

## **Hurricane Preparedness: What we learned from Bay County PIO's Due to Hurricane Michael**

Hurricane Season is once again upon us in Florida. As we work diligently to inform the citizens we serve on hurricane preparedness the question you need to ask is "Are we communicating the same message that our local strategic partners are communicating before, during and after a storm?" All too often we get caught up with the internal pre-hurricane check lists, such as employee rosters, staff response post storm, etc. Although that is extremely important, how well are we communicating with our counterparts? The City of Destin has scheduled meetings with our public safety-first responders including the Sheriff's Office, Fire Department and County Emergency Management personnel. This meeting was to discuss the "strategic plan" in the event a hurricane is headed in our direction. An important component of that planning is to provide the citizens and visitors we serve the most accurate, timely and consistent information amongst all the strategic partners. Its counterproductive for various organizations to give contradictory information to the public and erodes the public's trust in those organizations.

As a public information officer what is our main role? That's obvious, we are responsible for creating and disseminating communication in a timely manner between our organization, the public and the news media. Prior to a hurricane having the potential to impact your area, have you been in communication with your fellow PIO's? Is there a new PIO that you have not met? Do you know what their organizations messaging will be before, during and after a hurricane? How will you contact them if the power is out and all lines of communication are down, and you need to share information? Have you developed other ways to communicate such as a private FB group? Can you share the same technology to streamline information on a consistent basis from the lead agency in charge?

On June 13th, my fellow Okaloosa County PIO's from public safety, county and municipal governments, met with our counterparts from Bay County to discuss – Hurricane Michael. This meeting was invaluable for us as we learned from their experiences. What I personally took away from the meeting was:

Prior to a hurricane, inform citizens precisely where they need to go to obtain official statements, storm updates, and other critical information. Strategic partners should pre-designate and format information releases to facilitate consistency among the partners. Community leaders should strive for consistency so that varied entities are speaking with "one voice." This helps ensure the public receives the same information from its various elected officials and governments.

Have contingency plans in place for catastrophic utility service failures, such as internet, cellular phone and land line phone "service failures." Be creative, such as private and public radio stations, HAM radio operators, and even banner planes flying with emergency information.

Monitor and maintain social media channels continuously and establish a citizen hotline. Depending on the level of utility service failures, you may want to turn off social media platform instant messaging connected to the internet. This may help prevent curious overseas people from contacting you that have no critical need of information. If not monitored 24/7, some may consider this a means of communication and reporting for an emergency that goes unnoticed or unread for a period of time.

If unfortunately, your area is directly impacted by a hurricane, and there is no way to get information out on your social media platforms, consider contacting print companies outside the impacted area that can print flyers to be disseminated to the effected communities.

As a back-up plan, consider the purchase of burner phones, battery powered short range wireless radios, or other means to communicate with each other.

Communicate with your local radio stations pre-event to see if they would agree to continuous coverage of hurricane related information pre, during and post event, above what is required of their partnership with the Emergency Broadcast System. This will help share information with evacuees and personnel that remain in impacted areas.

Have plenty of updated physical maps of your area to utilize and to disperse to other personnel coming to your area post event.

Establish entry control points, with security, at consolidated command posts, supply locations, and your Emergency Operations Centers.

Consider your work space, needs and tasking. Its better to go large if available and reduce the size needed for operations, then start in a smaller space with no room for growth, supplies and other logistical materials and then try to expand.

If you request an additional PIO team to respond to your impacted area, ensure you have a good cross section of skills such as Spanish and other foreign language speaking PIOs that can facilitate releases/messages if you have a community demographic that predominately speaks a language other than English. When you are requesting this type of specialty PIO assistance from another area through the Emergency Operations Center, you will need an ICS 213 resource request for a Type 1 PIO team.

Recognize that you can't do everything, nor do you have control over everything, but you can do the absolute best you can over what you do have control over. Remain calm, and be the lighthouse in the storm, because they will be looking to see that light before, during and after the storm. Your calm and professionalism will shine through and the public will see that, and believe you, when you continually assure them, during the darkest time, help is coming.

Along with all of your other critical tasks and assignments, ensure that you also take care of yourself. You will not be able to effectively function and perform your tasks and functions if you become a walking casualty and need other resources to take care of you when they could be helping others.

Stay safe,

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