



# **TERT: A BEGINNING**

**BY  
JENNIFER VERBER, DISPATCHER  
NORTH RICHLAND HILLS  
POLICE DEPARTMENT, TX**



It's Sunday, June 1<sup>st</sup> and my husband asks me if I know what today is. "Well of course I know what today is," I reply, "It's the first day of hurricane season." As a 5<sup>th</sup> generation Floridian born and raised in South Florida, knowing when hurricane seasons starts is like knowing your birthday. But my husband and I moved here to the great state of Texas, specifically the DFW metroplex, and hurricanes no longer concern me. Well, at least they didn't until I found TERT. TERT is the Telecommunicator Emergency Response Team. TERT is a team made up of specially trained telecommunicators, dispatchers, communications officers, etc. that deploy to areas affected by disasters as mutual aid.

Having lived through and worked through disasters, respectively named Andrew and Charley, the reality of what happens afterwards is one of my truths. So when the opportunity of TERT presented itself I was itching to get on board. The opportunity to join a team that offered aid to my sisters and brothers of the headset after disasters befell them was too good to pass up. So, here I am, a team leader for TERT.

It's now Thursday, September 11<sup>th</sup>. Not only is this day a day of great meaning to me but it is also the day that I knew Texas TERT was about to go active- the beginning. Anxiously, I watched the news as Ike's path became more and more certain until finally it hit. I awoke Saturday morning to see and hear the destruction. I was restless the whole day, knowing the call was coming. I prepared (got out my little manual, thought about what Natalie Duran told me and started shopping) sleeping bag, blow up mattress, food stuffs and so on. Then, on Sunday it came. The call. "Hey Jen, it's Sherry. We've got the call. We deploy in four hours." Excited, nervous, jittery, impatient, overwhelmed were just some of the emotions running through my mind. Swallowing my nervousness, I met up with the rest of my team and off we went on our way, south from Arlington to Houston.

So this was it, the inaugural team on its inaugural mission to provide much needed help and relief to our brethren. First stop on our trek, Houston. Now, why is it that when you're somewhere new, the one sign you need is the only one that blew down? Eventually we got there – Reliant Stadium. As we entered the stadium through a back gate and passed the loading docks, we saw our temporary home. We rolled up to the command post, the Montgomery County Hospital District's command bus, the hub of communications for Reliant Command. Beyond that inside the bays were rows and rows of ambulances or medics or boxes, whatever moniker you prefer. They had come from all over the U.S. to help. After we got our briefing and a quick tour, half of us went on shift while the other half bedded down inside the bays where the ambulances were staging and being dispatched throughout the day and night. I worked through the night and into the morning until the afternoon when I got another call from Galveston County Sheriff's Office (SO). We packed up and ventured south yet again.

It was a good thing we got gas before we reached Galveston as there was none to be had further south. Not that it would have mattered because each exit was closed off by stone-faced DPS Troopers. Each exit ramp was blocked by units and Troopers armed and ready. Apparently they were serious about not exiting. Finally we arrive in League City, home of the Office of Emergency Management for Galveston County. The Galveston County SO had evacuated their dispatch center to the mainland and now the Office of Emergency Management Building had become the base of operations for not just the Galveston County SO but the Emergency Operations Center and other entities/agencies needed in the area.

When we arrived and were shown upstairs to the communications center, we were greeted and met with gratitude. Each and every dispatcher couldn't stop thanking us and in fact thanked us throughout our stay. It was not only overwhelming to have someone be that grateful just for your presence but so very humbling. Within short order, we were shown around the bunk room, the shower room and, most especially, the room where the food was! Once again, half of us started shift and half of us bedded down. As I worked that night and got to know my new coworkers, I learned of the losses within their center and was reminded of my experiences. I remembered as a teenager watching my mother sweep water out of our living room through the open front door. An exercise in futility since the roof was completely gone and it continued to rain. I remembered my grandmother's face as she stood looking at around at what was left of the home my grandfather built for her. I remembered sitting in a communications center and learning of what was happening around us as the hurricane raged. Hearing that Desoto County's building caught fire and how the dispatchers in Charlotte County had desperately raced to the jail in fear of their lives. I remembered the Punta Gorda dispatcher who lost everything she owned. I thought of all those I couldn't help and looked at those I could.

Through the next days I worked closely with the dispatchers from Galveston County SO and Kemah Police Department. It's amazing how friendly we became with each other. Well, maybe not so amazing when you take into account the limited space and 12-hour shifts. It's funny to say, but during my deployment into a hurricane ravaged area I had a great time. I not only got the chance to meet fellow telecommunicators but I got to help the helpers and give to the givers. It felt wonderful to know that my efforts went to such deserving people. I also learned some stuff such as what a BOI is, that the man who said he was on 10 ½ Street really was, I got to see where N 9<sup>th</sup> meets N 9<sup>th</sup> and I am not the only one who likes to prank the new guy, basic calltaking is the same no matter where you go and whether they be officers or deputies, they all are looking for the same descriptions. I also got to listen as people desperately attempted to find lost loved ones and I witnessed how sometimes disasters bring out the worst in people. I got to learn and experience all these things because of TERT.

Such is the beginning of Texas TERT. As we sat in our classes and learned what we needed to learn, we also wondered what it would actually be like, what it would feel like and what it would turn out like. What we discovered was it worked and it worked well.

TERT is a mutual aid program for telecommunicators, which is deployed in response to the aftermath of disasters both man-made and natural. NENA and APCO have partnered to develop and institute this program throughout the nation. For more information, please visit our website at [www.njti-tert.org](http://www.njti-tert.org)

### **About TERT**

*In partnership, the National Emergency Number Association and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials-International are dedicated to the development of a nationally recognized certification program for telecommunicator mutual aid response in the aftermath of disasters, providing information as to operational deployment of Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT) programs and taking a leadership role in assisting governmental agencies in the development of TERT style programs at the regional, state and local levels.*

*If you have questions about developing a TERT program in your state, please visit [www.njti-tert.org](http://www.njti-tert.org) or email the National Joint TERT Initiative (NJTI) Co-Chairs at [NJTIChairs@NJTI-TERT.org](mailto:NJTIChairs@NJTI-TERT.org)*