



State Emergency
Response Team



FEMA

Backgrounder

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“CHARLEY COMMAND:” THE BEGINNING OF A UNIFIED FEMA-STATE TEAM

Why it was key to achieving a successful response and recovery to the 2004 hurricanes

“From this point forward, all state and federal assets that are in support of the counties affected by Hurricane Charley will henceforth be known as ‘Charley Command,’” said former director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management and now FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate.

Spoken from a make-shift press tent rigged outside of the destroyed Charlotte County EOC just two days after Hurricane Charley made landfall in Florida, those words ushered in a new era in disaster response and recovery. For the first time in Florida, all state and federal agencies would work under the same umbrella to tackle what would turn out to be the most destructive hurricane season in Florida history.

Five years later, the decision to form a unified command may seem obvious because the combined team received such high marks for their responses to Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne. Together, FEMA and the Florida Division of Emergency Management provided 10 million gallons of water, 14 million ready-to-eat meals, 78.5 million pounds of ice and more than 561,000 tarps.

Partnering agencies across the state sheltered more than 368,000 residents before and after the four hurricanes made landfall in Florida. The team provided more than 17,000 temporary housing units to families and individuals. Hundreds of thousands more got financial help in the form of rental assistance.

It was the largest disaster response in Florida history and, with all emergency managers working under unified command, the state was ahead of the curve.

Until this time, there were few formalized procedures and protocols by which local governments, states, and the federal government used to engage each other and request assistance following a disaster event. In some cases, this led to slower decision-making, response times and communication problems between all levels of government. This all changed during the response and recovery effort during the 2004 season.

“By merging state and federal team together, we were looking at the same issues at the same time,” said Fugate. “We were sitting next to each other making decisions as opposed to passing information between various command centers.”

With emergency management leadership speaking with one voice, the mission of the response teams became simple and clear. Fugate summed it up at a news conference shortly after the August 13, 2004 storm in the hardest-hit area, Punta Gorda, Fla.

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“Our only mission in life now is to meet the needs of the disaster victims in the communities of this storm,” he said.

The team formed a joint Incident Action Plan, a common set of response and recovery goals to be attained over a specific time frame or operational period. It also allowed the unified team to look ahead to future events, such as pending storms, so current operations could be sustained and responders safely pre-positioned to handle the future impacts.

Over the following weeks, as three more storms assaulted Florida, members of the unified command described themselves as being “joined at the hip.”

“We traveled together to the devastated areas after all four storms and sat at the same table during the response phase of the disaster,” said Bill Carwile, the designated official representing the federal government for the disasters. “When briefing Governor Bush, Craig and I did so together.”

Following landfall in three of the four hurricanes, the state-federal team moved into to the most-impacted counties to demonstrate that the unified command was on hand to assist the local elected and appointed officials. More importantly, it gave them a better idea of what was happening ‘on the ground’ and led to faster decision-making.

A local Joint Information Center (JIC) was established early with support from the State PIO Deployment Team, developed through the Florida Fire Chiefs’ Association, to ensure consistent messages were going out to the public on a continuous basis. This was especially useful when local PIOs, who were also storm survivors, needed downtime to recover while operations moved forward.

“We knew what we were going to be doing, who was going to do it and who was responsible for it,” Carwile said.

On the state and federal levels, lead External Affairs Officers were co-located in the same room at the Orlando Joint Field Office so urgent media issues and public events could be quickly dealt with together using satellite feeds, daily media conference calls, and managing the deployment of several hundred field PIOs to provide resources and feedback to the unified team.

The successful unified command emergency management structure continues today.

At the Florida Recovery Office in Lake Mary, Fla., state and federal recovery managers are working side by side to wrap up aid to local government and other public agencies. The team has managed more than \$2.5 billion in federal aid for nearly 27,000 recovery and rebuilding projects.

Another example of the unified approach is the State of Florida Logistics Response Center. The massive warehouse in Orlando, Fla. stores critical disaster response supplies. The state provides FEMA with significant space in the warehouse to store commodities at no cost to the federal government. This allows federal resources to be closer to Floridians in all areas of the state so response time is diminished.

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The new unified structure allowed Florida to better understand the staffing needs across multiple local operations in Southwest Florida (Charley), the Treasure Coast (Frances and Jeanne) and the Panhandle (Ivan) during the 2004 season. To allow the unified command staff the ability to “switch gears” and focus on subsequent storms, the state used more than 715 emergency management personnel from 35 states, some from as far away as Alaska, through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC).

Because of the experience gained in 2004, Florida was able to provide over 7,000 first responders and trained emergency management teams to aid six southern counties that were impacted by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

FEMA’s mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

For more information on the Florida Division of Emergency Management and to GET A PLAN!, please visit: www.FloridaDisaster.org. All students, teachers and parents can find educational information and free downloadable materials at: www.KidsGetAPlan.com. And for the latest daily situation and flash reports go to: www.YouTube.com/FloridaSERT.

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