REBUILDING SAFER AND STRONGER

ORLANDO, Fla.—Build safer.

Of all the messages from the 2004 hurricane season, that one rings most clearly.

With the prospect of more hurricanes than usual for years into the future, it also rings most urgently.

Below are four ways individuals and communities are making themselves safer and stronger. Each lends itself to different story possibilities. Examples can be provided of the successful practice of each. The Web sites and other resources listed offer a wealth of information, and the combined News Desk of the Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the State Emergency Response Team (SERT), at 407-858-6207, are available to work with editors on finding additional sources and information.

Buy flood insurance—Sometimes the floods cannot be stopped, but the financial damage can. As of July 15, 2005, a total of 2,498 policyholders in Florida have received a combined amount of more than $48 million in claims for the 2004 hurricanes. Possible angles to this story include:
  • Who can purchase flood insurance from the government? Who is most at risk?
  • Statistically, flooding takes the most lives and causes the most damage in a hurricane.
  • What do most people not understand about flood insurance?

Protect yourself, from soap to Safe Rooms—Anyone who owns a building can make it safer. Techniques range from the proper way to fight mold and mildew to building hurricane-resistant Safe Rooms. Mitigation teams are currently visiting home improvement stores in the Panhandle, counseling hundreds of residents every day on backflow valves (to prevent sewage backup), roofing techniques, elevating homes, hurricane shutters and other steps. Some shoppers tell them their homes survived Hurricane Dennis because of mitigation steps they learned—and used—from the teams last year. Possible angles include:
  • Watching the mitigation teams in action, and listening to the residents.
  • Quizzing your audience: which steps provide the best protection against what threats?
  • Explaining what a Safe Room is and how to build it (complete information at www.fema.gov).
  • Profiling a mitigation success in your area. Twenty stories are available in the booklet, “Best Practices: Promoting Successful Mitigation in Florida,” available from FEMA.
Federal funding for community projects—Because of the 2004 hurricanes, more than $320 million in federal funds has been set aside to fund projects that better protect Florida communities. More than 800 projects have been submitted for consideration, a FEMA record. The program is managed by the Florida Department of Community Affairs, which reviews the projects with FEMA and sets the priorities for the program.

A story on how this “Hazard Mitigation Grant Program” works and what past projects have been successful in your area could prompt other communities and organizations to think creatively about protecting themselves.

Long term community plans—After last year’s hurricanes, the state of Florida looked at the hardest-hit areas and decided to take advantage of federal financial support and technical advice in helping those communities think about their long-term future. This program, the “Long Term Recovery Initiative,” brought in private-sector specialists in areas such as urban planning, architecture, landscaping and engineering, plus experts on related government programs. Those teams assessed the damage, analyzed the unique situation in each of five counties (Charlotte, DeSoto, Hardee, Escambia and Santa Rosa), and listened to ideas and opinions from local officials and at public meetings. They put together plans, ideas and options for the communities to consider.

As part of the process, FEMA will fund a Long Term Recovery Initiative branch director and five county managers for a period of time to be determined. The county managers will confer with local officials to sort through the plan and determine what parts the localities want to implement. The manager then will help prioritize those projects. A critical function of the managers is to search out funds for the rebuilding projects, such as grants from government or nonprofit agencies, private donations, business interests and so forth.

The recovery plans have been produced. Branch director and county manager positions are in the process of being filled.

Would your audience be interested in what those communities might look like 10 or 20 years from now? Could the different possibilities generate discussion in your home town?

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For information on SERT go to [www.floridadisaster.org](http://www.floridadisaster.org); For FEMA, go to [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov).