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## Agency News

# Disaster preparedness exercise delivers quick benefits during historic floods

Once a year, TDCJ's Office of Incident Management holds an Emergency Management Simulation Exercise, which allows the agency to practice emergency response procedures in preparation for an actual natural disaster such as a hurricane or flood. This year's drill, held at the TDCJ Incident Command Center in Huntsville on May 25, brought together a team of key players from all divisions of the agency with the goal of familiarizing them with the agency's emergency action plan, identifying capabilities and needs during a natural disaster, and validating or modifying working procedures.

The drill began 72 hours before a simulated Category 4 hurricane hit the Gulf Coast. Participants were briefed on the situation with details such as the size, speed, and projected path of the hurricane, along with a list of TDCJ units and facilities in the storm's path. More than 70 agency employees were gathered in the Command Center, tasked with tracking the storm, assessing the proper actions and, if needed, coordinating the transfer of offenders to safe locations.



**CID Director and Incident Commander of the emergency management exercise Lorie Davis (left) meets with emergency management team members to evaluate the agency response to a simulated Category 4 hurricane strike.**

Incident Manager Kirk Moss, organizer of the training exercise, emphasized the need for such simulations, saying, "The objective of the drill is to familiarize everyone with their role in the process and open communication across the different departments that will be working together during a real disaster. It's important that they're comfortable with their role and the logistics of such an event."

The agency's emergency preparedness was tested only days later when unprecedented floods overwhelmed the lower Brazos River Basin. Heavy rains throughout April and

May had saturated the ground and filled upstream reservoirs. When additional heavy rains began to fall across the Brazos River watershed on Memorial Day weekend and continued during the week, river levels began to rise.

Moss and his team began monitoring the river levels on Friday, and by the time of a Saturday morning conference call with the Texas Division of Emergency Management, river levels were forecast to rise another two feet above flood level. By Sunday morning, the Incident Command Center was up and running around the clock and the agency was preparing to evacuate approximately 2,600 offenders from the Stringfellow and Terrell units. Initially, offenders at the Ramsey Unit Trusty Camp were only transferred into the main unit, but by Friday, June 3, as floodwaters continued to threaten the area, the Ramsey Unit was also evacuated. Overall, more than 4,100 offenders were moved to 19 units throughout the state.

As simulated in the emergency response exercise which took place just days prior to the

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flood, the actual disaster response required successful collaboration and communication among many TDCJ divisions and departments. Key players included, but are not limited to:

- TDCJ's Correctional Institutions Division identified housing alternatives, transported thousands of offenders to receiving units in safe locations, filled the food and supply needs of receiving units, and made sure that displaced staff members were safely sheltered and fed. Crisis Response Intervention Support Program (CRISP) members were made available to help employees and their families after the crisis had passed.
- The Parole Division and Community Justice Assistance Division monitored the location of high-risk offenders, and coordinated their relocation where necessary.
- The Manufacturing and Logistics Division coordinated the moving of mattresses, supplies and provisions.
- The Facilities Division took preventive measures to minimize potential flood damage and prompt remedial action to expedite repopulating the evacuated units.
- Officers from the agency's Office of the Inspector General were stationed along transport routes to provide additional security.

- Health Services staff arranged and monitored transportation for offenders with special medical needs.
- Employees of the Business and Finance Division's Agribusiness, Land and Minerals department coordinated the care and movement of livestock.
- The Information Technology Division coordinated internet, radio, pager, and cell and satellite phone communications for agency emergency responders.
- Ombudsman staff established and maintained a 24-hour public access hotline and worked with ITD to post updates on the agency website.

Eventually, the Brazos River reached its third highest level in history, topping out at more than 52 feet, far above its flood stage of 43 feet. Moss estimates that TDCJ filled and distributed more than twelve thousand sandbags around the affected units and peripheral buildings, which helped minimize the effects of the flood. The most serious damage occurred at the Region III Training Academy, which sustained water damage to one of its buildings, the maintenance and agriculture buildings on the perimeter of the Ramsey Unit, and the Terrell Unit Trusty Camp.

At the June meeting of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice, TDCJ Executive Director



**TDCJ evacuated more than 4,100 offenders from the Ramsey, Stringfellow and Terrell units due to severe flooding over Memorial Day weekend. Here, correctional officers escort offenders from the Ramsey Unit to waiting busses for transport to a safe location.**

Brad Livingston described the agency response to this event and the employees who responded, saying, "What this agency did was a monumental task that involved virtually every division and function within this agency. The operational strength and leadership of this team are extremely impressive and I'd like to take a moment to recognize the staff that was engaged, committed and operationally driven to keeping our offenders and our staff safe. This is an accomplishment others would think impossible."

No staff or offenders were injured during the evacuation.

Correctional Institutions Division Director Lorie Davis commended the outstanding work performed by disaster response staff, saying, "The agency faced many challenges during this event. The commitment people

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displayed to keep everyone safe and to embrace the perseverance it took to accomplish each task was phenomenal.”

On June 11, the Federal Emergency Management Agency released a declaration summary regarding the severe weather and flooding event, and President Obama granted Governor Greg Abbott’s federal disaster request for assistance for all 12 counties affected by the recent flooding, including: Austin, Brazoria, Brazos, Fort Bend, Grimes, Hidalgo, Hood, Montgomery, San Jacinto, Travis, Waller and Washington.

Employees can obtain further information by visiting the Brazoria County website. ●



An aerial photo shows floodwaters surrounding the perimeter of the Stringfellow Unit.

## ***Be prepared for a hurricane emergency***

If you live where tropical storms might strike, you should be prepared to take action in the event of a hurricane emergency.

The best way to avoid hurricanes is to get to a safe location; have an evacuation plan in place and take authorized evacuation orders seriously. Try to “run from water and hide from wind,” because even a low-category hurricane can produce a dangerous storm surge and flooding.

Information from [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) can help with preparedness planning.

If you have to shelter in place, prepare a supply kit with the following items:

- **Several days’ worth of drinkable water and nonperishable foods**
- **Special foods for infants or the elderly**
- **Personal toiletries and medicines**
- **Blankets and pillows**
- **First aid kit**
- **Flashlight and batteries**
- **Fully-charged cell phones**
- **Battery-operated NOAA weather radio**