

Terrorism Exercise
By Freeman Mendell

On March 5 - 7, 2002, the County of Galveston conducted an exercise in how to handle a major emergency of Countywide proportions. At the beginning we all were aware that the premise of the drill was a terrorist attack. The State of Texas sponsored the drill. A group called TEEEX from Texas A&M University were the drill "Controllers". The job of the Controllers was to set up the scenario, to define what it was that was expected of the participants, "inject" information throughout the drill concerning events that were taking place that we had to react to, and, monitor our reactions so that they could evaluate our actions. The evaluation did not consist of a grade but of ideas and suggestions that the Controllers helped us to arrive at during the drill and after the drill was completed. They did offer advice during the drill if they were asked. This drill took place throughout the County in multiple locations and a few locations outside of the County in Harris (the County that Houston is in) County and in Brazoria County, another adjoining county. I was told that this drill cost \$500,000. It was being used as a pilot to try to fine tune how such a real life situation would be handled. The state of Texas is very active in the Emergency Management area due to the hurricane menace that faces the state every year. Texas is also the home of many oil refining and chemical processing facilities that have a potential for great destruction were a major event to happen at those plants. All of the major cities, hospitals and fire departments were involved in this drill and participated in the scenario as it unfolded. Each city had their Emergency Operations Center activated and manned for this drill.

Galveston County is located on the southeast Texas coast. It includes Galveston Island where the city of Galveston is located and also has a mainland component. The population of the County is approximately 250,000 with about 54,000 of that number living on Galveston Island. Galveston Island is 26 miles long. It is connected to the mainland by a six-lane causeway more or less in the east-middle of the island, a ferry system on the far east end of the island and a toll bridge at the far west end of the island. Most of the traffic to and from the island comes from the causeway, as it is the most direct path to the Houston area.

When I arrived at the Galveston County Emergency Operations Center, I found people from the following departments of the County and outside agencies in attendance:

1. The Emergency Management Staff
2. The County Auditor
3. County Legal
4. Purchasing
5. Sheriff
6. Various local police departments
7. The Army Corps of Engineers
8. The County Medical Examiner
9. The Health District
10. Road and Bridge
11. The Salvation Army
12. The Red Cross
13. Rural Metro (EMS)
14. Fire Department Personnel
15. Information Technology repair technician

16. County Facilities Department
17. Coast Guard
18. Amateur Radio Operators
19. 911 District
20. FEMA
21. Texas Department of Emergency Management
22. Texas Department of Public Safety (State Troopers)
23. Galveston County Professional Services
24. District Attorney
25. County Attorney
26. Volunteers from the community
27. NASA
28. Texas Forest Service

Besides all of these folks, all of the area hospitals had personnel involved at their hospitals, the cities had their EOCs (Emergency Operation Centers) open and many people at the state level in Houston and Austin were participating as the drama unfolded.

I could understand why everyone was there except for the Texas Forest Service. They had 6 or 8 personnel in attendance at our EOC, with more stationed at Ellington Field (an old Air Force base in Houston near the County line). As I spoke with one of the men in charge of the Forest Service team, he told me that he knew nothing about trees, his job was fighting fires. What the Forest Service brought to the event was an unmatched expertise in handling a crisis. They have what they called an Incident Command Structure (ICS) methodology that structured the response so that they knew where everyone was, where each piece of equipment was, where supplies were in the pipeline and what the status of the event was. This ICS method has been adopted by most of the federal agencies as the way to organize response to events. The National Forest Service was called out to help in the response to the terrorist attacks in New York using their ICS methodology. In the summer of 2001, Houston was struck by Tropical Storm Allison and received 39 inches of rain over 5 days, most of it falling over a Friday night and Saturday. The Texas Forest Service was called out to help organize and execute the evacuation of 6,000 people from the Texas Medical Center.

NASA is across Clear Lake from Galveston County. Their presence is not unusual in our emergency activities because of their close proximity. When I was in charge of the Year 2000 effort for the County, NASA attended most of our sessions.

Texas is divided up into Disaster Districts by the state. At the head of each Disaster District is a Department of Public Safety Captain. These individuals are responsible for the area in their district. All activities of any consequence are coordinated through this DDC or Disaster District Commander. The greater Houston area is under one Disaster District.

Our exercise was referred to as "Game Day". We had a "Game Clock" that was moved manually. One hour in "Game Time" may take up several hours in real time. This was to allow discussions of the events and to try to do corrective actions as the event was progressing and we discovered problems in how we were handling issues.

The assumption was that the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) had been activated. All of us had been called in to man the center. Most of the activity took place in a large

rectangular room. Each group was set up at a small table. At the table were a two-way radio, a phone and electrical outlets. The EOC has an emergency generator in case of power failure. In the center of the room towards one end was a table where all messages were to be sent after reception. The individuals at this table sorted the messages and assigned them to each group. I was given the messages to be posted on a white board as they came in. The board listed time, city, location and incident as categories for each incident. As the time wore on, I borrowed a laptop computer from purchasing and set up a database to track the incidents with. I then printed them out and passed them around to different teams. This was so they would have their own chronology to refer to as the event unfolded. The white board filled up. Entries needed to be erased, as the day went by, to make room for new entries. The board had room for 20 entries. The hard copy enabled everyone to see all of the messages rather than just the ones that were on the white board.

Each group had a specific job to do. We had to figure out who was to respond, where to get equipment, where to get supplies, where to store supplies, what shelters were open, what law enforcement needed to do and who needed to be notified. Each group had a white board at their station for notes so that others in the room could glance at their board and see what was going on.

Each group has their special area that had to be handled. Every couple of hours, we would stop and go around the room to see what everyone's status was. This was some of the most informative times of the exercise. It is hard to imagine how complicated our society has become until you see how many players it takes to respond properly to any serious incident. The Health District was concerned about saving the living, the Medical Examiner was concerned about preserving the crime scene and extricating the dead, the Coast Guard was concerned with rescue, The Army Corps of Engineers about the waterways and access to them. Accounting was trying to get a handle on the costs as the task moved along, Purchasing wanted to find the needed supplies and acquire them and store them. The Sheriff was concerned about maintaining order, The Red Cross and Salvation Army about where to set up shelters and how to get supplies to the shelters.

Since this was the first time all of these people had been together, there were some problems that surfaced. These were worked out as the time went by. Afterwards, there will be more meetings about lessons learned during the drill.

Had this been a real event, I think it would have been handled rather well. Nothing happened during these two days that caused anyone to throw up his or her hands. We all learned. If a disaster does come our way, we will be ready to deal with it. If you are a citizen of Galveston County, you should be comforted to know that all levels of your government are working hard to see that you are protected.