

Hurricane Harvey After Action Report

San Antonio VOAD and Texas Crisis Resiliency Team (TCRT)

Disaster Spiritual Care

October 12, 2017

SITUATION

Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the evening of August 25 near Rockport, Texas as a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 130 mph. The storm then stalled southeast of San Antonio before gradually moving to Louisiana. While the area of Rockport and Port Lavaca sustained the greatest wind impact, the area between Houston and the Texas-Louisiana border received extreme rainfall that exceeded 50 inches of rain in some locations. More than 40 individuals lost their lives as a result of this disaster.



San Antonio was expecting a large amount of rain and high winds on August 26th, but only received a small amount of rain with the situation drastically different just a few miles east and south of San Antonio. The city initially organized shelters at two locations in San Antonio for evacuees from the area around Corpus Christi, Rockport, and Port Lavaca:

1734 Centennial Drive Bldg 118 (Warehouse facility)
Kazan Middle School, 1520 Gillette Blvd

The city opened a mega-shelter at a third location anticipating thousands of evacuees from the Houston and Beaumont areas and planned to open a fourth shelter if needed:

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5003 Stout Dr (Large warehouse facility)

Because of the closure of I-10 from west of Houston, the large number of evacuees did not come to San Antonio, but went to other locations. While San Antonio expected many more evacuees, the number of people in the shelters was approximately 2,000 people. The city adjusted the shelter locations by closing the first two shelters and consolidating all evacuees at the Stout shelter. When the number of evacuees at the Stout center shelter diminished the city closed the Stout shelter and reopened the evacuee center at Kazan Middle School on 10 September. The Kazan shelter transitioned from a city run shelter to a Red Cross shelter the week of 11 September. By the end of that week the shelter had only a few remaining evacuees and was soon closed.

San Antonio VOAD and Texas Crisis Resiliency Team Response

I (Dan Franklin) as a representative of the San Antonio VOAD and the TCRT went on August 26th to the shelters at Centennial Dr. and Kazan Middle School and to evaluate the situation and make initial coordination for spiritual care at the shelters. Because the San Antonio VOAD had already worked with the San Antonio EOC and planned for providing support to the city run shelters there was no problem with access for members of the TCRT in the shelters.

Members of the TCRT then provided coverage on a rotating schedule at the shelters. The schedule was flexible based upon the availability of the volunteers, and the goal was to make sure several Spiritual Care Providers were present each day at the shelters. There were requests for worship services on 27 August and members of the TCRT provided Christian worship services at both shelters. Members of the TCRT also provided worship services on 3 and 10 September. These services were done with the approval of the shelter managers and in a way that did not impose on those not wanting a service.

Towards the end of the first week, anticipating a very large influx of evacuees, I made coordination for two three-hour Disaster Spiritual Care training sessions on 1 and 2 September. These were designed as a “Just In Time” trainings to cover the bare essentials of Disaster Spiritual Care and allow local providers to serve in the shelters. This was consistent with the plan the San Antonio VOAD developed in 2009 for spiritual care in shelters. The plan was to have a core group of people trained to provide spiritual care at shelters and when needed to offer a three-hour introduction for additional providers.

Expectation was for about 20 to 30 people at the trainings, but the first session had approximately 120 participants and the second session about 440 participants. Since the large number of evacuees did not arrive in San Antonio, this training was not crucial but a few of those who took the training did provide assistance during the last week of shelter operations.

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The role of the TCRT ended at shelters on 15 September when there were only a few evacuees remaining in the shelter. The shelter manager had contact information if any need developed for additional spiritual support.

SUSTAIN:

Prior Coordination: The San Antonio VOAD in 2009 developed a plan for Emotional and Spiritual Care at city run evacuation shelters. This plan was coordinated with the city and from 2009 to 2017 the San Antonio VOAD continued training and participation in disaster exercises. There was an airport disaster exercise in July 2017 and all those from the San Antonio VOAD and TCRT that participated in the exercise also responded and worked in the shelters. The San Antonio emergency managers and the San Antonio Red Cross were prepared for the involvement of the San Antonio VOAD and TCRT in the shelters.

The plan that the San Antonio VOAD developed in 2009 worked and the three-hour training program ensured that if a large number of evacuees came to San Antonio, the San Antonio VOAD and TCRT were prepared to provide needed emotional and spiritual care.

Shirts: One local minister made arrangements for additional TCRT T-Shirts to be available. The shirts were a plus and made for easy identification of TCRT members at the shelters.

E-Mail: E-mail was used extensively to coordinate with Spiritual Care Providers. Announcements were made via a distro list and Facebook requesting volunteers to work in the shelters. People responded and were utilized according to their availability. Reminders on how to work in the shelters was also provided via both Facebook and e-mail that was helpful to Spiritual Care Providers.

Not everything went well with communication via e-mail and Facebook. In some cases, TCRT members did not see the e-mail because the message went to their Spam folder or they did not read their e-mail. One option considered was to call those who might be available and did not respond to the e-mail, but this is very time consuming. Text messaging is also another option, but in all cases these options take additional time and resources.

Stout Road Shelter: While Spiritual Care Teams did great work at all the shelters, the situation at Stout Road went exceptionally well. The first couple of days the center was open and Spiritual Care Providers and other shelter personnel were there expecting a large number of evacuees that did not show up. This unexpected waiting time was very frustrating to everyone, but allowed the TCRT team leader to develop exceptionally good relationships with the shelter management. When religious groups wanted to come into the shelter and distribute literature, the shelter manager utilized the TCRT team leader to establish clear guidelines. This was a continuing problem that was very well addressed by the TCRT team leader. The shelter also needed assets

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to deal with hearing impaired individuals and Spanish speakers to assist evacuees. The TCRT team leader located responders who knew ASL and Spanish and they provided a crucial role at the shelter.

Impact on Evacuees and Spiritual Care Providers: Spiritual Care Providers shared that they provided care and support to Senior Adults, Families, Children, Teenagers, Support Staff, Officers and other personnel in operations. It was a very positive experience and one Spiritual Care Provider expressed that she felt that she had really found the place God was calling her to serve. Providing spiritual care in the shelters was not only valuable to those being assisted, but also a privilege for those serving.

Worship Services: The first worship service at the shelter happened because the people in the shelter were asking about a worship service and the shelter manager requested a service. Other services took place because of the needs of the evacuees. These services were conducted by retired military chaplains and a hospital chaplain that were experienced in conducting Christian services that ministered to a diverse group.

We were fortunate to have those who were experienced in conducting services, but many of the TCRT members do not have experience in conducting worship services. At least one TCRT member desired additional guidance if they had been requested to do a service. This is a possible area for further development. The current plan is to utilize TCRT members who are experienced in leading services.

IMPROVE:

Local Church Involvement: Members of local churches desired to assist in the shelters and their attendance at the three-hour sessions showed their willingness to assist. Unfortunately, by the time the sessions were taught the situation had changed and there was not a large need at the shelters. While some people who attended these training sessions were able to get involved, local churches and their members need to be prepared before a disaster in order to be able to immediately respond.

Better Distribution of Responsibilities for Coordination:

There were many tasks that involved coordination of teams, conducting training, and gathering information from those trained. Several people stepped up and assumed large responsibilities that assisted with these details.

During the three-hour training sessions several people volunteered to register those taking the training, conduct required background checks, and make ID badges. There were a few issues with this process, but the help of these individuals was extremely valuable.

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Also following the large training at Community Bible Church, a husband and wife came forward and volunteered to organize the information in a database. Their assistance was invaluable.

One individual who normally would have helped coordinate the response was involved in assisting churches impacted by the disaster. This conflict had not been anticipated and another person who does not have those conflicting responsibilities would enhance coordination.

Ways to improve coordination and better distribute responsibilities between team members continue to need exploration.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Continue coordination with San Antonio EOC. The planning process for Emotional and Spiritual Care and the participation with local community disaster exercises was extremely valuable and helped facilitate an effective response in the shelters. This must continue.

2. Work with local faith groups to prepare for future disasters. The three-hour training sessions brought in religious communities that were not involved in the prior preparation for disasters. While many faith communities are already included in the disaster response plans, these communities must also be included so they might be able to assist in future disaster responses.

3. Enhance ways to better coordinate and divide responsibilities. Too much of the administration and coordination for this response was done by one person. While several people stepped up and did extremely valuable work to help with the coordination, continuing improvement of the coordination process is critical to ensure the best support possible to those impacted by hurricanes and other disasters.

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