

Hurricane Katrina

A Perspective from the North Carolina TERT. Team Leader

Jesse Creech, ENP

The North Carolina TERT. (Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce) was originated in September of 2001, shortly after the attacks on 09-11-01. This concept was created to assist PSAPs with additional personnel during times of critical situations, or when a major disaster strikes. In any major disaster personnel from Police, Fire and EMS agencies have been deployed to assist in every way imaginable, thus creating more workload on the local PSAP or communications center in the affected area. When you add these additional resources and the additional phone calls being received, it's easy to see why help is needed. As we all know, in a disaster situation, the number of incoming calls to 9-1-1 only increases with the magnitude of the disaster. With the creation of TERT, the 9-1-1 centers needing the additional resources would now have them.

As a responder to every TERT deployment since its creation, I find it beneficial to share my stories with other 9-1-1 professionals.

The first TERT deployment was in January of 2003 when an explosion took place at a pharmaceutical plant in Kinston, N.C. Twenty people responded during this deployment. Of the twenty responders, several were administrative people, including some of the original creators of TERT to see how the concept actually worked in action. It was determined early in to the disaster, that this new concept was worth all the time and effort that was put into it.

The second deployment came in September of 2003 when Hurricane Isabel rocked the coast of eastern North Carolina. This deployment consisted of 18 people from several different agencies.

The third deployment came approximately one year later in September of 2004, when Hurricane Ivan and Tropical Storm Frances struck the mountains of western North Carolina, within a two week time frame. This deployment involved five people.

In each situation North Carolina TERT was able to provide the requesting agencies with exactly what they asked for. Every deployment is unique. If there's one thing I've learned from these deployments it is that all people who work in this profession appreciate each other a lot more than anyone else does.

Then came Katrina!! In September of 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck as a category five in Louisiana and Mississippi. Fortunately Woody Glover, Director of Saint Tammany's Parish, Louisiana, Communications District, and his Deputy Director, Jack Varnado in Covington, Louisiana were somewhat familiar with North Carolina TERT and the reason it had been formed. Because of their knowledge of N.C. TERT, they were able to request

a TERT deployment to assist their centers. Although there had never been a TERT deployment out of state, anything was worth a try.

We received word of a possible deployment on September 1st. Anyone who has ever responded would like to think that they are ready to respond at a moments notice. However several things must take place before one can respond. An official request must be made, and the official request must be granted. Over the next three days, we found out just how long it takes for something to become “official”.

As TERT responders we must be prepared for anything when deploying for a TERT assignment. Although each situation is unique, there are several things you should always be prepared for. First you must wait, we spent the next few days anticipating the phone call, and preparing ourselves for the trip. What you must remember is you’re going into a disaster zone, so what you take is what you have. You should go prepared with enough clothes, water, food and personal hygiene products to last for the days requested. Since it’s a disaster zone you’re responding to, you have no idea what kind of sleeping arrangements will be provided, so you should prepare yourself for this as well. You should also take items you use everyday, such as cash or medication, since these things are just not easily accessible during a disaster.

The official call came in on Sunday night, September 4th around 9 pm. It had been decided earlier, that if possible, we would leave at night, so we would arrive in the disaster area during the daylight. We had heard several reports of numerous flats tires from debris in the roadway, and it was our goal not to join this elite group. We had been asked to stay for 10 days, therefore when we departed with 2 vehicles were packed to the max.

The trip from Raleigh North Carolina to Covington Louisiana was long to say the least. Fifteen hours on the road is a long trip, even if you’re going on vacation. Our first goal for the trip was to arrive safe and never have less than a half of tank of gas. Fifteen hours after leaving Raleigh we arrived safe, had a half of a tank of gas, and we were starving.

Soon after our arrival, at the old Court House, in Covington, we were fed lunch, and met with Woody Glover who explained what we would be doing. It had been decided that we would be answering phones in the Emergency Operations Center for Saint Tammany’s Parish. When we arrived these phones were being answered by people with the Saint Tammany’s Sheriff’s Office, as well as people they had recruited from other departments within the Parish.

We split our group in 2 shifts, one for days and the other for nights. Myself, along with Philip Penny, Judy Capparelli, and Christy Burgess from Raleigh/Wake 9-1-1, Nathan Huey from Durham Communications, Adam Coulter from Haywood County Communications, and Cole Cass from Iredell Communications would be working the day shift. Steve Newton and Mike Reitz from Orange County Emergency Management and Joel Chambers from Haywood County Communications would be working the night shift. Both shifts always had at least one person from the Parish to assist with directions

or other questions of local interest that we couldn't answer. Often when people from out of town show up to help, people react in a negative way as if you've come to rescue them, or take over their job. We found exactly the opposite here, as they were glad to get any help we could offer. Many of the people staffing the operations center phones were secretaries for the Parish.

The E.O.C. was staffed with representatives from each police department within the Parish, the National Guard, Fire Services, Medical Officer, Ambulance Service, Wildlife, Public Schools, Public Works, Parish Media, three different power companies, State Police, Sheriff's office, and the Parish President's office to name a few.

Within a very short time, we were able to relieve people who had worked for days with no chance to even go home to check on their own families or their property. They had been stationed in the E.O.C. since the storm hit. Several of the people we relieved in the operations room actually had no home to go to, as did several of the workers in the E.O.C. By the end of the second day, we were able to relieve all the day shift and night shift people who had been there since the storm hit. This why it's extremely important to take only experienced telecommunicators as responders. The goal is to relieve people who otherwise would get no relief. Sending a rookie or someone in training to assist another agency should not even be considered. You must remember the people you send as responders represent your agency and will leave a lasting impression on anyone they come in contact with.

As in any 9-1-1 center, you instantly become everything. Other than being the police, fire and EMS, we were also FEMA., and the American Red Cross. With this in mind, you can imagine how some people felt about us. And in a situation such as Hurricane Katrina you'll become even more than you are on a regular basis. Each day the St. Tammany Parish Public Information Office updated their website and provided the media with updates concerning everything imaginable. A few of the updates were curfews, shelter information, drinking water restrictions and medical assistance. Think of any major disaster you've ever been involved in, and that's the kind of questions we were asked. Questions such as where to acquire food stamps, unemployment information, and mosquito control to name a few. When's the last time someone called your center concerned about the 1892 outbreak and wanted the water in the area to be tested for Scarlet Fever, The Plague or Yellow Fever? How many times have you received calls about a corpse hanging out of a casket, with on lookers stopping to take pictures? The list goes on and on. Even though it doesn't fit in the job description, we even helped unload a Red Cross truck of medical supplies. You're there to do whatever is needed, be prepared

After 10 long, but very rewarding days, our deployment ended. While you almost hate to leave, you have your family and job to get back to. Believe it or not, you miss them both, and become very grateful for what you have. The assistance you've provided to other 9-1-1 professionals is more appreciated than words could describe. The friendships that are made are priceless. Last but not least, **TERT WORKS!!!!!!**