

Mitigation best practices



FEMA

Read all about it: Galveston newspaper never misses a beat

The Daily News never skipped an edition during and after Hurricane Ike

At a glance

The Galveston County Daily News never missed an edition during or after Hurricane Ike, despite losing the roof covering, power, generators, and nearly all their technological capabilities. Their success is due to having an elevated concrete building, preparedness planning, ingenuity, and fierce determination to keep information flowing.

“People would see our trucks and flag them down.”



Heber Taylor is editor of The Galveston County Daily News.

GALVESTON, Texas — The Galveston County Daily News has written countless stories about the challenges and heroes of Hurricane Ike. But one tale that has received little notice is the newspaper’s own.

During Ike, The News staff lost almost everything but their grit. Even when the storm was at its worst, they didn’t miss an edition.

“It’s all a blur,” building superintendent Brett Baker said about operations throughout Ike and its aftermath.

When the eye passed over the newspaper building at 2 a.m. Sept. 13, workers who were there overnight rushed out and boarded up cracked windows in preparation for the second assault. It brought 110-mph



Its sturdy, elevated plant behind the seawall protected the newspaper during Hurricane Ike, but its roof was damaged.

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winds and a 12-foot surge that invaded the building and crippled technological capabilities. But the staff never stopped.

“We were operating, at one point, pretty much just on my cell phone,” recalled editor Heber Taylor. “We had to improvise and overcome.”

Rain came in around the windows. The waterproof covering blew off the roof. The surge came up quickly, flooded the carpet, and then went down just as quickly. The generator failed when natural gas service was cut off. Before the storm was over, some News staffers lost everything. But they never stopped.

“We were working around the clock,” Taylor said. “Our reporters were operating out of emergency management centers in Galveston and League City.” Dedicated to their readers and their craft, reporters filed stories using whatever technology they could muster, including cell phones, laptops and air cards. The News exported copy editing to the mainland and printed through sister newspapers, starting with the Herald Zeitung in New Braunfels, Texas. But they never stopped.

When the newspaper was ready for delivery, finding readers proved nearly impossible. Delivery personnel went where they thought people might be, dropping bundles at emergency centers and hotels. “People would see our trucks and flag them down,” Taylor said, “and I don’t know how many people told me they hiked to the points of delivery just to find out what was happening. Think about it: There was no cable, no CNN, no local news stations. This was the way they got information, and information is critical.”

The News turned to the Web, posting stories as soon as they were written, before assembling them for print. Through the Web, the newspaper was able to reach evacuees, extended families and news media.

“Our readership on the Web was enormous and continues to be very high,” Taylor said.

In some cases, faraway web users relayed information back to survivors in the impacted area. “It was amazing to me how people in New York would see something on our Web site and pass it along to somebody in Biloxi or

New Orleans who somehow, maybe after 20 tries, would get a call in to Galveston, telling people there was a curfew, and those people would go tell their neighbors,” Taylor said.

“It was critically important to get out accurate information,” the editor continued. “There were all kinds of horribly inaccurate rumors cropping up. There was a pernicious rumor that Ball High School burned to the ground, and it would not die away. When the phones did work, I got angry calls from people accusing us of hiding the truth. Of course, one of the things you can do is report what is there, as well as what didn’t happen. There is tremendous value in that.”

Several factors contributed to the newspaper’s ability to keep publishing through the storm.

The oldest newspaper in Texas, The News has been continually publishing since 1842, through epidemics, wildfires, the Civil War and major hurricanes in 1900, 1915, 1963 and 1983. The current building received some damage while it was under construction during Hurricane Carla in 1963, leading to the decision to make it strong enough to withstand hurricanes.

Today, the building superintendent calls the structure “one of the safest buildings in Galveston.” The News plant is a hulking concrete fort with a 14-inch-thick concrete floor, 9-inch-thick concrete walls and a concrete roof. The windows are rated for up to 160-mph winds and further protected with internal film. The building is behind the seawall, elevated and anchored on 30-foot-deep concrete piers.

Preparedness and business continuity planning also contributed to the newspaper’s ability to keep publishing.

When Hurricane Ike entered the Gulf, The News team, according to plan, began preparation in earnest. “We filled 55-gallon drums with water so we could flush toilets. We got plywood and screws. We brought in drinking water, food and a grill so we could cook our food,” Baker said.

The emergency plan included provisions for exporting printing and copy editing to the mainland if needed, which it was. Export-

ing the copy electronically turned out to be a major challenge, but the staff found ways to make it work.

The newspaper had installed a natural gas-powered generator as an emergency power source. “We assumed it would be 100 percent reliable. We certainly didn’t plan on losing natural gas service,” said Taylor. But at the height of the storm and for days thereafter, natural gas service was cut for the entire island.

“The reward is that we were here when people needed us”

“And we certainly never planned on our satellite phones failing,” Taylor said. “For a while, we were operating on the backup emergency power supplies for computers, and we used them to charge cell phones, too.” In time, workers were able to add small gasoline generators.

What advice does the newspaper staff give to others on curbing storm losses?

Baker recommends investing in a strong, elevated building and protecting the integrity of the windows and other openings. “These newer buildings are being built too cheaply,” he said. “Corrugated steel. They can’t handle this wind. They rip apart.” He hopes to look into shutters or coverings for the windows and wants to have them resealed to prevent leaks.

“Have a written plan,” Taylor said, “Review it every year before the season. Also, I would have an annual review of technology. I would decide what you can use and what you can afford – and if you live on the Gulf Coast, I would seriously be asking what you can’t afford not to have. The solutions that actually worked for us are not that expensive: air cards and cell phones.”

Taylor recommends redundant systems. “I would tell other editors this: One of the most important provisions you can build in to any plan is the provision for failure. Think about what you will do if something fails, even something you think is going to be 100 percent reliable. You have to be very flexible as things develop.”

The lessons learned from Hurricane Ike have changed the way the paper does business, Taylor said. The newspaper now relies more on cell phones, air cards and the Web. “We’re using the Web much more,” Taylor said. “We’re still operating as we did during the emergency – posting information as we get it. We’re posting these stories in real time on our Web site, then at the end of the day we pull together a print edition.”

The editor also said hazard mitigation, disaster preparation, and emergency planning will play a larger role in future news operations.

“The reward is that we were here when people needed us,” Taylor said. “If we hadn’t been in a strong, elevated building, if we hadn’t had that written plan, we simply would have failed when people most needed us. We’ll plan better for the next time, but we did have that plan, and it allowed us to keep functioning, even when things went wrong.”

By text and Twitter

Leigh Jones was one of The Galveston County Daily News reporters who had to resort to unconventional means to cover Hurricane Ike.

When most communications channels were down, Jones text messaged the news from her cell phone. She sent short, 140-character (not words, characters) bulletins, called tweets, to Twitter, a social networking Web site that

“The newspaper did not miss an issue.”

works over multiple networks and devices:

5:44 p.m. Sept.12 – People are calling for help now but no one can get to them. The water is really coming up fast now.

7:55 a.m. Sept.13 – Crews pulling people from high water.

8:30 a.m. Sept.13 – Entire row of houses on fire. Nothing crews can do.

8:42 a.m. Sept.13 – Structures from the beach are now on the street.

In another city, a reporter who had traveled with evacuees to cover their story was able to get to the Twitter site and convert the bulletins for The News to post online in real time. Soon other media discovered the bulletins and used the Twitter text for regional and national coverage.

“So that’s how we got out information as quickly as possible,” Jones said.

As time went on, the staff was able to use computers, but only sparingly. “Usually just one of our cell phones (in the media pool) would work, because everybody had different carriers.” Jones said. “We would swap phones around and dictate our stories from the phone that worked to someone who had a computer to type them out. We didn’t have time to write them down. It was pretty amazing.”

As The News drama unfolded, Jones had her own personal disaster. Hurricane Ike flooded her home 8 feet deep. She lost everything, but never missed a deadline.

Core elements of a business continuity plan

Several survival systems used by The

Galveston County Daily News are integral to continuity of operations plans, which could be useful for any business.

- Identify your risks and take aggressive hazard mitigation actions to make your building and site safe. Secure your roof, windows, and doors. If you’re in an area at high risk of flooding, elevate or flood-proof, if at all possible.
- At a minimum, plan to elevate or move what’s most important, possibly including evacuation of personnel.
- Identify the things that must be done for your business to continue. Plan where and how you will continue, even if you have to leave your present site.
- Identify your communications needs and the best ways to meet them.
- Be redundant. Back up records. Plan for the potential failure of essential elements of your system and alternate ways to operate if your power fails, your computers crash, your suppliers abandon you or your customers disappear.

Live or Die

In his book, Galveston: A History, David G. McComb describes an incident after the 1900 hurricane that illustrates the Galveston newspaper’s stubborn spirit.

As a visiting reporter “walked across a plank, he looked into the water and saw four or five naked, swollen bodies, floating face up, open-eyed, looking at him. He found the newspaper with its doors broken, flooded, engines and press damaged. He met Major Robert Lowe, the general manager of the Galveston Daily News, and remarked that if he were Lowe, he would print the paper in Houston. Lowe exploded, ‘You would, would you? Well, I won’t,’ he exclaimed as he shook his fist and stamped the floor. ‘You never lived here. You don’t know – and you would ask me to desert? No, no, no! This paper lives or dies with this town. We’ll build it again and The News will help.’

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