

**Mark Sloan**

Harris County Homeland Security & Emergency Management Coordinator

Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management

U.S. Committee on Homeland Security hearing: Houston Strong: Hurricane Harvey Lessons Learned and the Path Forward

Monday, April 9, 2018

**INTRODUCTION**

- Name, Title, Organization

**BACKGROUND**

Briefly describe urban and complexity of Harris County. We are unique in the country in that we have a dense, urban population of approximately 2 million that are in unincorporated Harris County, meaning they do not live within a city limit. There are also 34 cities inside the county, including the City of Houston. During times of disaster, it our responsibility to support each of those cities equally – including our partners in unincorporated Harris County.

Harris County is home to 57 fire departments, more than 125 law enforcement agencies, with quite a bit of critical infrastructure and key resources, as you may know. Since 1979, Harris County has had 46 federally declared disasters. In fact, we average 1 disaster every 8 or 9 months.

**EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY – HARRIS COUNTY**

- Harris County, and all counties, has the authority it needs but it needs to be followed
- This is of particular concern to Harris because 34 cities, dense urban region

*City to County to State to Feds.....Feds to State to County to City*

- Absolutely essential to managing scarce resources during a disaster
- Practice how you play
- Important not only before disaster and during, but also during recovery

**FEDERAL JOINT FIELD OFFICE – POST DISASTER**

- These FEMA field offices to support a disaster response
- They typically house at the state in Austin
- That makes sense for them pre/during disaster but not after
- For increased coordination with locals, the Joint Operations Center should be sent to local communities where the disaster occurred for better integration (state can request this)
- State support is needed for this because the state is FEMA’s client, not the locals

- The purpose of a Joint Field Office, according to the federal plan, is to integrate all federal agencies to improve the overall federal response. But no matter how well the federal response is coordinated – if it is not integrated with local efforts, it is not working as well as it can.

## **RECOVERY AND MITIGATION**

- Harris County inspected 180 county buildings in 6 days
- Within 72 hours over 900 traffic signals were inspected and repaired to safe conditions
- Within 5 days over 13,000 lane miles and 800 bridges were inspected.
- Within 2 weeks all road washouts and damaged bridges were repaired to safe conditions
- Harris County started hauling debris 4 days after Harvey on schedule for 3 passes in 90 days.
- For a while we removed the equivalent of the Tax Day flood debris *every 2 days*. We have hauled over 1.2 million cubic yards to date, not including the Flood Control District's debris.
- Harris County inspected over 500,000 homes visually and issued almost 30,000 permits and 25,000 full inspections within 5 weeks.
- Our courthouse and jury assembly were completely damaged and continue to be a challenge.
- **All of these statistics were for the *unincorporated area of Harris County*.**
- The FEMA mitigation funds are crucial to restoring these efforts as we are now looking ahead to the upcoming storm season.

## **LESSONS LEARNED - WARNINGS AND COMMUNICATIONS**

The Regional Joint Information Center was activated with personnel from all over the region and state. This included 2,418 social media posts, 650 media interviews, 259 news releases, and 25 news conferences. But we saw that even that was not enough and recovery planning now includes new back-ups for our 911 system and other public alert systems.

## **LESSONS LEARNED – SHELTERING FOR URBAN POPULATIONS**

Harris County Sheltered almost 20,000 people with the mega shelters being opened at George R Brown Center and NRG center, including persons from other counties seeking refuge. The shelter at NRG with community partner Baker Ripley has become a model, having included medical and pharmacy services, childcare, veterinarian care and FEMA registration on-site.

## **LESSONS LEARNED – MULTIPLE, OVERLAPPING NATIONAL DISASTERS**

Harris County originally received 3 mega DRCs and eventually housed approx. 20 DRCs, both fixed and mobile. There were delays during the critical first few weeks when FEMA became stretched thin to manage additional events in Florida. We urge Congress to look at ways to better equip FEMA to handle multiple, overlapping events in the future.

**CLOSE FOR QUESTIONS**