

## **Hurricanes Charley & 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 training, exercises or simulations can adequately prepare you for life in an activated 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 were 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.

Helpful Hints: 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 reign 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 11:00 a.m. on Aug. 13, the track of the storm was projected to impact Tampa Bay. However, the 11:00 a.m. 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 than 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 percent of your time in the EOC is involved in putting out brush fires. 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 involving 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 resource requests 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.

Following both hurricanes, the EOC staff have 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 Hurricanes 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: We have learned in training 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 drawbacks. I'll give you two examples:

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

- Another incident, also prior to Hurricane Frances, occurred when a local newspaper printed the location of all Orange County shelters. A disclaimer was put on the article that stated that these shelters might 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 school board was also inundated with calls.

The best advice I can give you is to be careful in your dealings with the media. Never turn your backs on them. Also be sure your public information team is an experienced team. I'm happy to say that Orange County's EOC public information officers are an excellent unit and get the job done.

Hurricanes Charley and Frances were devastating 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 them in returning our community to normal as soon as possible