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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Management: Ensuring Critical Personnel Have Government Emergency Telecommunications Service/ Wireless Priority Service

SUMMARY

State emergency operations centers (SEOC) should ensure that critical response personnel's cellular phones have government emergency telecommunications service/wireless priority service (GETS/WPS). This will enable them to communicate during emergencies when landline communications may be disrupted and cellular towers oversaturated.

DESCRIPTION

GETS and WPS enable government employees and responders to complete high-priority phone calls in an emergency. GETS holders receive emergency access and priority processing in the Public Switched Telephone Network when cellular networks are congested. WPS-enabled national security and emergency preparedness personnel receive similar priority, enabling them to complete calls on their cellular phones when networks are oversaturated.

On August 16, 2007, Tropical Storm Dean became a hurricane as it moved through the Caribbean Ocean. National Hurricane Center forecasts indicated that Hurricane Dean could make landfall along the southern Gulf coast of Texas. President George W. Bush issued an emergency declaration for 32 Texas counties to provide federal assistance to state and local preparations for Hurricane Dean. This constituted the greatest mobilization of emergency resources in the history of the state of Texas. The direct threat to Texas lessened as Hurricane Dean approached land, although rains and storm surge had the potential to cause coastal flooding. Hurricane Dean made landfall in Mexico on August 21 as a Category 5 hurricane and dissipated several days later without impacting Texas.

As Alamo-area operations centers expanded their preparations for Hurricane Dean, they experienced a lag in communications. Emergency managers might have encountered challenges maintaining routine communications had Hurricane Dean made landfall. They recognized that cellular networks would have been oversaturated due to disruptions in landline communications caused by the hurricane. If this had occurred, Alamo-area emergency responders and management personnel would have been unable to complete calls to their crews or to the SEOC.

The Alamo-area after-action report (AAR) recommended that operations centers provide GETS or WPS to emergency responders and government personnel. This will allow these personnel to receive and transmit information as part of incident response.

SEOCs should consider ensuring that critical response personnel's cellular phones have GETS/WPS. This will enable them to communicate during emergency situations when landline communications may be disrupted and cellular towers oversaturated.

LINKS

National Communications System, Government Emergency Telecommunications Service
http://gets.ncs.gov/program_info.html

National Communications System, Wireless Priority Service
<http://wps.ncs.gov/>

CITATION

State of Texas Emergency Management, Governor's Division of Emergency Management.
2007 Hurricane Dean After-Action Report. 26 Nov 2007.
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=32494>

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