide evacuees with temporary housing at make-shift shelters throughout the Houston metropolitan area. The volunteers sheltered roughly 15,000 Louisiana residents in Houston's Reliant Astrodome, while thousands more were housed in the nearby Reliant Arena, Reliant Center, and George R. Brown Convention Center.



Harris County Judge Robert Eckels

BACKGROUND

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall near Buras, Louisiana. Despite mandatory evacuation orders by Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans, an estimated 100,000 residents could not, or would not, leave their homes for safer ground. Many of those trapped by the storm flocked to hurricane shelter points set up by the American Red Cross (ARC) at the New Orleans Superdome and other sites around the city. Approximately 30,000 Louisiana residents took shelter from 145 mph winds and torrential rains at the Superdome complex.

Within days of the storm, 80 percent of the city had flooded, and the shelters set up by the ARC and other organizations had far exceeded their capacity. At the Superdome, the air conditioning failed, the water pressure dropped, and the turf field, plastic seats, and concrete ramps and corridors were overflowing with hungry, dehydrated, and exhausted evacuees. The deteriorating situation forced emergency managers to transport remaining residents out of New Orleans to make-shift shelters in cities throughout the Southwest, including Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas, Texas.

Harris County Citizen Corps Council

Established on August 26, 2002, the council's membership includes the Harris County Judge, the Mayor of Houston, the Harris County Sheriff and Fire Marshal, the Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, the Chairman of the American Red Cross, the Area Commander of the Salvation Army, and some 15 other members.

GOALS

The obstacles encountered during the New Orleans hurricane response prompted a concerted effort on the part of cities to provide the storm's victims with comfortable, convenient, and safe living accommodations. The Harris County Citizen Corps mobilized thousands of Houston-area volunteers to assist in the shelter efforts. Citizen Corps volunteers assisted in greeting and processing 65,000 evacuees from the New Orleans area.

At the Reliant Astrodome and surrounding buildings, the Citizen Corps volunteers created an evacuee “city”—complete with its own zip code—capable of sustaining over 27,000 people.



Reliant Park Astrodome Shelter, Houston, Texas

DESCRIPTION

In a matter of hours, the Harris County Judge’s Office and the Harris County Citizen Corps prepared the Reliant Astrodome to receive evacuees displaced from their homes. Exemplary aspects of the Citizen Corps response included:

- The use of the Harris County Citizen Corps online member directory to call for volunteers;
- The formation of an organized process for enlisting, training, and assigning the thousands of volunteers to specific tasks; and
- The seamless integration of Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) members and other Citizen Corps members familiar with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) into the Reliant Park Incident Command (IC).

Summary of Events

Two days after Katrina’s landfall, the Harris County Citizen Corps began mobilizing to accept volunteers. At approximately 6:00 am on August 31, Mark Sloan, the Coordinator for Homeland Security Special Projects at the Harris County Judge’s Office, participated in a conference call with officials from the Texas Department of Emergency Management (DEM) and the Harris County emergency responder community. During that call, Harris County officials were instructed to prepare for the arrival of 23,000 to 25,000 Louisiana residents, who, at that time, were being sheltered in the New Orleans Superdome. Texas DEM representatives warned Harris County officials that buses full of victims were set to leave the Superdome, and that the County would have to support the ARC in its efforts to prepare the Astrodome as a shelter.

Four hours later, at 10:30 am, the ARC asked the Harris County Citizen Corps how many volunteers were available to help prepare the Astrodome. Using the Harris County Citizen Corps directory of member e-mail addresses, Sloan sent out a general e-mail announcing that New Orleans evacuees were on their way to Houston, and that Harris County “must build a city ready to receive them.” Sloan got 1,000 responses per hour, flooding his inbox and crashing his personal e-mail system and the Harris County Citizen Corps website. When the site came back online a short time later, the directory contained over 2,800 new members and 38 new organizations.

Evacuees began trickling into the Astrodome shelters the night of August 31, but it was not until late in the evening on September 1 that the Citizen Corps was officially activated. At 10:00 pm, the ARC sent a second message to Harris County, this time alerting them that 60 buses—each with 50 passengers—were expected to arrive at the Astrodome and that volunteers were needed to process evacuees and staff the shelter. In response, Sloan turned again to the Harris County Citizen Corps website member directory to issue a call for volunteers. Within the hour, over 1,000 people had arrived at the dome, ready to help.

For the next several weeks, the Harris County Citizen Corps assisted the ARC in the complicated volunteer coordination effort. Members of the area CERT, Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), and Neighborhood Watch groups established volunteer check-in points, where spontaneous volunteers were received, enrolled, and assigned to shelter tasks. In the first 24 hours, the Harris County Citizen Corps processed over 8,000 volunteers to assist the ARC in its activities. Over the course of the county’s operations, volunteer coordinators averaged 3,500 spontaneous volunteers processed each day.

By Wednesday, September 7, the number of evacuees still sheltered in Houston area sites had dropped from almost 27,000 to only 8,096. In a matter of days, the ARC had transitioned New Orleans evacuees from temporary shelters in the Astrodome and other Reliant Park sites to more permanent housing arrangements in cities around the country.

Using the Member Directory

The Harris County Citizen Corps member directory proved invaluable to the Hurricane Katrina response effort. Since the launch of the Citizen Corps website, it has been used as both a public information tool and a resource-tracking mechanism. Volunteers visiting the website are asked to login using a member name and password. They are also asked to create a member profile with their contact information and emergency response skill sets (e.g. language skills, medical skills, veterinary skills, etc.). Area organizations and businesses can also create member profiles detailing the type and amount of resources at their disposal in the event of an emergency. This member directory allows the Citizen Corps to accurately track the location and availability of potential volunteers and emergency response supplies in their area.

When the ARC requested volunteers to staff the Reliant Park shelters, the Harris County Citizen Corps used the member directory to quickly mobilize area residents. In addition to the e-mail sent to 10,000 subscribers issuing a general call for aid, Citizen Corps also sent out more detailed messages asking volunteers not to self-deploy and describing the number

Other Citizen Corps Activities

Beyond volunteer coordination, Harris County Citizen Corps groups contributed in other areas of the Hurricane Katrina response. The doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals associated with the MRC assisted in the creation of an evacuee medical center in Reliant Arena. CERT members also enhanced perimeter security during an Astrodome site visit from former Presidents George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton.

of volunteers needed, when they should arrive, and the skills they should have. Including specific instructions in volunteer requests allowed the Citizen Corps to control the flow of volunteers into the Reliant Park shelter area.

Organizing Volunteers

Once the Citizen Corps had issued its call for volunteers, the complicated task of organizing and deploying those who responded began. Using CERT members and representatives from other local Citizen Corps organizations, the Harris County Citizen Corps established a volunteer integration procedure to lead the thousands of spontaneous volunteers through the enrollment, training, and deployment process. The volunteer integration procedure involved three primary steps:

- First, upon arrival at the designated volunteer area, organizers asked potential volunteers to provide a valid photo identification, reminded them that they must be 18 years or older to work on-site, and asked them to fill out the appropriate NIMS sign-in sheet. Individuals accepted for service were issued a wristband identifying them as registered volunteers and were directed to the Reliant Center's orientation area.
- Second, groups of accepted volunteers participated in short orientation sessions on the policies and procedures of volunteer duty. Orientation leaders encouraged volunteers to first take care of their own physical and emotional needs, to always work in pairs, and to work only as long as they felt comfortable. They said that if volunteers found themselves incapable of, or uncomfortable, performing their assigned tasks, they should return to the assignment area where they could be re-deployed.
- Third, at the end of each orientation session, organizers sent volunteers to staging areas, where they awaited deployment orders. When volunteer job opportunities arrived, an organizer announced the nature of the work involved and asked for a specific number of volunteers to perform the task. Finally, coordinators escorted groups of volunteers to their assigned worksite.

Using this system of volunteer integration, the Harris County Citizen Corps was able to identify and meet areas of need in a timely and effective manner.

The Benefit of NIMS and ICS Training

According to emergency responders on the scene, Citizen Corps members previously trained in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS) were of great value to the hurricane response. Due to their pre-incident training, many Citizen Corps volunteers were already familiar with NIMS/ICS terminology (e.g. Joint Information Center, Joint Operations Center, IC, etc.) and understood the responsibilities of emergency responders at the incident site. Because of this knowledge, coordinators could place well-trained Citizen Corps volunteers in positions of responsibility. These responsibilities included: conveying information from site to site in the shelter area; controlling access to doors, elevators, and escalators; providing directions to volunteers and emergency responders; and moving volunteers from staging areas to areas of need.

Incident Command also recognized the value of NIMS-trained volunteers in the Hurricane Katrina response. On the morning of Friday, September 2, the Reliant Park Incident Commander requested that 4 NIMS-trained volunteers be made available to staff the Reliant Park IC Post. Volunteers continued to operate under NIMS/ICS guidelines at the IC Post 24 hours per day, 7 days a week throughout the response effort.

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

Long before Hurricane Katrina ever made landfall, the Harris County Citizen Corps laid the groundwork for success with its pre-incident organization and its partnerships with local volunteer groups and area businesses. These two factors allowed the Harris County Citizen Corps to mobilize and organize its resources quickly and efficiently to serve the thousands of evacuees sheltered in Houston-area sites.

Pre-Incident Organization. The Harris County Citizen Corps organized itself for large-scale emergencies through the formation of a Citizen Corps Council and the tracking of Council member capabilities. Upon joining the council, each Citizen Corps Council member completes a survey, which describes the resources and capabilities s/he can provide. This capabilities awareness allowed Hurricane Katrina responders to gain easy access to information on where resources were located and how they could be employed.

Establishing Partnerships. The Harris County Citizen Corps also established partnerships with volunteer organizations and area businesses. Included among these partners were the United Way, Catholic Charities, and Volunteer Houston, the major clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities in the Houston area. When the number of spontaneous volunteers arriving at Reliant Park leveled off during the Hurricane Katrina response, Volunteer Houston was tasked with managing corporate volunteer commitments. These commitments included local businesses (e.g. Shell, Halliburton, etc.) that provided groups of employees willing to volunteer for shelter activities for a specific period of time. These partnerships became “force multipliers,” as pre-incident contacts with a few area organizations led to the mobilization of large groups of volunteers.

Links

Harris County Citizen Corps: <http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com>

Office of the Harris County Judge: <http://www.judgeeckels.org>

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