

REGION 2 BI-WEEKLY

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IRENE HITS, REGION RESPONDS

Staff Embedded With Partners; RRCC Staff Held For Duration;



Irene snuck up on us, organizing into a tropical storm 130 miles outside the Credible Threat circle the Region is now using as a tripwire for IMAT activation. That was late Saturday night.

By Sunday, *Hurricane Irene* had dumped more than 10 inches of rain on Puerto Rico, causing flooding, mudslides, road closures, and leaving nearly one million residents without electricity.

The next day, the RRCC was at Level 1 (24/7) activation, and staff were being routed to New York county EOCs in Nassau, Suffolk, Orange and Dutchess, as well as to New York City's OEM. Liaisons were also sent to New York and New Jersey's EOCs in Albany and Trenton respectively. "Having people in the county EOCs is part of our new strategy," said Response Director Dug Salley. "It gives us a 'heads-up' on what the counties need, what they will be asking for from the state."

Stewart AFB on Long Island and the Dix-McGuire-Lakehurst facility in New Jersey were identified as commodity staging areas early on, as the Region braced for what was initially projected to be a Category 4 direct hit on the metropolitan area.

This threat prompted NYC Mayor Mike Bloomberg to order an unprecedented evacuation of the city's low lying areas. He also ordered the shut down of the city's buses and subways by noon Saturday.

RRCC staff and ESFs assemble for transition brief by Response Division Director Dug Salley, speaking at front of room.

Regional staff and ESF partners manning the RRCC after the transit shutdown hunkered down at 26 Federal Plaza, as area hotels were all within the evacuation zone and not accepting bookings. Except for the senior Regional and RRCC leadership — who got rooms before the Mayor's evacuation order was issued — all staff were given cots and Red Cross blankets.

Male and female dorms were set up in the main conference room on the 6th floor. The RRCC Chief of Staff team also arranged catering — 3 meals and a 4am snack daily — amid hygiene admonishments ("wash your hands before getting food") and trash disposal guidelines. They were also arranged for the use of showers in the 6th floor gym. (By Sunday, this made them heroes.)

And like most heroes, the Chief of Staff team was anxious to recognize the contributions of others, including the Federal Protective Services (FPS), Fedcaps and the building engineers. Food was shared, as those not in the RRCC were also trapped in a deserted downtown.

A handful of people thought the weekend was a "bonding experience," achieving something that an infinite number of harangues could not: "With everyone working together, all on this one overriding mission, the 'stove pipe' syndrome finally broke down" one senior manager said. Another likened the weekend to 'Camp FEMA.'

UPDATES ON R-II's IRENE DISASTERS



PNP Deputy Director David Musick, seated center, conducts RRCC 7am transitional briefing between morning and nightshifts as Hurricane Irene makes landfall into New Jersey and New York. President declared an Emergency for both states to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety and to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe. Photo by Elissa Jun/FEMA

As of COB Friday, DR-4017 in Puerto Rico has requested an additional 11 municipalities be added for IA, and 37 additional municipalities for PA.

In New York's DR-4020, the state has requested that eight additional counties be made eligible for IA (Eight counties were originally approved.); and one additional county for PA (19 were cited in the original declaration). DR-4020's JFO will be in Albany, although AFOs are contemplated.

The JFO for New Jersey's DR-4021 will be in Neptune. Thirteen additional counties have been requested for both IA and PA.

LEARNING BY DOING

By Sarah Bennett

Volunteering at Region II's RRCC for Hurricane Irene was an eye opening experience for me. I was given the opportunity to see firsthand how FEMA responds during major events. From my first day I was assigned to the Planning Division. My primary responsibility was the Situation Reports, AKA SitReps (a term I didn't know before August 26th). That first afternoon I probably drove my supervisor crazy with the number of questions I asked to make sure that I knew exactly what I was supposed to do.

However, I'm pleased to say that the report we submitted received positive feedback. As the weekend progressed, my team grew more cohesive and we fell into a natural rhythm completing our deadlines throughout the day and submitting strong deliverables at the end of our shifts.

Beyond the group that I worked with, I met new people from the other Regions and interacted with a variety of people that I'd seen around the Region II office while interning for FEMA's Radiological Emergency Preparedness Program. Working this event allowed me to get to know them better and see these individuals in a new light.

I saw first-hand the dedication of not only my team, but also everyone else in the RRCC. There was a strong energy throughout the RRCC, with people striving to meet their objectives and working as a team to ensure that things were getting done effectively.

Overall, I was impressed by the professionalism, the efficiency and the camaraderie with which the FEMA employees carried themselves during this event and I am proud I was able to be a part of the team.



RRCC Director Dug Salley, left, and Daytime Ops

RECOVERY (It's not just for survivors)

By Brice Acosta



Editor's Note: As the Night Mission Assignment Manager in the RRCC, Brice had one of the operation's busiest assignments. His observations are mirrored in early "After Action" analysis and comments.

The effects of Hurricane Irene, although days past, are still being felt in the lives of countless residents of Puerto Rico, New Jersey and New York, as well as in several other states north and south of our Region. Region II remains poised to provide all the assistance legally possible to aide in their recovery.

But the notion of recovery doesn't just apply to the disaster survivors; It also applies to Regional staff. Over the past 13 days, the Region mounted a frenzy of response activities not seen in years. Evidence of this can be seen in the missed dots on the "i's" and uncrossed "t's" of our response to Hurricane Irene. There's a lot to recover from, and a lot of rebuilding to do.

A lack of experience and training of Regional staff hampered response efforts. Simple oversights, like not using the correct forms and inadequate dissemination of information, are on one end of the spectrum, whereas missing requests from the state, and insufficient data to act on those requests, is at the more critical end.

I applaud everyone who, without said training or experience, performed to the best of their abilities, and brought us through the Irene response effort. Great strides were made to fill gaps in information, and there was a push to pre-position assets for quicker response. Some staff showed resiliency and willingness to sacrifice by living out of 26 Federal Plaza for days while the storm raged and transportation stopped.

But knee-jerk reactions became more frequent towards the end of the response efforts; something which years of training and qualification systems have tried to prevent. Examples of poor planning are found in the initial deployment, release, and then re-deployment of a handful of emergency support function assets, the scrambling to fill staffing positions, and limited disaster authority constricting the provision of resources. As I said, there's a lot to recover from.

As survivors transition into recovery, and ultimately rebuilding, we need to do likewise. An after-action review will attempt to capture "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of our efforts. For it to be helpful, it needs to be clear-eyed, so successes can be replicated, and failures avoided.

It is also rumored that Regional staff will soon be deployed at the JFOs. That would be a tremendous step forward – if it actually happens. We have a dangerous amount of staff in positions for which they are untrained and unprepared. On the job training and field experience can only improve our operations. If there is no increase in training and exercises, opportunities for field experience, or the codification of best practices, the Region will neither rebuild nor recover, and that, from a Regional point of view, would be a disaster.

IN IRENE'S WAKE: Puerto Rico

Clockwise from top: An aerial of flooding in Canovanas; Canovanas resident begins cleanup; Children pass the time in a shelter at the San Juan Sports Complex;; Shelter accommodations for a young family; FEMA conducts PDAs in Fajardo; Residents test the waters and survey flood damage in the MiniMini section of Loiza.



IN IRENE'S WAKE: New Jersey



Clockwise from top:
Aerial of a community in Somerset County, NJ; Adele Hurilla, Sr. of Manville surveys debris from her house cleanup; Business owner Brijio Garcia cleans up; Commercial street in Bound Brook; PSE&G repair crews at work.
Photos: Andrea Booher



IN IRENE'S WAKE: New York



Aerials of Albany county, left and lower left. Home cleanup in Schoharie below. Household items salvaged and drying in Schoharie lower right.

