



August 19 2010 – By Morgan Carlson

One day after communications in Jackson County were shut down for six hours, county agencies participated in training to prepare for just that type of situation.

On Wednesday, Jackson County Emergency Management held a continuity of operations exercise with 15 county agencies participating.

The exercise was scheduled months ago, and just happened to fall a day after a real emergency in the county.

Representatives from several county agencies participated remotely by computer and also at the Jackson County Emergency Operations Center, according to Chris Floyd of Disaster Resistant Communities Group, the company contracted to conduct the exercise.

The exercise was designed to enhance agencies' disaster plans and readiness. Participants used a computer program to go through 37 scenarios following a hypothetical category 2 hurricane.

The exercise tested participants ability to stay operational during these scenarios.

"A lot of people don't have good back up plans," Floyd said. "This makes them think through all of the 'what ifs.'"

Participants entered responses to each situation and will be given feedback following the exercise, which will include corrective actions.

Floyd said there is a low probability of things like Tuesday's situation happening, but there are inexpensive ways to lessen the effects.

Floyd suggested agencies set up remote access voicemail systems that calls can be routed to if the phone lines go down.

Some systems cost as little as \$5 or \$10 a month.

The voicemail systems would have prerecorded messages and prompts that would help get information out during a disaster.

This was just one inexpensive way for agencies to prepare for a disaster situation where communication is interrupted.

Officials from the county health department, libraries, road department, tax collector's office, corrections department and several schools participated in the exercise.

The exercise is required and was funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, said Rodney Andreasen, Jackson County Emergency Management director.

Andreasen said everyone thinks disaster situations will never happen here. "Well, it happened," he said, adding it only took one line being cut.

"We're so tied to the electric world, when it's shut off it's like we're back in the dark ages," Andreasen said.

Jackson County Emergency Management was in contact with the state yesterday by satellite phone. The office was also in contact with TV stations, but there was nothing to report, Andreasen said.

Everyone in the county did a good job handling yesterday's situation, Andreasen said.

It is still not known who or what caused the cut in the line, he said.