

City prepares for Hurricane season

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As hurricane season gets more active, questions stand out and more preparation persists. Is the city of Plano ready to take on evacuees if another disaster happens?

Have the highways been equipped to allow fluid traffic? How have the city and county governments changed their policies since last year?

C.J. Howard of Homeland Security for City of Plano has answers to the city's questions. He is hopeful that when the people of the Plano community do encounter another crisis, they will be informed and prepared.

"We have worked diligently with the state, the region and the community to make sure that our plans and strategy are will work," said Howard. "During our three-day exercise, which worked with the Regional Coordination Center, we found a long list of processes that worked and did not work. So we revised and developed successful actions."

Howard also wants the community to be informed and prepare for hazards that may occur in the local community. An overview of natural and man-made disasters that could occur in the Plano area are located on the Plano Homeland Security website at plano.gov.

Also on the website is a mitigation plan concisely laying out actions that should be taken if anything from tornados to highway gas spills occurs. For example, in case of a tornado, one action is to modify community recreation centers to serve as shelters with tornado safe rooms.

"We have been gearing up shelters to accommodate crisis.

The Red-Cross have done their assessments on some of our locations and they have passed. But, we still do need more resources to operate," Howard said.

The Texas Department of Public Transportation has an extensive plan which outlines how to control the evacuation process and flow of traffic in case of an emergency. The plan provides a detailed course of action for most any occurrence and can be found at www.txdps.state.tx.us/dem/pages/index.htm. Even a list of acronyms for every organization involved, from the ARC (American Red Cross) to VOLAG (Voluntary Agency) is provided.

Emergency Operating Centers and Regional Crisis Centers have also been updated. In 2004, Dr. Bob Helms of UTD noted that the "government and industry" needed to work together to be able to respond quickly and actively to security breaches and times of emergency.

"Advancing the state of the art in areas of information technology will play a key role in these efforts," said Helms.

The EOCs have been updated with computers and web-based programs which allow greater communication, and quicker reactions to be taken.

The Homeland Security also distributed a REDI (Residential Emergency and Disaster Initiative)guide, which aids residents in educating themselves.

"We get a call just about every day for a guide and we are still handing them out," said Howard.

Also, the Plano House Warmers, a welcome wagon for new residents in Plano, gives a package to each new resident, which includes a copy of REDI.

Howard, who has been working closely with the city of Houston and Harris County as a sister home for evacuees, says last year many self-sufficient families from other cities found shelter in Plano. Though the shelters are setup for people from Houston and Harris, anybody is welcome during times of duress

"This is an open society, we aren't going to turn people away," said Howard. "The relationships we have built with hotel and apartment managers will help us extensively. What makes it all successful, though, is the community, the organizations and volunteers participating and working together."