



Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Correctional Institutions Division

TDJ's Correctional Institutions Division is responsible for the secure confinement of adult felony offenders. CID consists of three components: Prison and Jail Operations, Management Operations and Support Operations. Working in conjunction with other agency and emergency response groups, CID was responsible for successfully evacuating and housing most of the nearly 6,800 offenders, including parolees and probationers, who were moved to safe areas beyond the reach of Hurricane Harvey's most devastating effects.

CID consists of six regions across the state, and Hurricane Harvey first struck at CID Region IV along the southern Gulf Coast, then Region III along the northern coast, and finally moved inland to Region I. Altogether, Hurricane Harvey threatened 13 units in Region I in East Texas, 20 units in Region III and 16 units in Region IV. Due to Hurricane Harvey, nearly 5,840 inmates were evacuated from the Ramsey, Stringfellow, Terrell, Vance and Jester III units, along with more than 970 parolees and probationers evacuated from their homes in the community, or halfway houses and transitional treatment centers in Houston and the surrounding areas.

The agency's Incident Command Center opened for operation on August 25 and CID Deputy Director of Support Operations Leonard Echessa described the scene, saying "From the executive leadership, to all



Flooding at the Ramsey Unit.

the agency's divisions, all of them, everybody had some representative in that command center and it ran like clockwork. Everybody worked together and everyone stayed in communication. If CID needs something from the Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics Division, somebody is right there. We let them know, they get on the phone and it's done. It was amazing to be in there to see it in action. We worked day and night, for the first five days. For the agency, that's a very positive result of a bad situation."

In the days leading up to the storm, command center staff estimated the broadest possible scope of the storm and made as many preparations as they could in as many areas as possible. Landfall was expected somewhere along the coast near Corpus

Christi and Rockport, so preparations were focused on those areas beginning three days prior to the storm's anticipated landfall. It was decided that the best course of action was for staff and offenders in most units to shelter-in-place until it was clear where the storm would make landfall.

As storm conditions rapidly worsened and the forecast began to call for higher-than-expected rainfall totals for the Houston and surrounding areas, it was decided to evacuate the Ramsey complex and, as the Brazos River continued to rise, the Vance and Jester III units were also evacuated.

Deputy Director Echessa described the complexity of the response logistics and how the agency's transportation assets were

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brought in from regional transportation offices around the state to take part in the successful evacuation of offenders. “We had to bring the majority of our fleet from around the state, even from places like Palestine and Abilene, to the affected area. We had a total of 77 TDCJ transport buses moving at the same time, and that does not include offender transport vans.”

Lorie Davis, director of the Correctional Institutions Division, commented on the work done by CID transportation office employees, saying “I can’t tell you how lucky we were to have a transportation team who knew when they should rest and hand over driving duties to another officer, they had practiced that. If a bus breaks down, we had a plan to use backup transport buses that had been staged along the route so no one has to wait too long. We’ll be right there to recover and get the inmates to their destination.”

One of the biggest transport challenges involved moving offenders who use walkers and wheelchairs. To accommodate this population, Echessa explained, “We had multi-use vans and wheelchair accessible vans, especially at Jester III and Terrell. We also had to make sure the host unit could meet all their medical needs. You can’t just put them in any unit. That’s a real challenge, to put these offenders in the right place.”

Another transportation hazard grew worse as the storm moved inland and roads were being closed due to flooding. Fortunately, offender transport buses are equipped with a monitoring system, which allows the agency’s incident command center to track their movement. As major roads in storm-affected areas were being closed, transport officers began using smaller roads to move offenders.

After Houston and the surrounding area had endured record-setting amounts of rainfall, Harvey moved back out over the Gulf of Mexico, strengthened, and made a second landfall east of the Beaumont–Port Arthur area. Torrential precipitation and the flooding Neches River caused the city to lose both primary and backup water service for several days. Before the storm, the agency had prepared for this potential problem by deploying supplies of bottled water, water tankers and porta-potties to CID units in the area, replenishing them until water service was restored and tested to ensure it was safe to drink.

When asked for words of advice for other correctional administrators who might face a similar event, CID leaders agreed that staff must be well trained, practiced and prepared to do hard work. Echessa added, “You have to get your employees prepared mentally, physically and emotionally for what’s about to happen. You have to have tabletops and real, practical emergency response exercise training drills. You have a unit full of offenders sleeping in the gym, something happens, what do you do? You’ve got to have a plan and put in the practice. You’ve got to plan for and practice dealing with all the buses coming in and out of the back gate.” He continued, “And after this kind of event, you have to review and revise your emergency response plans. In every incident, every year, something new comes up every time, and you have to do things a little different.”

During emergencies like Hurricane Harvey, TDCJ is fortunate to have a professional staff deeply committed to preserving public safety. Each year the department must stand ready in the event another storm develops in the Gulf and threatens Texas. Echessa noted,

“Once they’ve done it, people will remember what to do when another emergency happens. Flooding happened to us last year, and it helped prepare us for the work this time around. We found that experienced staff members will take the initiative and step in to do some very hard work, and no one has to order them or even ask them to do it.”

CID Director Davis commented, “We have people who do amazing stuff. They take care of each other, they make sure staff and offenders are safe. It’s a lot of commitment.” She continued, “From a security aspect, we generally don’t have much trouble, even from offenders who have sheltered-in-place or have evacuated and are staying in host units. Everybody pulls together and it becomes a human thing. Offenders understand we’re doing our best to keep them safe, they know their safety relies on us doing the job right.”

As always, there was a tremendous positive response from agency staff. A lot of correctional officers took care of their homes and families, then packed their vehicles with whatever they needed for five or six days and came to work. COs spent night after night in the units putting the mission before themselves. Word spread quickly across the state and soon correctional officers were volunteering to relieve their brothers and sisters in gray. Civilian correctional staff also helped throughout the response, keeping offices open and working, tracking offender movements, and even bringing home-cooked food to other staff who couldn’t take a meal break.

Echessa commented, “Everybody banded together, that’s where success came from.” He continued, “Our leadership, you saw them go out onto units handing water out to offend-

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ers. When people see that, and it's all hours of the day and night, it's not like they're at home sleeping and everyone else is working. When you see that, you say, 'I've got to join in. I've got to do my part.'" ▲