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LESSON LEARNED

Shelter Operations: Maintaining a Continuous Security Presence

SUMMARY

Shelter operators should ensure that security providers maintain comprehensive coverage of their assigned areas by staggering their breaks.

DESCRIPTION

After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, thousands of residents evacuated to Clark County, Nevada. Clark County Office of Emergency Management's (OEM) "Operation Open Arms" (OOA) accommodated the needs of over 5,000 evacuees over 3 months by recruiting representatives from social services organizations to arrange medical care, temporary housing, and financial assistance. The American Red Cross (ARC) distributed financial assistance checks to evacuees who provided documentation that they lived in a Katrina-affected jurisdiction.

Clark County, Nevada, which includes Las Vegas, is the state's most populated urban area.

Clark County OEM also contracted two local police officers to provide security at OOA's operational headquarters, which accommodated approximately 400 evacuees and OOA staff members per day. However, Clark County OEM did not schedule breaks, including meals, for the police officers. Often, both police officers took their breaks simultaneously, leaving the facility temporarily unsecured.

The OOA team discovered that criminal activity, particularly fraud attempts, increased when both police officers left for lunch at the same time. Four local women used false papers identifying them as Gulf Coast residents to receive approximately \$10,000 in assistance checks by visiting the ARC station repeatedly when the officers were absent. When ARC representatives recognized the same women returning multiple times, they notified the police officers responsible for security. The officers checked the licenses that the women were using in the police registry and discovered that they were false. An undercover detective posing as an ARC volunteer arrested the women the next time they came into the facility. After this incident, the police officers took breaks at different times to ensure continuous security coverage. This deterred local citizens from further attempts to steal from the ARC or any of the other social services organizations.

It is important for shelter security staff to maintain continuous security coverage to preserve order and deter crime. An essential component of maintaining vigilance is to stagger breaks so that at least one security officer is present at all times.

CITATION

O'Brien, Jim. Director, Clark County, Nevada Office of Emergency Management. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 06 Sep 2006.

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