

Louisiana's Department Corrections Meets Challenges

By Pam Laborde

"When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity."

—John F. Kennedy

The crisis that swept in with hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 caused major destruction, injury and death, deeply affecting Louisiana, Mississippi and indeed the entire country. And, just as depicted by Chinese characters, the crisis brought both extreme danger and countless opportunities. Along with the horrifying dangers witnessed on live television, there were many instances of opportunities seized.

This story is about how the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections (DPS&C) met both danger and opportunity in the face of that crisis. The department was prepared when crisis struck because it had a plan that had been tested through many hurricane seasons, with inmates being evacuated from low-lying parish and municipal jails to state institutions. And leadership throughout the department meant selfless, even heroic, responses to the opportunities that arose.

Executing the Plan

DPS&C Secretary Richard L. Stalder assured Gov. Kathleen Blanco's executive staff members in the early hours of Aug. 30, 2005, that the department was prepared for its mission to evacuate more than 7,500 inmates from Jefferson and Orleans Parish prisons. "Our contingency planning includes provisions for this type of occurrence, although the logistics of transportation and security will be complex because of the numbers," Stalder wrote in his e-mail. "I will keep you informed."

Just a few hours later, Stalder prepared his own troops for what would be the largest inmate evacuation in the nation's history, sending the following e-mail to senior staff, including wardens, assistant wardens, headquarters executive staff, and probation and parole district managers:

Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005, 4:49 a.m.

As you know, we are currently housing 750 inmate evacuees from local facilities in our state facilities. We are providing security and food to civilian shelters. We are providing probation and parole staff as a resource to state police and the National Guard for law enforcement duties. Washington Correctional Institute was in the immediate path of the storm and is challenged by the lack of water, gas leaks and no electricity in addition to three breaches in the perimeter fencing caused by falling trees and debris. They are also the evacuation site

for parish inmates from Plaquemines Parish and are providing support to staff families. Now, in addition to the many other responsibilities you are currently dealing with, and recognizing that many of us have had little sleep in the last 48 hours, I must ask you to reach for additional strength as we initiate the emergency evacuation of inmates from Orleans and Jefferson Parish Prisons. ...

Most of the resources of other agencies are engaged in trying to minimize the further loss of life in the path of the storm. Hospitals are without power and attempting to move patients to alternate sites. Bodies are reported floating in canals in New Orleans. At first light, additional rescue attempts will commence for citizens still stranded on roofs and otherwise not able to leave flooded areas. ... The 17th Street canal levee and possibly two additional levees in New Orleans are breached and water levels in the city continue to rise. Our own rescue efforts at Orleans Parish Prison will be hampered by the increasing water levels around the facility (currently 5 feet).

I advise you of this because this department needs to call upon the core values we have developed as a team over the years. Your commitment, your work ethic and your tireless devotion to the safety of everyone in Louisiana must see us through this crisis. We will quietly and effectively anticipate and meet the needs of others.

Thank you for your sacrifice. I am proud to serve with you.

Department of Public Safety And Challenges of Major Hurricane Crisis

The department was officially in crisis mode, and employees could hardly find better leadership than what presented itself as the days and weeks unfolded. That leadership was present at virtually every level in the department, from secretary to wardens to correctional officers to medical personnel to probation and parole officers to support staff to inmates. Everyone was called upon to work extra hours to accomplish the mission, with many taking on duties they had never had to before. Employees knew that during Katrina and Rita, "consistency and accountability" were crucial.

Stalder's management philosophy of consistency and accountability has been the department's mode of operations for years. His tenure in the top management position (he has served more than 15 years as secretary) has helped to achieve a sense of community in the department, and teamwork is stressed at every level. In most cases, the decision-making process is wide open, with input solicited from senior staff regularly. Stadler's e-mails during hurricanes Katrina and Rita sought not only to communicate vital information, but also to express his appreciation for the incredible sacrifices his employees were about to successfully perform.

Again, Stadler communicated through an e-mail to his senior staff:

Friday, Sept. 22, 2005, 7:39 a.m.

I regret to inform you that formal instructions will issue from the chief of operations and the Incident Management Center later this morning regarding evacuations relative to Hurricane Rita. We will immediately move approximately 1,400 inmates ... into state and local facilities. ...

I recognize that everyone has performed far beyond their limits during the past three and one-half weeks in response to Hurricane Katrina. We must now redefine the boundaries of

those limits and prepare for the possible catastrophic impact of Rita. Specific instructions will be forthcoming.

Your friends and colleagues around the country continue to keep us in their thoughts and prayers.

Virtually all of those in the department's leadership positions, whether at headquarters, institutions or probation and parole, are long-time employees who have worked their way into positions of authority. Many other employees have family ties to corrections. And all of the 6,500 agency employees know that the public safety of the citizens of Louisiana rests with them.



Secretary Stadler (middle) talks to (left) Attorney General Charles Foti Jr. and Col. Kenny Norris from the Louisiana State Penitentiary as DOC personnel work to finish the temporary booking and detention facility.

Photos by the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections

Facing Danger

The evacuations of Orleans and Jefferson Parish prison facilities were dangerous missions. The department's leadership knew that and did not hesitate to put themselves on the front lines; they would have it no other way. Institutional tactical teams and probation and parole officers from around the state were called in to assist with security. Many employees deployed to New Or-

leans probably felt a little better knowing that department veterans were right there with them. Hungry, wet and unhappy inmates greeted employees as they arrived. Boats were used to ferry inmates from the facility to a staging area where inmates would have to climb scaffolding to get to the caravan of buses and vans that would take them out of the city. Inmates knew that the correctional staff were there to help and, with few exceptions, gave them little trouble.

Some inmates went directly to state institutions or parish facilities. The majority, however, went to a staging site set up at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, where inmates were fed and where they waited for a more permanent housing assignment. Despite borrowing transportation resources



Dixon Correctional Institute became a haven for pets rescued from New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Inmates, staff and volunteers did a terrific job taking care of animals for weeks and some of the staff even ended up adopting animals who went unclaimed.

and some personnel from local sheriff's departments and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the evacuation of Orleans Parish Prison took three days to accomplish. It was nearly a nonstop process, but it was completed without any serious injuries or death to either staff or inmates.

During the early stages of evacuation, bed space was being secured at parish and private facilities across Louisiana because state institutions could not safely accommodate the eventual number of inmates needing long-term alternative housing. Louisiana's unique housing relationship with parish and private facilities — and the partnerships created between the department and local sheriff's departments as a result — was one of the keys to the success of the evacuations. Another was the opening of a juvenile facility in LaSalle Parish. The privately owned facility had been closed for some years but desperately needed to ease the housing crunch. Although this was not part of the emergency operations plan, creativity, flexibility and teamwork helped turn a closed facility into temporary housing for 500 inmates in less than 48 hours.

For those working at the institutions, there was danger in the unknown. They suddenly had to deal with hundreds of inmates about whom they knew nothing. Paper records were under water and computer records took a long time to retrieve and reproduce in any meaningful way. Medical and mental health staff evaluated the inmate evacuees, while classification and other staff went through the unenviable task of trying to identify them.

The department's service in New Orleans did not end with the evacuation. In the days after Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department was in disarray, and it was clear that the city needed help. Probation and parole officers filled a crucial security role by providing security escorts around the clock for the New Orleans Fire Department after firefighters were met with bullets while responding to calls for help. The patrols lasted nearly a month.

Meeting Opportunities

In addition to the department's selflessness and courage reacting to the hurricanes' dangers, they met even more opportunities to serve generously and heroically. When the governor pounded her fists on a podium during a press conference about the desperate looting situation in New Orleans in the days after Katrina, she insisted that state police and National Guard troops were "locked and loaded"

and ready to deal with the situation. There was one problem: There was no jail in which to put them. This is when the DPS&C came to their aid. Within 48 hours of Blanco's directive to get looting under control, the department, in partnership with the state Attorney General's Office, erected a temporary holding and processing facility in New Orleans. Camp Amtrak (the facility was erected at the New Orleans Amtrak train station) was open for business and was staffed primarily with correctional supervisors and officers until the Orleans Parish Prison restarted jail operations on Oct. 17, 2005.

There were other opportunities to help the communities. In the days after the storms, both Washington Correctional Institute (southeast Louisiana) and C. Paul Phelps Correctional Center (southwest Louisiana) served as FEMA distribution sites so that people living near the facilities could get necessities such as ice, nonperishable foods and water. Correctional facilities are excellent choices for such sites because they provide the security and manpower (inmates gladly volunteered to help) needed to run an efficient and effective operation. In addition, both facilities were operating on emergency power for at least a week after the storms; it helped to have necessities, such as food, water and ice, on hand for staff and inmates.

The department's humanitarian response did not stop there. The plight of Katrina's four-legged victims was heart-wrenching. During the evacuation of Orleans Parish Prison, many employees witnessed the terrible fate the storm dealt family pets. Some animals were rescued near the staging area in New Orleans by correctional employees. "Evac," a male Pomeranian plucked from the waters by Stalder and others, clearly someone's beloved pet prior to the storm, fortunately is thriving in his new home living with the deputy secretary.

Evac was not the only lucky dog. When space became an issue at one of the major pet evacuation sites just outside Baton Rouge, Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson stepped up to provide care for more than 200 animals, mostly dogs. In a cooperative effort with the U.S.



Staff and Dixon Correctional Institute interview inmates to get classification information.



Secretary Stalder (middle with brown pants and navy shirt) oversees the building of the temporary booking and detention facility on the site of the AMTRAK train and Greyhound bus station.

Humane Society, DCI staff and inmates, as well as volunteers from across the country, turned an old barn into a safe haven for some traumatized canines, geese, chickens and ducks.

The quickly following second hurricane, Rita, presented its own challenges and opportunities to an already devastated area. Inmate evacuations were coordinated through the department, but local facilities evacuated early and there was not nearly the chaos or the inmate evacuee numbers as was the case with Katrina. However, maintaining law and order in Rita's aftermath in some small communities required additional resources — resources that the department, through the probation and parole division, provided. Correctional officers drew assignments to help small-town police forces that were stretched to the limit. It was more precautionary than anything because of what happened during Katrina. Probation and parole officers helped ensure that looting and lawlessness after Rita would not be an option.

Corrections Community Generosity

Although many of the department's responses to the storms were not written in the plan, there was so much pain and devastation that the only response, in many cases, was to do whatever could be done to help. The department assisted in evacuating a senior citizen home before the storm. After Katrina, employees helped to transport "walking wounded" from the New Orleans area to Baton Rouge so that vital ambulance space could be saved for those truly in need of emergency care. Institutions and headquarters worked diligently to connect displaced inmates with their displaced family members. There are so many heroes to emerge from these storms that they are impossible to count, but many of them would say that they were just doing their jobs.

Many of those heroes are also victims — their homes and possessions that they worked so hard and so long for were damaged or destroyed. Nearly a year later, some residents, including correctional staff, still have a long way to go to recover. Yet, there was a silver lining in these storm

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clouds. The corrections family came to the department's rescue when it was most needed. The corrections community was the department's cavalry. Other correctional departments across the country sent officers to help with the thousands of extra inmates. The corrections community sent medical staff to relieve the department's overburdened nurses and doctors. It sent social workers to put things in perspective and to help deal with the psychological implications of the disasters, whether personally or professionally. It donated necessities and other supplies by the truckload and gave monetarily so that the hardest-hit employees and their families could get by financially. The department has worked very hard to ensure the equitable distribution of those funds for all employees affected by both Katrina and Rita.

Just as the department and its employees provided invaluable services for the communities and fellow citizens of Louisiana in the aftermath of the storms, the acts of kindness and generosity from the corrections community were equally as priceless and tremendously appreciated. Many thanks from the DPS&C.

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