



## **Presentation by Stan Blazyk and Jim Hale, Co-Chairs**

The Mayor's Citizen Response Team for Special Needs Evacuees

*Readiness for Recovery: Galveston Evacuation Model*

January 18, 2007

### **Blazyk**

Thank you. Jim and I are going to share the podium. And basically we've divided our remarks this morning into two segments. **First we're going to go back over actually the events that occurred at the time of the Rita evacuation.** Because it's really a very remarkable story. And I think it in itself has some lessons that would be applicable to other cities.

And the **second part of our presentation we'll talk about some of the issues, conflicts, problems that we're still struggling with and that any city that develops an evacuation plan would face.**

Before we begin, I know there are some volunteers here from the citizen response team. And I would like to ask them to stand up and be recognized by the audience. So please, those of you who are here, please stand up and receive the recognition. We couldn't have done this without the volunteers, as well as the support of the City and Mayor Thomas. As Jim mentioned, this was actually a fairly late development. Now, I know the City had had its hurricane planning meeting back in May of 2005. And that the City emergency management people had been meeting regularly. But basically, Jim and I got pulled into this fairly late. And I think part of the story is how this came together.

So I'm going to start off with a brief chronology. And then Jim is going to share some of the events of that crucial evening when the plan really was implemented. So we'll start out, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Hurricane Katrina made landfall at Buras, Louisiana at 11:00 p.m. that evening. And, of course, that was capturing the attention of everybody in Galveston as well as along the Gulf coast.

Around that same time Jim Hale and I were contacted by Mayor Thomas. And she asked if we could co-lead a Citizens Response Team of local volunteers to help with evacuation plans in case of a hurricane emergency. Four days later, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Jim and I met with Mayor Thomas and an aide and we discussed a little bit in more detail **the role of the Citizens Response Team as well as identifying volunteers and how we would identify potential evacuees and what kind of process** we would set into place.

Between September 2<sup>nd</sup> and September 13<sup>th</sup>, a two week period, Jim and I began contacting potential volunteers. We **identified a core group that could help us expand our volunteer base.** And this was very important because between us and the people at the City, we knew a number of people who might be good volunteers. But there were also a lot of other volunteers who stepped forward during the Rita emergency that we got through volunteers that we had already

identified. We also worked in that period on **developing initial protocols and forms**. We needed volunteer *registration forms*. We needed to know who our *volunteers were*. We needed *evacuee registration forms* so that we could document people who were requesting assistance with evacuation. And we also needed a *telephone script for volunteers* to use in contacting those who had signed up for evacuation.

**The City also began publicizing the citizen response team and they set up a designated telephone number** at City Hall for citizens who were needing assistance with evacuation to; or had questions about the program to contact. On September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the citizen response team met with the City of Galveston Emergency Management Advisory Committee. We updated the committee on the status of the response team and also learned what other people in the City were doing in terms of planning for an evacuation. That evening the City, even though they had held a hurricane planning meeting in May, held another hurricane planning meeting at the island community center. At this meeting we discussed the goals of the response team and we had volunteers there already to sign up potential evacuees.

Four days later Tropical Depression Rita formed in the southeastern Bahamas. Two days after that, September 19<sup>th</sup>, the City of Galveston put on hurricane status as Rita strengthens and headed into the Gulf of Mexico. We began contacting identified CRT volunteers and got ready to identify and contact current and new evacuees. On September 20<sup>th</sup> the **CRT volunteers, working from City Hall, and also some worked from their homes, began contacting enrolled evacuees**, registering new evacuees because the telephones were ringing off the walls literally. And began responding to these telephone calls regarding the evacuation process. And with this going on, I'm going to turn it over to Jim who will explain what was going on in detail at the City Hall with the Citizens Response Team.

**Hale**

Thank you. Thank you, Stan. You're probably wondering why we're both standing up here together. Well, we're a team. Stan and I have done everything together on the Citizens Response Team since the very beginning. And we decided we would share together on this.

One of the things that we wanted to point out, there are a lot of other groups and organizations that really participated that came up to the forefront and said, how can we help? How can we help with the Citizens Response Team? What can we do to help? And I wanted to mention just quickly some of those. There was the Red Cross. The Gulf Coast MHMR Center, Saint Vincent's. Many, many church leaders throughout the island. The Salvation Army. Jesse Tree. And at the actual point of evaluation at the community center, **Anheuser Busch came up with truckloads of beer cans full of water**. Cases of beer cans full of water. And I have a six pack at home of that I saved. I won't let anybody drink it.

**Following the mandatory evacuation given by the Mayor, the decision was made to call in the volunteers and they began contacting the residents that requested transportation to the shelter**. These residents had been calling in. The call to the volunteers went out. Telephone shifts were assigned. And data information forms that we'd already collected and filled out were distributed to the volunteers to begin calling. They begin calling. **They begin contacting the**

**residents, obtaining more specific information from them about the size of the household, the members of the family, children, the ages of the children, any pets, how many pets, what kind of pets, and then advice on what to bring with them.** And the size of the luggage; like bring one bag. Some of them brought everything they owned. But we asked to; we told them what to bring. Stan and I walked the phone banks. We were fielding; many questions came up we hadn't even anticipated. We were fielding the caller questions to City staff. To the county staff. To UTMB staff. And then when we couldn't get any answers, we just made decisions on the spot. And then those answers were conveyed back to them.

Our biggest problem that we experienced at that time, which has since been worked out, but at that time it was, it **was how were we going to transport those patients, those residents with very special needs that could not be transported on a regular City bus or school bus.** We needed a way to organize the data in such a manner; it was piling up. We had to organize it in such a manner as to reduce the time required of the transit department of the City. Once it was given to them, they needed to move rather than just sort through a bunch of forms.

Well, as always happens when an emergency comes up and a problem comes up, people rise to the occasion. And at this time it was a man named Joe Hicks that came up and he said, if the City can provide a computer, I'll get out a spread; an Excel spreadsheet on all of this information and we can massage it anyway you want. And so the computer; the City did. A computer was provided, and he did. And he designed a system right there on the spot. And, and then we needed someone to input it. And a secretary that works for the City volunteered to do it. She was very adept at keyboarding. She began keyboarding the information from the data sheets as fast as they came in. Throughout the night she did this. Slowly through the night the list grew. The data was entered. And finally by midnight the number of calls began to recede. They didn't stop but they began to slow down.

Then our volunteers began to go home themselves and prepare for the emergency, the evacuation themselves. At five the next morning I picked up the spreadsheets and the final data sheets that were received after midnight that had been organized and; after midnight, and then delivered them to the City Transit office. **These data sheets had; the information had been organized where; geographically, where the residents live. So that there was a list by sections of the City so the buses could be assigned** to them. The transit director was waiting. The buses, the engines were running. The drivers were on standby. They were waiting for that information. Presented that to the director and he passed it out; made the assignments and the buses went on. Throughout the morning buses arrived at the community center. Dropped off a load and then returned for another load of pickup. People kept coming; kept calling. Had not called earlier. Had not responded to our pleas for them to get us the information. They began calling then. They were really getting concerned as Rita began nearing closer and closer to the coast.

There was one lady, she said, I can't get on a bus. I'm too large. I weigh 350 pounds. And so I went out there in my Land Cruiser to try to pick her; she couldn't fit in the car. And she had a large family. They, they hadn't been

reported. So I reported that back and then the word got around. The fire department went out there with a lift. And lifted that lady with her wheelchair, got her on. And then a special bus with a lift enabled her to get on with all of her possessions and with her family.

Meanwhile, Lynn Hale, the former superintendent of schools, responded to the Mayor's call for backup transportation. Don Roy, director of GISD Transportation, assigned the school buses and volunteer bus drivers. These bus drivers actually volunteered to do this. And their families to assist in transporting the residents. The City of Galveston and the Galveston Independent School District worked as a team in getting the citizens and their pets off the island. What was delivered to the transportation director was the following.

There were 541 were the number that had been; that had called in to be picked up by island transport. This was the number we thought we were going to be picking up. There were another 740 who said that they would go to the community center when we contacted them. There were another 666 who had called so late we told them we couldn't get the information **to the transit center, and to get up there as best they can.** And that came to a total of 1947 people. So that many had been identified. They kept coming in. They call on their telephone; they were calling on cell phones. We were sending out vehicles to pick them up. At the very end, by noon on the day of departure, as, as Steve had said, approximately 3500 island residents and their pets had been evacuated off the island.

**Blazek**

Thank you, Jim. Jim and I have spent a lot of time identifying some of the problems, issues and challenges that not only we continue to face with the Citizen Response Team, but we think that any community looking at this model will encounter. And some of them are, are fairly easy to address. And some of them are, are quite difficult. And so what I would like to do is read this list. Now, it's not prioritized in any particular order. This was kind of Jim and I free associating. So if you'll bear with us. One thing that I think any city can anticipate is, we; when Jim and I got involved in this; one of the reasons I got involved is that I felt like there was going to be a much larger number of people needing the service than I had heard estimated previously.

**But the number one issue is the number of potential evacuees can be much larger than estimated by your emergency management personnel.** And I think any city has to be prepared for that.

**Second, and this is kind of related to it, more people may appear at the collection centers as well as there may be more people at the houses where you go to pick up people than are anticipated.** I know there were some houses where we went to pick up a couple of people and there were 11 people there waiting to get on the buses. Which plays havoc a little bit with how many people can you put on a bus when you're running a route.

**Third; and this is a big issue, families, sometimes quite extended families, very large families, want to stay together.** And this can be a particular problem when you're dealing with medical or special needs evacuees. Because of many reasons. Sometimes the medical and, and special need evacuees have to go on different transportation than the other family members. There are some family

members that get very upset about being separated. That's an issue you need to anticipate and look forward to. Evacuees, no matter how much you talk to them and remind them, may forget or may not have needed medications, medical equipment, bedding or clothing when they either show up at the collection center or are picked up. And this has been addressed.

**People will not leave without their pets.** Some may resist even being temporarily separated from their pets. Some people kind of have the image that maybe they could ride with their pet rotweiler on their lap while they were leaving the city, but obvious there's, there's good reason for trying to separate the pets out during the transportation process. But nonetheless, there will be people who are unhappy with that.

**Evacuees with mental health problems or other behavioral disorders may prove disruptive and difficult to manage during the chaos of an evacuation.** And we've been working very closely with MHMR on this issue to try to prevent that. But that was an issue that came up during the Rita evacuation. And again, this is another issue that should be addressed in any city across the country due to federal guidelines. But it wasn't necessarily true during the Rita evacuation for us.

**Some residential care facilities may not have proper plans for evacuation and may suddenly request to use the city's transportation means.** And so that's something that cities should anticipate when they're planning these programs.

**Another issue is volunteer availability.** With more and more stress on early evacuation and certainly with the experience of Rita, I've heard many people including some volunteers say, I'm leaving way ahead of time. You may lose some volunteers that you're counting on because they're getting a mixed message in one sense. They're, they're being told to leave as early as possible. On the other hand you're asking them to stay as long as they can to help with this process. That's an issue that needs to be dealt with and each city needs to be aware of that. Another one, and, and this goes back very early in Galveston's history, is apathy.

*It is more difficult to enroll potential evacuees after a quiet year or after a difficult evacuation experience.* In 1980, we had a very difficult evacuation from Galveston with Hurricane Allen. Well, in 1983 when Hurricane Alicia appeared, a lot of people said, I'm not going to evacuate because of what happened during Allen. This is a problem; public relations can help with it. And we need to constantly reinforce that it's better to have a bad evacuation than not evacuate at all and wish you had.

**Volunteers need to be trained and certified.** We went to using *background checks*. Because they're dealing with confidential information. For one thing, somebody is finding out who is leaving their home and leaving the city. And so if you had someone wishing to take advantage of that situation, they would have a very good list of who was gone. So we, we try to be careful about making sure that the people who we enroll in the volunteer program are, are trustworthy.

And also we also have to be careful to **protect the rights of evacuees**, particularly those with medical issues. As you know, *medical information is confidential*. So you have to really walk a very tight rope between getting enough information that you can direct the evacuees to the proper means of evacuation but not get so much information that we're really violating peoples' rights.

As Jim mentioned, **coordination with a wide range of public and private agencies are absolutely necessary for a successful evacuation to occur.**

Another **one is you need a good database**. And on top of that, the database must be constantly updated. With much of the population we are dealing with, if you have a database that's three weeks old you're probably going to lose 10 to 20 percent of those people. So it's an ongoing process. It's not something you can set up at the beginning of the summer and in September assume that your database is going to bear any relation to reality. And again, that's where volunteers come in. And also the city. We need to keep updating these databases. Fourteen, Jim and I and Mayor Thomas and Steve and Charlie Kelly and everybody learned this lesson.

**Improvisation is a must.** No matter how good your plans are, you're going to run into some issues that you simply can't anticipate. And that's where communication and the ability to be flexible comes in. I don't know how you transfer that to other settings but it's an absolute essential. Related to all these, you need to have continual communication with your volunteers. You need to keep them involved and motivated. If you're having a quiet summer and nothing much is going on, some of your volunteers are going to get involved in other things. And not be available.

And then finally, and this was a key issue, and a credit to the city government and Mayor Thomas' - **you need strong city commitment.**

Galveston has had evacuation plans ever since I've been here. Which is a very long time now. A lot of those plans weren't really very effective. And part of it was the long term determined commitment and planning was not there. You need to really have your city, your county and all the responsible governmental bodies very committed to the plan. But at any rate, these are some of the issues we feel like are essential for any city attempting to look at our model and use it, as well as things that we deal with all the time.

**Hale**

Thank you. One final thing that I just wanted to add is Dr. Sexton said; referenced earlier about how she felt empowered by Dr. Stobo's support. The same thing, the same thing is true with us. The City staff, through, through Mayor Thomas' leadership and direction, anything we needed they provided. If we needed space; if we needed telephone use; if we needed secretarial assistance; anything we needed they provided. We really worked as a team - the City and the citizens of this island.