

FLORIDA *Catholic*

Hurricane John Paul (this is only a drill)

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During the 2004 hurricane season, farmworkers in this small town in northwest Volusia County found themselves without water, housing, food and help for over a week.

Marcos Crisanto vowed that the next time would be different.

“There were people without food, without water,” said Crisanto, a member of the community response organization Grupo Comunitario de Respuesta a Desastres, which formed among area farmworkers in the wake of the disastrous summer. “Now, the hurricanes are coming again. We’re working together this time.”

The consistent annual threat of destructive hurricanes prompts Florida’s Catholic Charities offices to conduct yearly hurricane drills to test their statewide communication capabilities and disaster-relief equipment.

On July 15, three satellite communication trailers owned by Catholic Charities of Florida — also purchased as a response to the 2004 predations of Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne — underwent the “most aggressive test” of the equipment so far, according to Deacon Marcus Hepburn, emergency specialist for the Florida Catholic Conference, who ran the drill in Pierson. Similar drills took place at Providence Place Women’s Shelter in Miami, the Pastoral Center in Pensacola and at Goodwill Industries of the Big Bend in Tallahassee.

Three minutes after the team put the satellite truck into position at the Pierson Community Center at 8:40 a.m., the team had the satellite dish locked onto a signal; by 8:55, the Internet was up and running, and more than 60 drill messages had already been received.

“They did a phenomenal job,” said the Rev. David Lee Butler, a chaplain ordained through the Evangelical Episcopal Church, who evaluated the drill based on Federal Emergency Management Agency standards.

FICTIONAL STORM TESTS REAL CAPABILITIES

Conducted in the fictional aftermath of a destructive Category 4 storm Catholic Charities dubbed Hurricane John Paul, the drill not only pushed the capabilities of the truck's communications services but "widened the circle" and reach of the SatCom Hubs to involve non-Catholic, faith-based organizations.

The satellite trailers offer Internet and phone connection via a connection to a satellite orbiting the Earth. During an actual emergency, the trailers would become a hub of activity and communication for relief organizations of all sizes and denominations. Using the trailers, workers can register victims with FEMA, communicate with statewide organizations and arrange for help for local residents.

Since a hurricane affects whole communities, not just Catholics, Hepburn views the satellite communications trailers — while owned by Catholic Charities — as "community assets." A community spirit was certainly evident at the drill, where Catholic Charities executives and information technology professionals from the Diocese of St. Petersburg worked side-by-side with secular government organizations, Protestant churches and local disaster relief groups.

The principal purpose of the mid-July drill is not to "do everything right," said Deacon Hepburn, "but to learn how to do things right. We're learning a lot, and that's the purpose of the exercise."

The communications trailers are hosted by Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida, Central Florida and Miami. In the event of a Florida landfall, they would be moved to the locations where they would be the most useful, according to Alan Rettig, Catholic Charities of Central Florida regional director.

"It's a coordinated effort from the top down and from the bottom back to the top," Rettig explained. While serving as the "eyes and ears" in a hurricane-devastated area, Rettig can remain connected to statewide resources — and, thanks to the satellite, even to the files on his work computer.

Representatives from more than 200 individual relief sites wrote in to test the satellite hub's ability and capacity; responses kept the Catholic Charities team typing from the moment the drill began at 9 a.m. until the moment it stopped at noon. Among the participants were smaller Catholic social outreach sites, the American Red Cross, FEMA, Florida Interfaith Networking in Disaster, as well as the Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist disaster assistance networks.

CONNECTING VICTIMS TO FEMA

New to the drill this year was the testing of the trailers' capability to register households in affected areas directly with FEMA through the Internet. FEMA provided a "dummy page" that members of the Grupo Comunitario de Respuesta a Desastres used to "register" volunteers.

The drill uncovered some issues Catholic Charities must address before the advent of an actual hurricane, such as the need for a more powerful Internet signal router that can handle dozens of individual computer connections and break a signal through a concrete block wall.

Greg Harford, a disaster recovery specialist working for the Disaster Recovery Ministry of the Florida Conference of United Methodists, would be on-site at the hardest-hit area in the event of a hurricane. "I want to see how the United Methodists can plug in" to the resources Catholic Charities was offering, she explained.

Like Catholic Charities, Kathy Broyard of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Network would need to be in contact with Presbyterian responders in the field, and a satellite hub would be essential for that work.

Further interfaith and interdenominational cooperation is being examined, Hepburn said. "Since we've had (the trailers,) we've been working with the United Methodists and the Lutherans in having a discussion: How can we do that? I hate to say that we need a disaster, but ..."

"No disaster," joked Reddig. "The practice is just fine."

Catholic Charities' communication hubs also tie in with government response, according to Pat White of the Volusia County Emergency Management Office. Citizen-organized response groups and Catholic Charities' satellite hubs can take some of the heat off of first responders, she explained, helping her office move faster and make better decisions as to where to apply their resources.

"This lets us know better where we need to be," said White. "The (drill) Web site was organized and easy to follow. We try to put out an all-hazards approach to preparedness; the last two emergency declarations were not hurricanes. These things are just a part of living in Florida."

Partnering with Catholic Charities in Pierson was the homegrown Grupo Comunitario de Respuesta a Desastres, who were reviewing their own relief-and-response procedures. Fifteen members of the grassroots group, most of whom speak Spanish, are working towards first-responder certification and were recently honored by being made the subject of a case study at the Florida Governor's Hurricane Conference.

"The more prepared you are, the better you do when you get hit," said Lisa Doig, Grupo Comunitario president. "The better your attitude, the stronger you are."