

BUSINESS PREPARATIONS

Detailed plans emerge in wake of '05 storms

Data is backed up and storm sewers are cleaned out, for starters

By L.M. SIXEL

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Many companies had to learn on the fly during last year's hurricane season as they scrambled to find missing employees, get their computer systems back up and reroute their phones.

But with nearly a year behind them, companies seem to have learned the lessons of hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

Some have spent thousands of dollars to back up their data. Others are investing in more reliable communication equipment. And some are cleaning out their storm sewers.

"We saw the struggles they went through in New Orleans," said Anna Drake, public relations and marketing manager for the Hilton Americas-Houston.

From that up-close experience of lending a helping hand to its waterlogged sister properties, the Hilton Americas learned some critical lessons about communications.

Getting the bug spray

One of the most important lessons was to invest in a satellite phone system so the hotel doesn't have to rely on cell phones, Drake said. The Hilton Americas also bought two-way radios so employees can communicate with the company's other properties in Houston.

The hotel also made sure it has supplies on hand for the cleanup, such as a lot of bleach and bug spray for the pesky critters that come out after the storms.

"You wouldn't really think about that before," said Drake, unless you went through it.

And to make sure employees and guests can find their way around, the hotel has stocked 2,000 flashlights already complete with batteries, and every 9-year-old's dream, 5,000 glow sticks.

Data storage, what to store, how to store it safely and where to store it, preoccupied the attention of a lot of companies during the past year.

The fear of losing everything on its computer system drove Locke Liddell & Sapp to spend more than \$300,000 so the information on its computers is stored on a nightly basis, said David F. Taylor, who was the law firm's administrative partner and is now head of the corporate section. That way, if the Houston office is down, the Dallas office can pull up the information.

It was money the firm planned to eventually spend, said Taylor, but the experience with Hurricane Rita sped up the project.

The firm also found a low-tech solution for another storage problem: all the paperwork generated during the course of a case.

When Hurricane Rita was bearing down on the Gulf Coast, the lawyers panicked. The wind could blow out the floor-to-ceiling windows and the papers would be ruined.

In a pinch, the lawyers, along with their secretaries and paralegals, stacked boxes inside the hallways. Since then, the firm has embarked on a huge archiving project, sending the old file boxes to a storage site.

And that, said Taylor, is not necessarily a bad exercise.

"Offices are tidier," he said. After every disaster, The Methodist Hospital System has meetings to decide what it learned and what it can do better the next time. And from its experience with Hurricane Rita, the hospital has devised a better way to get ready for family members seeking refuge.

No one expected the mass evacuation, recalled spokeswoman Stefanie Asin. So when employees said their families had nowhere to go if they stayed to work, the hospital invited them in.

Six hundred family members showed up, including children, spouses and grandparents, she said. An ad hoc child care center was set up with a big-screen TV, cots were found and the hospital kept everyone fed.

A yearly survey

It worked, Asin said, but it will work better the next time by identifying the essential functions of the hospital and then each year surveying the employees who have those jobs about how many family members they have. That way, Methodist can keep enough food and cots on hand.

Several Houston employers after Rita passed kicked themselves for not acting fast enough when local meteorologists were debating landfall projections.

Sterling Bank, for example, didn't give its employees the go-ahead to leave until noon Thursday during the fateful week when Hurricane Rita was bearing down on Houston. But by that time, the roads were jammed and it was nearly impossible to get anywhere.

Since then, the bank has re-evaluated how it would handle the next evacuation order, said spokesman Graham Painter. The bank is thinking of letting its nonessential employees leave earlier than other workers so they don't face the prospect of 20-hour drives to Dallas.

Sterling Bank has 27 branches in Houston, eight in San Antonio and eight in Dallas.

Whataburger also found that its essential employees need to get into place early to prevent the communication foul-up it encountered during Rita.

The regional director of operations was stuck in traffic trying to get to a central command post set up in Dallas, recalled Pam Cox, communications director for the Corpus Christi-based chain. And he couldn't even call in because cell phone networks were jammed.

This year, the chain of fast-food restaurants has invested in satellite phones and installed more land lines at its command post, she said.

And the company, which has 112 restaurants in the Houston area, will begin monitoring storms earlier and send employees to its command center well ahead of any crisis, Cox said.

When a hurricane is on its way, everyone with windows rushes to buy lumber. But what about the less obvious storm sewers?

Traders Village, the flea market that attracted 1.4 million visitors last year, is busy with preventive maintenance, such as making sure the drains are free of debris.

That way, the water won't back up as it has in previous big storms, said marketing director Mike Baxter.

Engineering work isn't glamorous either, but it's on the minds of folks who saw what the swirling water and high winds did to buildings during the hurricanes last year.

DePelchin Children's Center, for example, is spending \$10,000 for an engineering study of its buildings to determine what it needs to protect it from wind damage and a storm surge, said vice president Ron McDaniel.

The center is also working on a map showing where each of its 470 foster children live. It will correspond to flood plain maps so center officials can immediately see which areas need to be evacuated based on a storm's intensity and see to it that the foster children get out.

Checking with parents

Last year, McDaniel said, the center just called all the parents and asked them what their evacuation plans were.

"We tried to insist people evacuate in evacuation zones like Clear Lake," McDaniel said.

Tara Hart, CEO of the Compliance Alliance which consults on safety issues for corporate clients, especially construction companies, discovered by accident as she was preparing to flee from Hurricane Rita that she needed a complete inventory for an insurance claim.

Even though Hart was well insured for the contents of her business and home, she found out from her insurance agent that was little good unless she had an itemized inventory showing room-by-room contents along with photographs and either original receipts or documents showing replacement value.

It took Hart about four hours to get the most of the computers and other equipment documented but over the course of the year, she spent time getting all her documents in order.

That way, Hart said, "you will get your check while the water is still subsiding."

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