

“Together Against the Weather” **Communications Plan**

(Populations with Special Needs Hurricane Readiness Outreach Project)

Background

In the summer of 2007, the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) and Houston TranStar engaged a small team of consultants to assist with the development of a hurricane communications initiative targeting populations with special needs.

The team’s first action was to identify these populations as persons with hearing loss, the elderly and frail, homeless/displaced, illiterate, sight impaired, persons with medical concerns (both physical and mental), and the non-English speaking populations (Spanish-speaking and Vietnamese-speaking being the largest populations) in the 13-county H-GAC coverage area. Next, the decision was made to invest a significant effort in a comprehensive, two-part research and discovery process to a) identify the underlying issues of hurricane preparation and evacuation in each of the targeted populations; and b) to engage emergency management officers and first responders in focus group meetings to identify their perceptions of the challenges and opportunities as well.

Phase I: Nearly 150 “subject matter experts” from organizations primarily based in Houston, that serve one or more of the project’s targeted special needs categories, were identified, and subsequently invited to provide input at a series of focus group meetings. In addition, the consulting team created a partnership with the Texas Association of Adult Literacy Councils (TAALC) that conducted a statewide survey of its membership regarding the challenges and opportunities involved with communicating information to individuals with limited literacy.

Phase II: Because no one consolidated source was available, an original database of emergency management contacts was constructed for the more than 130 cities and towns, in the Council’s service area. From that, more than 200 officials were invited to attend one of seven focus group meetings strategically located throughout the 13-county region.

At the conclusion of this extensive research, consistent themes emerged, which the team viewed as key to the long-term success of an effort to communicate the importance of hurricane preparation to populations with special needs, and motivate them to take action.*

The findings outlined in the following section form the foundation of a resulting Communications Plan for emergency management personnel in the H-GAC 13-county region, and presented at strategically located meetings the month of May, 2008.

* While much was discovered regarding emergency communication needs at the actual onset of a hurricane, the focus of this project has been centered on communications for advance planning and preparations. Input collected on communications needs during an event may be obtained through the review of transcripts provided from each of the focus group meetings.

Strategy for Success

A primary theme that surfaced almost immediately out of the initiative's research process was that of partnerships. From existing partnerships between persons with special needs and their trusted support systems, to the need for collaboration between emergency officials and community agencies and organizations that serve these targeted populations, the importance of partnerships was voiced consistently throughout both phases of research.

The role of bridging-relationships is essential to unlocking the predominant issue of mistrust and vulnerability among each of the targeted populations, and, while several focus group participants had discovered this truth for themselves, it is a principle that must be applied universally. As a result, the campaign title of "*Together Against the Weather*," was developed to capture the core strategic concept of this plan; that being that a multi-tiered network of relationships is required to effectively reach each targeted audience and move them forward in implementing hurricane preparation and evacuation planning.

Enhancing partnerships between emergency management offices and community service organizations is central to this approach. Fortunately, the added value of relationships initiated through the project's research, including formulation of an extensive contact database, has already established a substantive starting point from which clients H-GAC and Houston TranStar can build.

Using this core strategy as a base, several additional strategies were formulated to address issues identified in the initiative's research process. The following section describes these challenges, and outlines recommended strategies and tactics to address them.

Challenges, Strategies and Tactics

Challenge #1: Trust is a guarded commodity among persons with special needs; reserved for only a select circle of relationships and influencers

One of the most consistent findings among subject matter experts (SME) questioned was the importance of trust. Given the vulnerability issues faced by each population with special needs, it is understandable that gaining trust is an important challenge to overcome. The vast majority of SME participants believed that attention to message, and taking action to prepare, is most affected by the degree to which message recipients trust the sender. And while trusted sources varied somewhat by special needs group, the more local or personal a contact, the more that contact is trusted.

Strategy A

Aside from family, the most cited source of trust among each population was clergy and, in turn, religious congregations. This is particularly important in immigrant populations that may not come from a country where there is a tradition of trusting government or other organizations. Religious centers, or houses of worship, also provide a central gathering place.

Tactics:

- Reach persons with special needs, and their families, through their houses of worship with hurricane preparation information through presentations to senior groups, religious classes, festivals, health fairs, and other gatherings that present opportunities for a captured audience.
- Because clergy are most trusted source of information, they are also the most effective means of message delivery. Engage religious leadership in forming partnerships with local agencies who serve targeted populations.
- Encourage congregations to act on the “*Together Against the Weather*” concept by adopting near-by residential complexes that, unlike fixed facilities such as nursing homes or hospitals, do not have an organized preparation or evacuation plan in place. Many religious organizations schedule community service projects and take an active role in reaching out to neighboring communities. Adopt-a-site programs; door-to-door identification, and mapping of needs, are effective.
- Leverage the local ministerial alliance. This is an organization that brings together the leadership of all religious outlets.
- Engage congregations in donation drives to collect items that can be built into preparation and evacuation kits for populations with special needs.
- Engage the local law enforcement’s chaplain. The chaplain has existing relationships with most of the local religious leadership and can leverage opportunities for presentations and communications.

Strategy B

Community organizations, service agencies, health care providers, case workers and other sources of existing support are also significant origins of trust. This is where the campaign’s core strategy of engaging partnerships pays dividends. If an organization, or care giver, is already trusted to provide support, then it is more likely to be accepted as an advocate for hurricane preparation.

Tactics:

- Contact community organizations, service agencies, health care providers, case workers and other trusted sources that serve targeted populations to provide information for their clients on preparation, registration and evacuation. In addition to charitable organizations, include community service organizations such as the AARP, Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, Rotary, and Lion’s Club.
- Utilize service agencies to assist you in identifying and mapping the populations of special needs in your local jurisdiction.
- Offer training to the volunteers of these organizations regarding the need for communication on hurricane preparedness and evacuation issues.
- Assist the trusted resources on how best to engage patients, clients, relatives, neighbors in motivational questioning that helps identify needs and steps for preparations (see Challenge #2.)

- Provide visual and audio information that clearly explains what planning and preparations “look like.”
- Leverage wait times of community clinics and other locations serving persons with special needs to communicate instructional information directly to audiences it is designed for.
- Suggest text messaging systems, email and reverse 911 tactics to communicate with populations with special needs in time of crisis.
- Utilize health care providers, including, but not limited to, doctors, pharmacists, home health care agencies, group homes, associations of specialty doctors, and insurance agencies to provide information on preparation and evacuation.

Strategy C

Although government, in general, was not ranked highly as a trusted entity by SME focus group participants, local authorities, in particular fire fighters, are considered valuable influencers. Whenever possible, hurricane planning information should be delivered by a local representative and labeled with local contact information.

Tactics:

- Conduct Town Hall meetings specific to issues of persons with special needs that partner local emergency management authorities with local organizations serving targeted populations, and leadership within that population’s community.
- Deliver communication tools that provide the opportunity for individual customization by a local sender, including space for trusted agency’s logo, contact information and message.
- Utilize local CERT teams, Super Neighborhoods, Chambers of Commerce and Homeowners Associations to assist in distributing flyers, posters, magnets and other materials to neighborhoods and residents.

Strategy D

Because many first-generation immigrants and non-English speaking populations are less likely to register with local officials, students can be a conduit to the parents and sources of information about preparedness, evacuation, family disaster plans, and meetings that will be held to provide additional information and resources. It is recommended that local officials partner with school districts to utilize the school environment to distribute information.

- Contact School District representatives to discuss opportunities for partnering to educate parents and family members through students.
- Contact school principals directly to organize presentations, distribute information and schedule “Town Hall” meetings for parents and students that feature presentations from firefighters, EMS, the local police department on the importance of preparation, evacuation and family plans.
- Utilize regularly scheduled Parent Teacher Conferences to distribute information to parents and family members.

- Utilize other school programs, such as open houses, fall carnivals, and social activities, to provide information and presentations.
- Distribute “*Together Against the Weather*” information when sending home report cards, school newsletters, and other documentation that is directed to parents and family members.

Challenge #2: Hurricane Preparation messages are often too complex and have an overwhelming effect

A comment heard repeatedly in SME meetings was the fact that many persons with special needs are in low or fixed income households, and that items typically listed in a hurricane preparation kit can represent a financial burden. In addition, preparation instructions are often too lengthy, include jargon that is not commonly understood, and require so much time and effort to implement that the affect is overwhelming. Most basic is the problem that hurricane planning and preparation efforts do not take into account the communication prerequisites of targeted populations.

Strategy A

The effect of being overwhelmed is greatly reduced when preparation information is presented in incremental, or bite-sized segments. In addition, questions can be an effective means of raising awareness, prompting action and influencing behavior. Simplifying the preparation message in this way also removes a perceived barrier to compliance.

Tactics:

- Provide a motivational questionnaire to persons with special needs and their support systems (including family members, service agencies and other identified origins of trust) to help identify areas of need and steps for preparation.
- Provide visual and audio information that breaks preparation information into incremental segments and clearly explains what planning and preparations “look like.”
- Contact and form partnerships with local utilities providers, including water, electricity, gas companies that have direct mail contact with these populations on a regular basis to include communication materials in their mailings and encourage preparation and evacuation plan development.
- Encourage caregivers, and persons with special needs, to keep a daily journal for one week to help identify what is needed *every* day. Then, from that resulting list, begin acquiring extra supplies with each purchase, and become aware of adaptations that may be necessary equipment to be portable in an evacuation.

Strategy B

Rather than concentrating hurricane planning messages during one time of year, communicate preparations as a year-round activity; the cost and effort of gathering supplies is more tolerably distributed over 12 months. (This strategy also speaks to a

point repeated in each emergency management focus group, that if residents with special needs are prepared for hurricanes, they are prepared for other disasters as well.)

Tactics:

- Engage the local corporations such as Wal-Mart, Target, Home Depot, Fiesta and their marketing departments to establish point-of-service communications via:
 - * Audio, video, or printed materials such as the flyer at check out.
 - * Local companies can also print messaging on their plastic and paper bags about hurricane preparation.
 - * Many corporations will allow local officials to distribute materials to customers as they enter the stores.
 - * These corporations have also provided significant donations in times of a weather crisis.
 - * Stores will also set up displays working with service agencies and local officials with the recommended essential items needed for preparation, such as battery operated radios, flashlights, etc.

- Contact your local newspapers, radio, and television stations to garner participation and a partnership in educating populations with special needs and their families and caregivers on the year-round need to prepare for hurricanes and a plan for potential evacuation. The media can play a critical role in providing consistent messaging and education to your local residents.
 - * Distribute articles on hurricane preparedness and evacuation issues specific to special needs populations for publication in local newspapers, newsletters, magazines
 - * Distribute public service announcements for print, radio and television to your local stations for year-round programs.
 - * Distribute flyers and posters to all local media for inclusion in publications.
 - * Invite the local media to all hurricane related events, presentations, and programs.
 - * Provide a copy of all supporting materials in this toolkit to local media as a resource for their files and coverage.
 - * Announce to the media all local partnerships with social service agencies, religious organizations, and other groups specific to special needs populations.
 - * Announce Hurricane Season/Program Launch to media with specific information for special needs populations.
 - * Prepare a monthly calendar of events schedule to distribute to the media to alert them to all presentations, events in which materials and information will be shared specific to special needs populations.

- * Utilize the local newspapers, Yellow Pages, community magazines and other print publications to include the motivational questionnaire developed specifically for the special needs population.

Strategy C

Literacy, sight, hearing and language challenges faced by targeted populations make electronic media the preferred means of direct communication. Instructional messages need to be factual, specific and free of jargon, and any print materials for direct communication must use large type-face (preferably 24 pt.)

Tactics:

- Distribute radio spots produced in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.
- Distribute television spots produced in English and Spanish, and that also include closed captioning and American Sign Language translation.
- Distribute instructional video, produced in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, to sites that provide services (point-of-service locations) to persons with special needs, eg. community clinics, churches, service organizations, etc
- Incorporate the guiding principles of this strategy when executing each of the tactics provided in the communication plan.

Strategy D

Preparation messages, and communicating with the homeless/displaced population, present a unique set of challenges that counter conventional strategies. The team's research discovered that rather than taking messages to the homeless/displaced, the homeless/displaced must come to messages posted at acknowledged gathering sites. As this population lives each day in "crisis mode", it was learned that it is almost impossible to motivate this audience to "prepare" in the traditional way. The key message for preparation is to provide information on where the embarkation points or shelters will be located in each jurisdiction. Based on the recent Rita and Katrina experiences, it was found that this community will react in the following ways:

1. The homeless/displaced population will find their way to a clinic, hospital, or service agency in the event of a disaster.
2. This population does carry cell phones and more than 3,000 have access to a voice mail system in the Harris, Fort Bend and Montgomery counties provided by the Coalition for the Homeless. In the event of an emergency, voice messages are widely distributed via this system.
3. This population disseminates information via word of mouth and is a tight network of information providers.

Tactics

- The key to successfully communicating to the homeless/displaced population is through the social and service agencies that cater to this audience. It is critical that emergency management officials engage the agencies in designating embarkation points and shelters as it will be the agencies that disseminate the information to

this population. These agencies will also be able to identify the most familiar points for planning of evacuation of the population.

- Invite and include local homeless/displaced social service agencies in your jurisdiction's command center to garner critical information in the planning and execution of an evacuation.
- Host Town Hall meetings in landmark locations that this population is familiar with, such as local libraries, agencies that service the population to explain the difference between reporting to a shelter or traveling to an embarkation point.
- Distribute informational posters to central locations where this population congregates, such as the local homeless shelters, churches, libraries and central landmarks. The information on the poster should be customized to list the embarkation points in the area as well as the locations of local shelters in the event of a hurricane or evacuation.
- Develop a phone tree with your local service agencies that serve the homeless/displaced community in order to expedite the communication of information in your jurisdiction.

Challenge #3: Compliance with preparation messages can be weak

For many persons with special needs, the challenges of everyday living can reduce hurricane preparation messages to background noise. Research participants expressed concern that gaining necessary attention will require a different approach than traditionally used. Coupled with that insight was the observation that many residents, with or without special needs, do not consider hurricane risks in the absence of an actual threat.

Strategy A

By engaging community organizations, family members and other trusted support entities in an effort to bring hurricane preparation messages to groups and individuals, the goal is to foster compliance by using existing relationships and one-on-one interactions to spur behavior changes.

Strategy B

After careful consideration of the tone and style of messaging for this campaign, the team decided to forego the use of fear-based appeals tried at other times and in other settings, and instead will implement a question-based call to action in its messaging. By provoking target populations to think about their needs, and level of preparedness, the result is aimed at more activity.

Tactics

- Incorporate motivational questioning strategies in scripting for broadcast spots and point-of-service instructional videos.
- Feature representatives from each targeted population in programming so as to enhance relateability, as well as cited influencers (eg. clergy, fire fighters) to motivate behavior.

Challenge #4: Distrust for and underutilization of the 211 Evacuation Assistance Registration Process

The inherent vulnerabilities of persons with special needs have caused an understandable concern for security and reluctance to register for evacuation transportation with the statewide 211 number. Focus group meetings with emergency management personnel discovered an equally serious concern for intake inaccuracies and outdated information. So while registering for evacuation assistance through 211 represents a starting point, there are a number of concerns among first responders and those the initiative is meant to serve, as well as serious issues related to delivery on the program's promise.

Strategy A

It is unlikely that even with heightened attention the 211 program will attract the desired level of advance registration of persons with special needs. And so while the 211 registry should continue to appear in hurricane preparation materials, equal emphasis should be given to local contact information if the goal is to improve preparation for an evacuation.

Tactics

- Deliver communication tools that provide the opportunity for individual customization by a local sender, including space for trusted agency's logo, contact information and message.

Tools / Support Materials:

- Flyer
- Poster
- Refrigerator magnet
- Articles for media placement
- Radio spots for public service and paid announcements
- Television spots for public service and paid announcements
- Point-of-service instruction video
- Point-of-service audio for on-hold telephone messaging
- Motivational questionnaire

Appendix:

- List of Supporting Social Agencies and Organizations by Geographic Locations and Special Needs Categories
- List of Target Media by Special Needs Categories and Geographic Locations
- List of Trusted Individuals, Organizations, Outlets for Communication
- List of Corporate Sponsors/Partners by Geographic Locations

- Sample Articles for placement in print publications