



## Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Office of Incident Management

The Office of Incident Management is the agency's central oversight authority for emergency management preparedness and response. OIM helps develop and update emergency response and continuity of operations plans, coordinates logistical and law enforcement support for the State Emergency Management Plan, and trains agency staff on roles and expectations during emergencies.

Kirk Moss, who was director of TDCJ's Office of Incident Management during Hurricane Harvey, is a 23-year veteran of TDCJ and was involved with the agency response to hurricanes Ike and Rita and the Memorial Day flood of 2016. As Command Center Manager, Kirk's job included monitoring ocean weather patterns and informing agency staff of tropical disturbances that may affect agency operations.

During hurricane season, Moss checked the storm forecast every day – no matter where they form, from the Gulf of Mexico to the coast of Africa. Harvey was a tropical storm as it approached the Caribbean and weakened to a “remnant low” as it moved over land, but close monitoring continued as it skirted the Yucatan as a tropical wave moving north.

On August 22, Moss began monitoring conference calls and weather updates provided by the State Operations Center housed at the

Department of Public Safety in Austin. Forecasters predicted landfall as a possible Category 1 or weaker storm, though Moss knew that the agency had to be ready to deal with unanticipated changes in the storm's movement and strength.

Moss credits agency planning and training for enabling implementation of a proactive strategic response plan. He explains, “These

landfall: Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics staged supplies in areas likely to be hit by the storm and the agency's fleet of vehicles was prepared for action, while the Parole Division developed contingency plans for maintaining supervision of high-risk offenders and the Correctional Institutions Division determined the capacity of potential host units should staff and offenders need to be evacuated from an affected facility. Kirk



Aerial view of the Ramsey and Terrell units following Hurricane Harvey. (photo courtesy of Brazoria County/Texas DPS)

storms can move unexpectedly, you have to be ready to respond to the changing situation. As the storm develops, you just have to be ready to move.” While OIM kept executive management informed regarding storm predictions and agency activities, employees throughout the agency began to prepare for

said, “At this stage, every division is involved in some level of preparation in anticipation of possible offender, employee and livestock movement.”

As Harvey suddenly and rapidly intensified from a tropical storm to a Category 3 hurri-

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1**

cane, the predicted landfall moved from the mouth of the Rio Grande, up to the Corpus Christi area, then up to Rockport. "It was very, very fast, and that happened overnight. These are the storms that are hard to predict," explained Moss. "But, that's why we train so extensively. We want to be prepared for the unexpected."

When the forecaster's storm models agreed that Harvey would hit somewhere between Corpus Christi and Rockport, staff at the agency's command center focused resources on TDCJ facilities which were most likely to be hit, leading to the evacuation of Parole offices and treatment facilities in Corpus Christi and Victoria.

Command center staff closely monitored projected precipitation totals. Moss explained, "We knew it was going to rain, we knew the storm was going to slow down. There were predictions that we may see 18 to 20 inches of isolated rain but there were other predictions that we could get 35 to 40." When the Brazos River was predicted to rise to the level of the previous year's Memorial Day flood, the agency took quick and prudent action.

By the time the storm had dissipated, TDCJ staff had demonstrated they could overcome some of the most demanding logistical and operational challenges that nature could contrive. More than 6,800 TDCJ-supervised offenders had been evacuated to safe areas, with nearly 5,840 coming from five TDCJ Correctional Institutions Division units, and more than 970 parolees and probationers from halfway-houses, treatment centers or homes in the Houston and Beaumont areas.

During an emergency such as Hurricane Harvey, the agency's uses a simple conference room in Huntsville as a central information processing hub, and Moss hesitates to call it a "command center," as he credits frontline staff for taking the initiative to get things done. Moss noted, "We don't really command anything. We make the big decisions, but once that decision is made, the frontline staff is the one taking command of their area. We're a resource for a well-trained workforce acting according to a well-designed emergency response plan. If someone needs fuel, we get them fuel. If they need water, we're going to get it to them, so they don't have to worry about it, because they need to focus on other problems the storm is throwing at them." ▲