

Emergency Management Partnering in Fort Bend County

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Fort Bend County is the 10th most populated county in Texas, having experienced an almost 60 percent rate of growth over the last decade. It is ranked as the 20th fastest growing county in the United States. It is strategically located adjacent to the fourth largest city in the country, allowing residents to have access to all of the advantages of a world-class city, including museums, airports and sports teams. Yet, a large part of the county is still graced with open space, like the George Ranch, where cattle graze on more than 20,000 acres. The inviting contrast of urban amenities and open space draws many individuals to the county, and this requires that we all work together to prepare Fort Bend County for any hazard that may occur.

Preparedness Strategy Focuses on Partnership

Fort Bend County has defined a disaster preparedness strategy that focuses on partnership. All political subdivisions in the county work collaboratively, often seamlessly, to improve capacity to prepare for and respond to threats. In 2004, the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) formed the Fort Bend County Coordination Council (FBCCC) in order to provide a framework for melding a patchwork of jurisdictional and agency response into a coordinated county response. The

Preparedness for Children in Disaster

A recent survey of licensed U.S. prehospital EMS agencies revealed that most are unprepared to appropriately care for pediatric patients in mass casualty events. See the October 2007 issue of *Pediatrics* at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/120/4/e756>.

17 jurisdictions in the county, working in concert with health care facilities and school districts, work as a team to prepare for disasters; secure homeland security funding; develop multi-jurisdictional exercise programs; and organize responder training efforts.

The FBCCC was formed with the idea that protection and security for Fort Bend citizens flows from building relationships between the various entities in the county and encouraging a team approach that allows the county and its cities and agencies to overcome disasters.

Achievements

■ The efforts of the Fort Bend County Coordination Council (FBCCC) have included the development of a Traffic Management Plan, designed to prepare the area for a large scale evacuation of the coastal zones in Galveston and Brazoria counties, neighbors to the south.

■ Similarly, the FBCCC initiated the FBC PIO (Public Information Officer) Network as a focused effort on emergency public information. The sharing of public information by public and private entities located in the county bolster the prospect that "one voice" will be heard when a crisis develops.

■ To address a critical need in 2004, the county teamed with six fire departments to form two Regional Hazardous Materials Response Teams. Until the development of these two teams, the county had no such capacity, thus requiring hazmat response to come from the City of Houston more than 30 minutes away. Knowing that such a wait time is unacceptable for a county approaching 500,000 in population, the Fort Bend County OEM worked with its partners to ensure that grant funds were secured, necessary

agreements were developed, and training was conducted to provide this significant upgrade in the county's ability to protect its citizens.

■ In 2005, recognizing the need to be better prepared to handle a major debris generation event (such as Tropical Storm Allison that devastated Southeast Texas several years earlier) the county OEM formed a Debris Management Steering Committee. This committee developed a multi-jurisdictional plan for debris management. The resulting efforts of all the county's jurisdictions resulted in an all-hazards debris plan; the development of pre-positioned contracts for debris removal and contractor monitoring; and significant training and exercising of the plan. The steering committee continues to work together today, partnering on future plan improvements and maintaining readiness for future disasters.

■ Now, in 2007, many of these same partners are teaming to form a Regional Structural Collapse Rescue Team. The formation of the team will once again provide a necessary service to the citizens of the county – a service that requires several agencies partnering together, since no one community in our area is large enough to address the problem by itself.

Summary

Partnership and teamwork have truly enhanced all phases of emergency management in Fort Bend County. This allows the county to provide coordinated and comprehensive emergency response. By working together, a better functioning system is possible because the key players have cultivated strong professional relationships while improving their understanding of all the elements involved in managing an emergency.