

EBS/PIES Communications System Goes on the Air in Texas

When Hurricane Alicia hit the Texas coast on August 18, 1983, the community of Baytown was among the hardest hit. Located in the storm's path 45 miles northwest of Galveston on Galveston Bay, more than 500 Baytown homes were flooded and 100 people had to be rescued from the rising waters. Miraculously, no one in the city of 60,000 was killed or even injured. Ask Baytown Emergency Management and Preparedness Coordinator Fletcher Hickerson what saved Baytown and he will answer you with two words: Luck, and PIES.

The Public Information Emergency System (PIES) is a new radio communications network that is now operational and being expanded in the Houston/Galveston area. PIES is the first such disaster network of its kind in the entire country, and has so

impressed the Federal Communications Commission that it could become a model for other cities nationwide and along the Gulf Coast.

The system uses a special radio frequency (161.64 MHz) to link all of the participating Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) in Houston's 41 suburban cities with the more than 60 media outlets (radio, TV, newspaper, wire services, etc.) in the metropolitan area. PIES receivers have already been installed at most of these media outlets, and transmitters have been operational in the Houston/Harris County and Baytown EOCs since 1982.

The system proved to be crucial when Baytown's local radio station lost its tower in 100 mph winds around 2 A.M. on the day Hurricane Alicia hit. A Houston radio

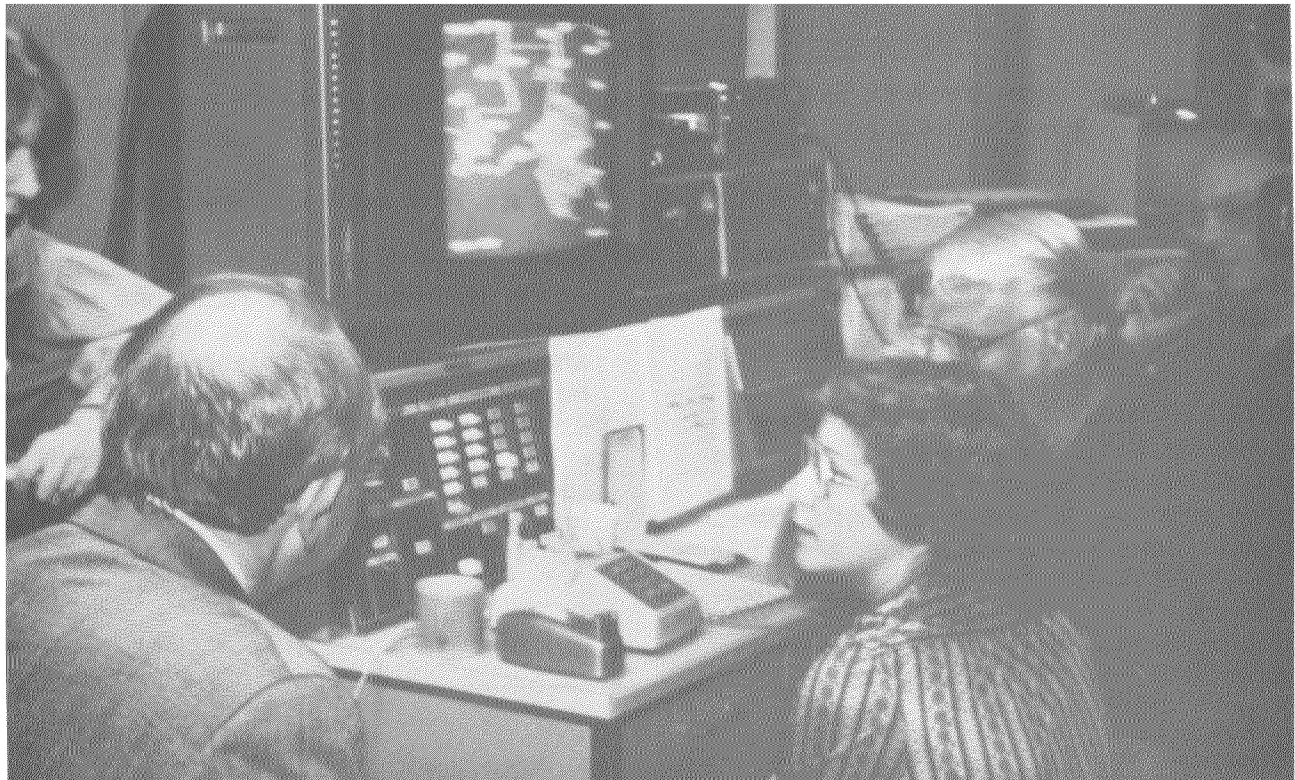


Photo courtesy KIKK-Radio Houston

station picked up the information Hickerson was broadcasting on PIES and relayed it back to Baytown residents.

Instant information proved to be the key in surviving Alicia, because the storm kept changing. As Hickerson got new information from the National Weather Service, he broadcast it over PIES, along with the latest tide and wind readings.

"In spite of everything, we had people caught by the waters. We came through because of the good information we were able to get out. No one was even injured--because we had PIES, in our opinion," Hickerson said.

Since Alicia, the PIES network has been expanding in Texas. When completed, broadcast band two-way radios will be installed in each of the Emergency Operations Centers in the five-county Houston metropolitan area, so that mayors, county judges, and civil defense officials will have direct radio contact to primary and secondary Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) stations, as well as other news media outlets.

During an area disaster such as a hurricane, Houston's primary and secondary EBS stations act as EBS/PIES Net Control Stations, coordinating a series of "round robin" city-by-city, county-by-county reports, with break-in capability for any emergency update. With these reports coming directly from each city or county EOC, the information should be more reliable, timely, and would be shared equally with all the news media, which could disseminate the same accurate information to the public. This would minimize the possibilities of being misquoted, sensationalized, or in conflict with other reports. If a mistake is made, the EBS/

PIES would allow faster correction to all news outlets.

Instead of trying to communicate by telephone lines (which often become busy or go dead because of high winds, flooding or overloaded phone circuits), each city and county EOC would communicate by radio on the same frequency. This means they would also be able to communicate with each other and coordinate their activities. They would be aware of a nearby town's evacuation, for example, that could cause traffic problems for them.

John Caswell, Emergency Coordinator for the City of Houston and Harris County, calls PIES "the most valuable asset enabling us to get information to the public more expediently during a disaster." It was Caswell who pioneered the idea in 1979, when he purchased monitors for media outlets in the Houston area.

Not long after the Houston system became operational, Chuck Wolf, news director for KIKK Radio-Houston, became interested in expanding PIES areawide and took the lead in developing the Houston Area Emergency Broadcast System/PIES Plan, which has been approved by the Federal Communications Commission. Wolf reports that the FCC is very interested in expanding the system to other areas of the country. He believes the EBS/PIES could be an asset in many major metropolitan areas where there are a large number of media outlets. "With PIES, one message goes out to everybody at the same time, and everyone gets reliable information," he said.

For more information on the EBS/PIES, technical specifications, costs, and licensing procedures, contact Chuck Wolf at KIKK Radio-Houston, (713) 981-9600.

Developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency with the cooperation of KIKK Radio-Houston, Baytown Emergency Management and Houston/Harris County Civil Defense.