Hurricane Charley and Frances: Advice From the Front Lines

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As many of you know your brothers and sisters in the Florida emergency management community have been quite busy and will continue to be until the end of November, 2004. This article contains some useful bits of information and advice that I have learned.

The EOC Environment

No amount of exercises or simulations can adequately prepare you for life in an activated Emergency Operations Center (EOC). During Hurricane Charley, Orange County’s EOC was activated for a total of 10 days. By the end of the storm the EOC staff was drained both physically and mentally. The EOC should strive to be an island of calm and cool heads in an ocean of instability and chaos. With that in mind here are a few helpful hints:

- Emergency Management is the core of the EOC, if we lose our cool we invite fear and chaos to rein in the EOC.

- EOC Briefings should be scheduled regularly. This is a fine line, too many briefings and you burn your folks out, too few and your EOC staff will be uninformed as to the present situation.

- There is no place for Micro Managers in an EOC. You have to trust your EOC staff. They are your subject matter experts, trust their judgment and back them up when their decisions are questioned.

Never Enough Time

During the height of an activation you never have enough time to make decisions. During Hurricane Charley up until 11am on Friday, August 13th the track of the storm was projected to impact Tampa Bay. However, the 11am track update changed our planning. We had to issue evacuation orders and get our citizens out of the mobile home parks and low-lying areas in less then four hours. We went from responding as a host county to an impact county. The last major hurricane that impacted Central Florida was almost 40 years ago. As you can imagine we used every asset at our disposal to evacuate those areas.

Another situation you should be aware of is that about 95% off your time in the EOC is involved in putting out brushfires. You have no idea what will come up in the heat of a disaster. In Orange County’s EOC, Emergency Management has a
place of refuge, our Operations Room that is in the corner of our EOC. However, once you leave this room you will be bombarded with issues, some of these technological, some procedural and some involve sitting down with your EOC staff to help them solve a problem.

Never Enough Resources

When the big one hits your jurisdiction you will never have enough resources. At the end of Hurricane Charley there were around 7,000 requests from the impact counties to the State EOC. At the height of the incident, the effort to track and fill resources was so overwhelming that the State Logistical Staging Areas were granted authority to take resource requests directly from the counties and fill them leaving the State EOC in a support role.

One other thing - when you need the resources they won't be there. Following this exercise my EOC staff has already begun reviewing mutual aid agreements and either rebuilding existing ones or establishing new agreements. FEMA has established a very interesting system of resources, called push packages. The State of Florida during Hurricane Charley and Frances also adopted this system. I can assure you we will also be looking at a similar system in Orange County.

The Media

From all the training we have all undergone we were trained that the media has a job to do and we should strive to work with them. Now I'll admit that the media is a useful asset but it has its draw backs. I'll give you three examples:

- Following Hurricane Charley a local reporter wrote an article on the lack of our cities being represented in the County EOC. While it is critical that they be present, the reporter’s article was full of inadequacies and questioned a system they did not fully understand. In the end it made Emergency Management’s job that much harder to work with our municipalities.

- Prior to Hurricane Frances one of our local T.V. stations interviewed a debris removal contractor. This contractor advised that around every debris disposal site citizens should be evacuated at least five miles away. Following this report the EOC was swamped with calls from frightened citizens. The T.V. station eventually dropped the story but the damage was done.

- Another incident was prior to Hurricane Frances - a local newspaper printed the location of all Orange County shelters. A disclaimer was put on the article that stated that these shelters may not be open. The disclaimer was in very small print. As a result citizens began arriving at a number of public schools that were not opened as shelters.
The best advice I can give you is to be careful in your dealings with the media. Never turn your back of them. Also be sure your public information team is a crack team. I’m happy to say that Orange County’s EOC PIOs are an excellent unit and get the job done.

**Conclusions**

Hurricane Charley and Frances were devasting disasters that affected all of Florida. However, in Orange County I’m proud to say our EOC staff weathered these two disasters and provided calm cool heads that protected our citizens and assisted in returning our community to normal as soon as possible. I’m very proud to say I work for Orange County, FL Office of Emergency Management.