

## **Public Information Plan Key in Utility's Response to Hurricane Alicia**

It was Monday, August 15, when Alicia—the first named tropical storm of the 1983 Atlantic hurricane season—formed in the north-central Gulf of Mexico.

"It's kind of like a gorilla with a machine gun. It goes where it wants to," said the meteorologist in charge of the weather service for the Houston area.

The slow-moving Alicia finally made up its mind and came ashore about 3 a.m., Thursday, August 18, at San Luis Pass, with winds of up to 135 mph. It proceeded northward on a path of destruction that left approximately three-quarters of a million Houston Lighting & Power (HL&P) customers without power.

When the fury of Alicia had passed, it was painfully obvious that the hurricane had caused the greatest damage to HL&P's electric system in the company's 102-year history.

Seven hundred and fifty thousand customers lost electrical service—more than the total number of customers HL&P had when Hurricane Carla struck in 1961. All power to Galveston Island was lost. Six hundred miles of line—the distance between Houston and Birmingham—were blown to the ground.

Service was restored to over 80 percent of customers within four days, and to all affected customers in 16 days.

Maintaining the flow of information to customers, federal, state, and city officials was a major responsibility. The company provided daily updates of restoration progress to the Public Utility Commission of Texas and the mayor of Houston. Company officials also contacted the Department of Energy's Office of Energy Emergency Operations in Washington the day after Alicia struck to apprise them of the status of HL&P's system. Public Affairs personnel worked



AP photo

around the clock making sure that critical information was made available to news media as it came into the company's Emergency Evaluation Center.

Public Affairs' storm preparations is renewed at the start of hurricane season each year by updating large wall maps in the media center and by installing storm phones with direct lines to service centers. Communications to news media were distributed by Western Union TWX as well as by telephone and direct delivery. Special storm telephone numbers were also given to news media outlets at the onset of the storm. As a result, communication was never a problem.

Besides providing damage and repair updates throughout the days and nights before and after the storm, Public Affairs worked to make sure that particularly important messages got priority. All news media, particularly radio stations, gave excellent cooperation in relaying current information out to customers.

For example, a serious safety concern for linemen and customers from portable generators was publicized. If these machines are wired directly into a home's electrical system, current can flow back through the HL&P wires, with transformers boosting the voltage to dangerous levels. Effective communication was needed to warn customers of this hazard.

Public Affairs personnel also assisted news media representatives in providing information on downed wires. Passengers who found themselves in cars with lines down on them were advised on how to leave the vehicle safely.

Customers trimming trees were advised to stay clear of power lines. In recently restored areas, customers were reminded not to drop trimmed limbs on power lines lest the service be lost again. One newspaper declined to name an individual who accidentally caused his subdivision to lose power in this way due to fear for his personal safety if his neighbors found out.

News media interviews were also arranged with work crews and company officials. Rumors were quelled and questions were answered. Frauds were reported. For example, as tree trimming crews worked through a neighborhood, a man went ahead of the crews to collect a fee for their services. With news media help, customers were quickly advised that the company was seeking no fees and that the police should be notified if someone sought to collect for HL&P's tree trimming work.

Over 500 calls were received from news media outlets seeking information--some from as far away as England--and a large number of calls were initiated to local news media. Thirty-nine storm damage and restoration progress reports were distributed by the department during storm repair efforts.

# **Red Cross and Union Partnership: Local Unions Assist in Coastline Disaster Project**

by  
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Hurricanes . . . a fire . . . flooding . . . earthquake . . . explosions . . . a tornado. For more than a century, whenever disaster strikes, we have counted on the American Red Cross to come into the stricken area to coordinate evacuation, emergency health care, and temporary housing and food, and to mobilize community and volunteer relief services.

Typically, during a major disaster, the American Red Cross can send in 200 to 500 paid staff and volunteers to set up and coordinate emergency services. But if we depend so much on the Red Cross in a disaster, who can the Red Cross depend on to make their vital disaster services easier and more efficient?

Human lives and property are in the balance during a disaster. In the past, the American Red Cross would dispatch those 200 to 500 experts to a disaster area with nowhere specific to go. First, they would have to find a place for crisis administrative control. Often such facilities would have to be repaired on the spot. Then emergency vehicles and equipment would have to be located and moved in, including generators if the power were out. Finally, a reliable communication system would have to be installed, including telephones (and now satellite systems), to receive and place calls for more help to specific stricken areas.

All this set-up and coordination could take several days, even a week. Precious time is lost as the disaster claims more lives and property which could have been

saved if the Red Cross could have hit the disaster scene running.

However, in some Gulf and Atlantic regions, local trade union halls are now ready to serve as administrative disaster headquarters, thanks to a remarkable partnership between organized labor and the American Red Cross. The story of this partnership has been called "the best project the labor movement has ever been involved in" and yet another example of the community-minded spirit of union members who often are either volunteers in Red Cross rescue and emergency efforts, or, sadly, victims of a hurricane, tornado, flood, or fire.

"We hope this union hall is never to be used as a Red Cross emergency center," says one local union official, "but if disaster strikes, we're ready."

Fifty local unions are now equipped and ready to turn their hall keys over to the American Red Cross with a minute's notice, from Lake Charles, Louisiana, to Norfolk, Virginia--more than 2,000 miles of coastline.

Now, when disaster strikes anywhere along the Gulf or South Atlantic Coasts, the American Red Cross has a place to go, with the Coastline Disaster Project. In the halls, telephones drop from the ceilings; there may be an emergency generator out back; and plenty of room for parking and emergency work. Instead of several days for mobilization and set-up, these facilities are ready for emergency operation in less than half a day. This unique partnership between organized

labor and the American Red Cross did not just spring up overnight or automatically. The story actually begins during Hurricane Frederick, September 1979, in Mobile, Alabama.

Death, destruction, injury, and homelessness surrounded the scene as the Red Cross scrounged around Mobile for an administrative center to coordinate emergency services. They had to find a shelter, telephones, and a generator before staff and volunteers had something they could call a headquarters. It was the same story 78 years ago when an earthquake and fires killed 600 people and leveled 30,000 buildings in San Francisco. Ditto a few years later when a hurricane whipped through Tampa. Ditto virtually every year since: when disaster strikes, the American Red Cross often has nowhere to go to set up an emergency administrative headquarters.

In Mobile, Chuck Johnson got to thinking: Can we ever be ready to go during a disaster? Johnson is Director of Labor Participation for Regions 3 and 4 of the Eastern Operation Headquarters of the American Red Cross and National AFL-CIO Community Services Liaison. The Boy Scout motto ate away in Johnson's mind over and over until 1981, the centennial anniversary year for both the AFL-CIO and the American Red Cross. Then he met with Ralph Barlow, disaster director for the Red Cross in the Southeast, and outlined a plan whereby local union halls would be retrofitted and equipped to serve as emergency administrative headquarters all up and down the Atlantic and Gulf.

Barlow, now deceased, was enthused by the idea--Coastline Disaster Project--and immediately Johnson began contacting state federations and central labor councils for the best locations of union meeting halls for prospective Red Cross disaster relief centers. In spite of recession, declining membership, and tight finances, without exception the response of organized labor was generous, cooperative, and enthusiastic. After all, union members, as volunteers or victims in

the past, knew and appreciated the American Red Cross.

The local union halls selected had to be on high ground but near an airport and motels. Some had to be pre-wired, altered, and equipped with emergency telephones and diesel emergency generators. Generators and communications equipment were donated by Southern Bell, South Central Bell, General Telephone of Florida, United Telephone Service, and Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone. Installing and retrofitting, as well as building insulated sheds for the generators, were performed by volunteer union construction workers.

The 50 local unions involved agreed to turn their meeting halls over to the American Red Cross during a disaster, often lasting up to two months until the emergency administrative headquarters is shut down. Unions so far involved in the Coastline Disaster Project are the IBEW Electrical Workers, Communications Workers, Steelworkers, Longshoremens, Tobacco Workers, Government Employees, Bricklayers, Carpenters, Plumbers, Operating Engineers, Auto Workers, Boiler-makers, Textile Workers, Machinists, Paperworkers, and Ironworkers.

Cooperation continues between the Red Cross and strategic local unions to extend the Coastline Disaster Project from Texas to Maine, and eventually out west and inland. After all, similar Red Cross disaster relief centers are needed in Utah for mudslides, in Missouri for floods, and elsewhere for explosions, fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, and potential nuclear accidents. But with the hurricane season approaching, the Gulf and South Atlantic coastlines are better prepared as a result of this partnership between organized labor and the American Red Cross.

So far, in the two-year development of the Coastline Disaster Project, only three union halls have been used by the Red Cross, and one was in Jackson, Mississippi, last year during that region's second worst flood on record. The worst was in 1978, and the Red Cross had to scramble for

several days to set up an administrative headquarters.

Last year, however, Red Cross officials flew into Jackson, drove to a CWA local union hall on high ground, cranked up the emergency generator, and dropped all the necessary telephones out of the ceiling ties. In an unprecedented 30 minutes, the Red Cross had an emergency administrative headquarters from which staff and volunteers could begin mobilizing rescue efforts and coordinating all the thousand-and-one details of a disaster operation.

"Unless you've been through something like this," says Jackson Mayor Dale Danks, "you don't know how comforting it is to see people, maybe strangers from out of town, who care about you and your community." He applauds the unions, phone companies, and Red Cross for the Coastline Disaster Project.

So far, the value of the Coastline Disaster Project tops \$10 million in equipment, machinery, and manpower, every cent of it donated and voluntary. As such, the partnership strengthens the ties between the American Red Cross and AFL-CIO unions, but more importantly, the 50 retrofitted local union halls dotted all along the Gulf and Atlantic provide faster emergency services meeting human needs during a disaster.

Today, Chuck Johnson and Lucious Webb are running up and down the East Coast trying to get more local union halls retrofitted for emergency Red Cross use as the hurricane season approaches. Running interference for them, especially in right-to-work (for less) states, is E.T. "Al" Kehrler, southern director for the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department. You'd be surprised to find pockets of resistance to what the Southern Field Office Advisory Council of Red Cross calls "a truly remarkable example of responsible citizenship on the part of organized labor" in the Coastline Disaster Project.

Nevertheless, while commercial media continue to hammer away at the AFL-CIO as a "special interest" of "labor bosses,"

Chuck Johnson finds nothing but cooperation and good will from state federations and central bodies of the AFL-CIO for the Coastline Disaster Project. The quiet, generous work of 50 local unions, until now, has gone unheralded, hardly noticed—but greatly appreciated by Jackson, Mississippi, and presumably wherever disaster strikes next.

### **Ironworkers Take the Lead in Coastline Project**

Three Ironworker local unions were among the first to sign over their facilities to the American Red Cross for emergency headquarters under the Coastline Disaster Project.

In the event of a major disaster, Ironworker halls in Savannah, Charleston, and Norfolk are ready to go for the coordination and administration of Red Cross disaster relief services. These halls were selected for their location in disaster-prone areas, convenience to airports, accessibility to lodging, and relative safety such as high ground during flooding.

Local 601 in North Charleston, South Carolina, was selected, for example, because of its location. The Coastline Disaster Project facility is not located in Myrtle Beach because it would be under water if a major hurricane hit.

Coastline Disaster Project coordinator Chuck Johnson first approaches the State AFL-CIO federation and then the appropriate AFL-CIO central labor council. In the case of Local 79 in Norfolk, Virginia shares a meeting hall with the central labor council on the highest hill around. During a flood, the local Red Cross chapter and the blood center would both be underwater.

Local 709 headquarters in Savannah, Georgia, is a back-up to the main Coastline Disaster Project facility operated by the Boilermakers, which could suffer extensive damage during a severe disaster. In that case, Local 709 would become the

administrative disaster headquarters from which the Red Cross would operate.

"Ironworkers have been among my top supporters," Johnson said in an interview recently. His Coastline Disaster Project

has been endorsed by top Red Cross and AFL-CIO officials who are now encouraging nationwide cooperation between the two organizations in order to expand the project to every major hit area in the nation.