



Harris County Citizen Corps

Harris County TX Citizen Corps Council: Collaboration & Communication Strategies Are Key

Overview

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Located in the Southeast section of Texas and encompassing the City of Houston, Harris County is home to nearly four million residents living within its 1, 778 square miles. It is the third most populous county in the United States and one of the most culturally diverse. Because of its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and the area's topography, Harris County is prone to flooding and a number of hurricane and tropical storm threats annually. In June 2001, Tropical Storm Allison was not packing hurricane-force winds when it washed ashore, but the tropical storm's tidal surge and the 20 inches of rains it dropped on Harris County and its neighbor counties claimed 22 lives and caused an estimated \$5 billion in damage.

The events of September 11, 2001 served to remind the Nation and County that government and citizens needed to also focus on the possibilities of man-made disasters, including terrorism. By objective standards, Harris County is home to numerous types of entities that terrorist organizations have expressed an interest in attacking. The Port of Houston, which ranks first in the United States in foreign waterborne commerce. The leading domestic and international center for almost every segment of the oil and gas industry and nearly 49% of the nation's base petrochemicals manufacturing capacity. The Texas Medical Center with its 42 member institutions provides leading medical care to people from all over the world and is the world's largest medical complex, serving over 70,000 daily. The fourth largest airport system in the country with over 43 million passengers traveling through the three area airports to both domestic and international destinations. The Johnson Space Center and NASA's manned space program. Three national sport arenas hosting thousands of fans for popular events such as the Super Bowl and the South Texas Project, a nuclear power plant located approximately 70 miles from the County.

Harris County, under the direction and leadership of County Judge Robert Eckels continues to seek innovative and common sense solutions to anticipating and preparing for these natural and man-made threats to the County and the surrounding region. The formation of the Harris County Citizen Corps Council (HCCCC) (<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/abouthccc.asp>) is one such example.

Council Background

Following President Bush's State of the Union Address in 2002, the White House contacted Judge Eckels and asked him to create a Citizen Corps Council in Harris County. Having had the recent opportunity to coordinate and respond to the effects of Tropical Storm Allison and the ensuing recovery efforts in his role as the Director of the Harris County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) (<http://www.hcoem.org/>), the Judge reached out to those entities already involved in disaster preparedness response and recovery and asked them to share their experience, resources and suggestions to develop and sustain a HCCCC.

The HCCCC is a collaborative entity chaired by Judge Eckels and enhanced by 22 member agencies and held their first meeting in August 2002.

(<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/missionstatement.asp>)

Strategy

The Council is made up of representatives from 21 local organizations and agencies who meet quarterly and limits its membership to less than 25 representatives. HCCCC programs include: Neighborhood Watch, Volunteers in Police Service, Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) and Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT).

To focus the multiple organizations and priorities, the Council drafted the following mission statement:

"To make Harris County and the surrounding communities safer, stronger, and better prepared through service and volunteerism that focuses on emergency preparedness and public safety."

In addition to serving Harris County, the HCCCC expanded their coordination of volunteer and first responder services through the Houston-Galveston Area Council, a 13-county regional planning organization. With that expansion in territory, the Council will add to the already large roster of volunteers.

The current membership is divided into two sub-committees:

- The Communications Subcommittee established to coordinate communication and volunteer information center at the Greater Houston Transportation and Emergency Management Center (a.k.a., Houston TranStar) to take advantage of the pre-existing collaboration between the Harris County OEM and various public-sector transportation agencies to handle communication with first-responder entities and other organization
- The Coordination of Non-Profits with First Responders Subcommittee (CNPFRS) charged with the task of keeping RIMS, Regional Incident Management System, a resource database containing information on all community service organizations that wish to provide their services during an emergency or disaster up to date to

provide a seamless network of communication between non-profit organizations, first responders, volunteer agencies, and other emergency management agencies

To further the Council's reach and development for CERT and Medical Reserve Corps, in June 2003 the HCCCC received a \$70,000 grant from the Texas Association of Regional Councils (TARC) to develop the CERT training program. The Harris County Department of Education planned to have at least one person from each school district participate in the CERT "Train the Trainer" program. Additionally, a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services gave rise to the Medical Reserve Corps (<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/volunteer/orgabstract.asp?org=12>) training program in partnership with the Harris County Hospital District.

Lastly, the Harris County Fire Marshall's Office, one of the many first responder agencies that work closely with the all the HCCCC programs, and the Harris County Health Department planned and executed full-scale disaster response drills that tested the skills and preparedness level of the emergency medical response community.

Next Steps

With the HCCCC, the Harris County Fire Marshall's Office is working on a plan to recruit military personnel who have experience with bio-chemical and HAZMAT containment.

Another initiative will involve enhancing the Council's Web site to track more demographic information of volunteers, and finding different avenues for recognition of service. Lastly, HCCCC intends to increase the number of volunteers in the CERT training program.

Results

The Council successfully worked in partnership with the United Way of the Texas Gulf, so Texans can now dial 211 (<http://www.unitedwayhouston.org/looking/helpline.html>) in the event of an emergency or a non-emergency to speak with emergency volunteers fluent in a number of languages, including Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, French, and Chinese.

In efforts to better communicate with citizens about upcoming weather, HCCCC updated citizens on impending weather problems by linking the council's Web site with a radar picture of the north Texas Gulf coastline and another radar picture of the entire state provided from the Harris County Office of Emergency Management (<http://www.hcoem.org/txdot/>).

Additionally, the Council leaders addressed the early concerns from first responders to educate each other about the roles and responsibilities of each organization, and talked in depth about the CCC programs, specifically the CERT training. Today the HCCCC was able to obtain full support of the area's first responders.

The Harris County Citizen Corps Web Site allows citizens to find volunteer opportunities as well as log volunteer hours. The site is available in both English and Spanish.

Volunteers can complete the following:

- Obtain national, state and local disaster preparedness information.
(<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/relatedlinks.asp>)
- Sign up to volunteer their time and/or services/equipment.
(<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/volunteer/join.asp>)
- Directly link to service organizations they may be interested in.
(<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/volunteer/volunteerops.asp>)
- Log their volunteer hours and activities.
- Obtain information on training opportunities from Citizen Corps programs and partnering organizations.
(<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/trainingopps.asp>)

As December 31, 2003 over 6,000 citizens have visited the website and have registering over 11,000 volunteer hours. Over 2,200 individuals participate in the four umbrella programs, CERT, Neighborhood Watch, Volunteers in Police Service, and the Medical Reserve Corps.

For further information, call (281) JOIN NOW or visit the Harris County Citizen Corps Council at www.harriscountycitizencorps.com.

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