



Presentation by Sharon Strain

Housing Authority of Galveston

Readiness for Recovery: HAG Evacuation & Management Model

January 18, 2007

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And I want to say to many of you who are in here, I haven't had the chance to say that. But the spirit that people to put the well being of others first has been so inspiring to me through this whole process. And I appreciate being able to know many of you. I know that each of us have memories of that time. I will always remember the capable, steady, compassionate faces of Lloyd Renderer and Charlie Kelly. Steve on the ground making decisions when we were trying to get people off of the island. The Mayor's calm presence and the hard work of my staff.

At the housing authority we serve a population of people, the majority of whom are, you know, six or eight thousand dollars in income and under. Well below the very low income mark. And many of them, of course, do not have transportation. In addition to the numbers of citizens who are very low income that we serve, the population for our housing authority right now in public housing is 65 percent elderly, handicapped or disabled. Although we do not have a legal obligation to take people off of the island, the HUD regulations under which we function say that people have to be able to live independently to live in public housing. And although there is no legal responsibility, we know we have a strong moral responsibility to help those who need transportation.

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Then we identify essential employees who would need to return to the island when the hurricane is over. We work with the City to find out how we would be able to get those people back onto the island. And then we train our employees and we train and we train and we train.

We do two different kinds of functions. *One part of my staff stays and helps the City with their evacuation. The other part of my staff takes care of the residents for whom we're responsible.* As soon as the emergency management office advises us - and I want to tell you this is a real plus for us - they let us know ahead of time that there's going to be a mandatory evacuation. *That gives us the opportunity to get our resident services organization functioning.* They leave and go to every single household with a letter to every resident telling them when the buses will be leaving. What they can bring. We've learned to say that when you, when you tell them *one bag*, you need to tell them it should be less than six feet long and three feet in diameter, because, because we got an awful lot of luggage last year. The resident services team after the notification process goes home and takes care of their own needs at home, securing their family situations. Many of them take their families and go with our residents to the shelters where we send them. And we received a national award from the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials for the evacuation in Galveston.

And one of the questions that people kept asking us, how did you make people leave? How did you make your employees do that? Well, I am of the opinion that in Galveston that the one thing that'll be hard for you to get in your Blueprint is that there is a spirit here of compassion. And also a very developed **sense of responsibility for the well being of other people.** And I think that will be the, the hardest thing for other cities to replicate.

My employees then go with the bus to the shelter and we provide 24 hours a day with someone from my staff on the inside of the facility. We have a lot of people who have medical needs. A lot of people went through trauma when they were up there. And I'm fortunate that I had people who would be with them. I had one housing director who works at one of our elderly complexes who stayed 24 hours a day with her residents. She would not leave their side. She made sure that if someone needed to be shaved, that they'd be shaved. If they needed to be bathed, that they would be bathed. That whatever assistance they needed, they got. And I don't know how you can put that kind of thing in a blueprint. We're fortunate in Galveston.

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buses do that. *They go with a backpack*, as it were, that is; has *walkie talkies* in it for communication between the buses. We give them \$300.00 *in emergency money*, if anyone needs Advil or gets sick at their stomach. They have lists of all the people who are going with them. They have; I don't know. They took a can of Coke last time because they were afraid someone would have problems with diabetes. So anything you can think of goes into that to help them make that trip with the residents.

Because of the **City giving us the early notification that they did the last time, we were able to get our residents through Houston and to the shelter before the traffic jam stopped**. After our residents came back, some of them came by to thank me for their vacation. It somehow did not feel like a vacation to me, but, but they enjoyed their stay there.

And over, you know, over and above the big getting the, the people out, I think there are some other considerations that when you're running a business, as it were, that there are things that you need to look into. And, and we, for instance, **have our finance director to take backup computer disks with him; to take a certain number of blank checks; to take \$2,000.00 in cash; to make sure that he has all of our deeds, all of our insurance policies, everything that we would need to be able to get into another location and set up operations if we were not able to come back**.

In addition to that, the MIS coordinator service in the finance department; we **move our computer server off of the island**. I know that all of you saw what happened with the Katrina people. And some of the chaos that happened when a lot of the residents got up here. We, along with the Houston Housing Authority and other housing authorities in this area tried to help house people. Well, the impossibility of it was if people have not thought to *bring all of their records showing, you know, they're a bona fide housing authority resident* and the housing authority there did not get out with this computer server, when it finally go the information out they only had about 50 percent of the information in there that needed to be in there. So you couldn't even verify that anyone was a public housing resident. So we take our server out. We take it to the same town where all of our residents are housed so we can set it up, have our finance person come there, if necessary. And we would be able then to *communicate with the other housing authorities and HUD* with the correct information to *find places to put people* if can't bring them back to the island. In addition to that, the; myself, my deputy executive director, Hareesh - are you - you know, I can't see up here. Okay. There he is. There's Hareesh.

And the **maintenance director stays at the island community center to direct employees and to assist people from the City** with their evacuation process. We stay there until the City tells us we can go. And then our buildings there are boarded up.

We learned after Rita when we came back some of the things that, that happened to us that we could not anticipate were, it was difficult about **knowing how to come back**. And I think we all learned something about that. A lot of the buses came back before you were ready for them to come back. And I think that that's probably being planned a little differently next year. It's difficult when the people

come back and they go into the houses and there's no electricity and they don't have anything to eat. And then you're kind of standing there saying, okay. Here to my employees; we went to the grocery store. *We bought \$10,000.00 worth of groceries.* It's close to the end of the month and everybody's food had spoiled and they had no money. We divided that food up so that everybody had three days' worth of food to live on. And distributed all of that, and did it one day's time. When the Red Cross truck came we helped them with the food distribution. We also; I have a daughter-in-law that I call Hurricane Annie who lives in Seattle. *And we received boxes and boxes of household goods, Target cards.*

She started kind of a campaign out there. And I bring that up to say, you can also **have a sister city; not only one for helping you house your people**, but maybe another city that you could have help you with some of those issues where you can send out a list of things you need. So that you don't get everybody's old handbags and shoes. You know? You get, you get the kind of things that you need to actually get them into the hands of people. It's hard to imagine from our perspective that, hey, someone comes from like Hurricane Katrina. Here's an apartment; it doesn't have a bed in it. It doesn't have a pot in it, you know for you to cook in. But here's a place for you to stay. So we actually looked at, at the needs of the people for after the time that they came back.

We had a lot of trauma. We allowed our children to make a, a video about what happened to them during that process and that was really good for them. If I had to say what I think our best practice is; I heard Steve say this at the end of his; it bears repeating. You have to have a plan. You have to have one. It's a living, breathing thing. It is not something that you pick up and put on a shelf. You get it out and review it every year. The players change; you have to keep it revised. **Once you have that plan, though, you need to learn to be flexible.** Because not every single thing that you have planned will happen. But what that plan does is give you a framework for decision making and it helps you get through the things that don't work out the way that you anticipated that they would.

The other one is, you have to have partnerships. And I think that, that if that has to be pinged on more than any other thing; the Mayor has brought partnerships together. You see this community working together. It's the backbone of your ability to be able to save peoples' lives during a difficult time. We also had some problems with communications. Those cell phones are not worth a darn when, when all that stuff starts happening. We changed our people to satellite phones. I hope that in the long run that might prove helpful for us.

I think that one of the hardest things for me during this is that we discovered that **we can't make everyone leave.** Public housing is not like an assisted facility; living facility where you can make people leave. And so when we; at the time that we left the island there were a few diehards in our high rises who simply would not budge from their position. I've since spoken with HUD. We're revising our handbooks and our leases right now and we're trying to put some language in there that says that we have the authority to evacuate someone from that property and that they have no choice but to go. That will be difficult, but I think in the long run that is really going to be able to help us.

One thing that I haven't heard; I mean, I've heard brave people talk today. And I know there are brave people sitting out there who are selfless and kind. The one thing that I haven't heard anyone talk out loud about is **being tired**. Now, I know the caregivers; people who are with the hospital understand this maybe better than, than we. But one of the things that I learned is that I need to **double the amount of staff** probably that I have helping me with that and identify more essential employees. Because people worked during this until they almost became ill. We did think of having as part of the motel room in the facility where we took our people; we had motel rooms so that those people who had ridden on the buses and who worked to help care for our residents who were up there, they had a place to come back and rest. But we really didn't think about ourselves in that situation. And, you know, buses are coming back in and 3:00 in the morning and we need to be there to have the building open. So I think that we will have more people involved as essential employees the next time that we do an undertaking like this. That is probably what I have to say about that.

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