

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE & PREPAREDNESS

# PREPARED DISPATCHERS: The TERT Response To Hurricane Ike

Preparedness is a major concern for an entire community, including public safety. And in an APCO-Motorola survey of 200 local firefighters, police officers, EMS providers and county officials, first responders named natural disasters as their highest preparedness priority (see “Responder Concerns,” April 2008, *PSC*). In the early morning hours of Saturday, Sept. 13, Hurricane Ike demonstrated again why this is a valid concern.

The storm devastated the Texas Gulf Coast and parts of Louisiana with 110 mph winds, leaving more than 60 people dead and thousands displaced. Many public safety agencies and comm centers were severely damaged and left without adequate staffing. According to Sherry Decker, APCO Texas representative for the Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT), “The [agencies and] PSAPs prepared as best they could to make sure their people were safe and to have backup systems [and equipment] in place.”

For communications personnel during Hurricane Ike, preparedness paid off. Extra relief and resources were quick



North Texas dispatchers were deployed to the Seabrook (Texas) Police Department.



PHOTOS ERICKA ANGEL

Hurricane Ike devastated the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast in early September, leaving thousands of residents displaced and destroying many homes, businesses and public safety facilities.

to arrive, thanks to the APCO/NENA National Joint TERT Initiative (NJTI) in Texas. A state’s TERT coordinator typically organizes and deploys the relief teams, but Texas does not have an appointed state coordinator at this time. Lisa Dobson, NENA TERT liaison and committee chair for Texas, would normally have assisted in the Texas TERT deployments, but she had her hands full preparing for the hurricane to hit her agency in Harris County. So Decker took over coordinator responsibilities. In the days before the storm, Decker and her colleagues e-mailed agencies along the Texas coast, making sure they knew personnel resources would be available through TERT.

By the early afternoon on Saturday, Ike slowed to a Category 1 storm, and

Decker’s phone began to ring nonstop with requests for TERT teams. The ringing didn’t slow until midnight on Sunday. According to Decker, dispatchers at the agencies requesting help were physically and emotionally exhausted from the events of the storm. “[The dispatchers] wanted to be able handle it themselves, to say they did it, but they needed help,” says Decker. “The first [TERT] team was deployed within four hours of the request.”

*The teams:* Most dispatchers in North Central Texas receive training through Decker’s agency, the North Central Texas Council of Governments, which conducted a TERT basic training course in the region. The NJTI requires dispatchers to complete this course to qualify for deployment. “We have a good pool of TERT-trained dispatchers to pull from

locally,” says Decker. “A lot of [our dispatchers] know each other, which made it easier for the [TERT] team leaders.”

Teams were deployed for four days at a time, and dispatchers from the same agencies were deployed together whenever possible. Every team was given paperwork that got them past roadblocks and to their destinations. The first team of seven dispatchers moved quickly, travelling to Southern Texas in two cars and paying for their own gas. “After that, we made sure [teams] had [discretionary] funds,” says Decker. “[Many agencies] making donations for supplies [also] sent gift cards for gas.”

Teams were deployed to support four different agencies: The Bridge City Police Department, Catastrophic Medical Operations Center, the Galveston Sheriff's Office and the Seabrook Police Department. A wide range of damage affected these agencies; some sustained water damage and were still flooded when the teams arrived. Other agencies were completely destroyed. Power was out. Mobile command centers and communications trailers with generators were being used as comm centers. The first request for help came from Catastrophic Medical Operations Center in Houston. Agency dispatchers were working out of a van in Reliant Park. There was no electricity to charge radios, so dispatchers communicated with units by cell phone until backup equipment arrived.

In addition to difficult working conditions, TERT teams had difficult living conditions. Team 1 slept in an ambulance bay between shifts. Some teams slept in fire stations and other facilities. In Bridge City, members of TERT Team 5 slept in an 18-wheeler equipped with bunks and used the beach showers and bathrooms. When Decker was first contacted about the beach showers, she thought team members were calling to complain. “They were actually excited,” says Decker. “The dispatchers knew what to expect. They knew the conditions were bad. They were amazing and ready to go.”

At press time, more than 30 dispatchers and 12 teams had been deployed, and

### HEALTH AND FITNESS

## Food: My BFF

For the past several months, I've been following and occasionally contributing to a blog called Get Fit Slowly ([www.getfitslowly.com](http://www.getfitslowly.com)), which is run by two nice fellows named J.D. and Mac. The blog bears witness to their struggles with weight issues as they approach middle age.

In a recent post, Mac wrote about how he realized he wasn't just fighting a battle, but an all-out war. “... [O]ur dinner conversation the other night made me realize the enormity of the battle against food that I'm waging. [My wife] asked about what happens when I reach my target weight. ... What happens when I no longer am in a reduction mode, but in a maintenance mode. ... I haven't done the math, but I'm betting my caloric needs now for reduction will be similar to my caloric needs in the future when I weigh less and have less to maintain. This made me a little sad.”

As I read the post, I thought back to when I quit smoking more than 10 years ago. When I took the plunge, I felt like I was losing my best friend. We'd been together through thick and thin for more than 15 years. How could I endure without my beloved smoky treats? The vision of my bleak existence made me sad. For at least a year, I regularly missed cigarettes, especially with my morning coffee. But every time I got through an episode when I thought I would break, it got a bit easier. Now, I can't imagine putting one of those things near my lips.

Similarly, many view food as a best friend. When you go on a diet, it's as though you're in fifth grade and your family is moving to another state. You know you'll never see your best friend again, and suddenly your future looks bleak and gray. Reluctantly and with much drama, you settle into your new house, go to a new school, rebel, adapt, accept your lot in life and finally start meeting people. Maybe you occasionally write or visit your old friend, but life goes on, new friends are made, and you begin to realize—but you'll never admit it to your parents—you're a better person for the experience.

Likewise, when you go on a diet, you're essentially saying good-bye to your old food friends. The good news is you can make new friends with healthier foods. *Example:* I use to love creamy Alfredo sauces. It wasn't good pasta if it wasn't loaded with cream, butter and a huge heap of parmesan cheese. When I decided to start making healthier choices, I'd reluctantly order the marinara sauce. I felt I was somehow being punished, but I did it (most of the time) knowing it was the right thing to do. *The odd thing:* Over time I started to like marinara sauces and realized they had a lot more flavor. Proof positive that new habits result in acquiring new tastes.

The 30-day-habit rule doesn't always apply when you're talking about cutting out one of your favorite food friends. This particular relationship modification took several years before the high-calorie cheesy sauces were naturally snubbed, but every time I got through a tough patch, it got just a tiny bit easier. So what food friend do you need to outgrow? It's something to ponder—until next month.

~ BRIGID BLASCHAK,

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requests for help were still coming in. Many teams were also able to transport much-needed supplies and donations to personnel at affected agencies.

Hurricane Ike was the state's first official TERT deployment. According to NJTI Co-Chair Brent Lee, "I think they have done a wonderful job. ... [Texas is] one of the few states that truly has the capability to use the program as it's designed to be used. ... Those states [developing their programs] need to look at this as an example of the need to have these teams. Texas took care of its own, but in a truly national emergency, or if an EMAC [Emergency Management Assistance Compact] request is issued, we need response teams close by."

**Challenges:** "The biggest obstacle is that the agencies don't realize they can ask for help," says Decker. "[Agencies] think about police, firefighters and the Red Cross but often forget about the dispatchers that are affected."

Despite the outreach before the storm, many affected agencies had never heard of TERT and were suspicious. According to Decker, one agency insisted on researching the program's legitimacy while filling out the paperwork to request a team.

"Next time, we will have educated the agencies on how to ask for help," says Decker. "I can't send anyone until I have a formal request through the [local] EOC to the State OEM in Austin, [which provides a team tracking number]. Once we get the number, [the teams] are out the door."

"But just asking for help is not enough, knowing how to fill out the forms and how to expedite the process was key," Decker continues. "We have a whole list of things to accomplish this calendar year. Education is No. 1; [we need to] reach out to the agencies on what they can have and what their people should expect, getting the message out that there are people to help."

The deployed dispatchers say bonds have formed between them and the local dispatchers. According to Decker, team members were sad to leave. In an e-mail to Decker, TERT Team 4 Member Ericka Angel of the Murphy (Texas) Police Department said, "[I just wanted to] let you know what a good

experience our deployment was to Seabrook, Texas. ... It was amazing to see so many people [come] together to help out their community. After this hurricane had destroyed so many lives, including their own, [dispatchers] stayed at the fire station to help others. [I will] never forget this experience."

~FYI: [www.njti-tert.org](http://www.njti-tert.org)

~NATASHA YETMAN, Assistant Editor

## Training on The Road

The Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) provides a variety of training courses designed for law enforcement, firefighters and health-care professionals that go beyond classroom instruction. So far in 2008, CDP has averaged 58 mobile training events per week. The Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) offer local jurisdictions an opportunity to receive vital training for potential threats, accidental or man-made. Training opportunities include 10 response disciplines: emergency management, EMS, fire, governmental administration, hazmat, health care, law enforcement, public health,

incidents. Many of the CDP's 38 training courses, which typically last from one to four days, are available through MTTs. Requests for training are made through a State Administrative Agency (SAA). Jurisdictions are responsible for recruiting students and providing training locations, but courses are offered at no cost to the local jurisdiction. Responders who need training at the CDP's toxic training facility make the trip to Anniston, Ala., home to the nation's only civilian facility offering nerve agent training.

"Having the CDP trainers come to us is more realistic because of budget and manpower constraints," says Lt. James McClain of the Chickasha City (Okla.) Police Department. "Training makes us better officers, and I feel more well-rounded. But if the [CDP] wasn't available to come here, I'm not sure when I would have gotten to train."

As of September 2008, MTTs have visited 48 states and four U.S. territories, resulting in more than 188,000 MTT-trained emergency responders. The first MTT event was held in Salt Lake City in 2002, in preparation for the Winter



PHOTO COURTESY THE CENTER FOR DOMESTIC PREPAREDNESS

Mobile Training Teams offer agencies the same level of training in their jurisdictions as that offered at the CDP, while allowing for customization and cost savings.

public safety communications and public works.

CDP is a major component of FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate and has the nation's only Congressionally chartered federal training facility. The MTT program provides responders with knowledge to prevent, protect, respond to and recover from chemical, biological, radiological or explosive

Olympics. More recently in Denver, an MTT event was held prior to the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

~FYI: <http://cdp.dhs.gov>

## Missing Credit

The credit was inadvertently omitted from an October photo, p. 55, bottom left. Greg Heifner took the photo. The editors regret the omission. **||PSC||**