

Hurricane Andrew (August 1992): A Wake-up Call for Emergency Preparedness

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Recently I was asked to prepare a Webinar for the Master's in Public Administration < <http://mpa.norwich.edu> > on lessons learned from Hurricane Andrew, the massive storm that devastated the Bahamas and other Caribbean islands and then hit the Florida coast with unparalleled intensity in August 1992.

The tropical storm that was to become Andrew was noticed in early August of 1992 and by August 17th, had been upgraded to the first named storm the season. Because the last major hurricane that had struck Florida was more than a generation before – in 1965 – few members of the public seemed concerned about it. But By August 22nd, Andrew was definitely a hurricane. By the time it passed the Bahamas on August 23rd, it was running at 150 mph. On that day, 700,000 residents of South Florida fled north in a disorganized panic; highways were clogged by panicked people in a desperate attempt to escape. In the meantime, Andrew reached extraordinary wind speeds near Miami – one recording topped out at 164 mph when the eye passed over Homestead, FL at 05:00 on August 24th.

In the three hours between 05:00 and 08:00 local time, Andrew moved across Florida, causing serious damage in Miami (e.g., downed trees, lamp posts and billboards) and almost completely devastated the Homestead and Florida City area a few miles to the southwest near the Everglades National Park.

The storm moved across the Gulf of Mexico on Aug 25th leaving residents in serious danger from exposure, lack of food and contaminated water. About 80,000 dwellings were destroyed; 250,000 people were homeless; a million people were without clean drinking water; and 1,500,000 people were without power. The storm reached the coast on August 26th and struck Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee with 140mph winds, although by that time it was starting to lose much of its force. Storm-spawned tornados rampaged through Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee destroying much of the sugar crop, destroying 10,000 homes and leaving 30 to 50 thousand residents homeless.

Government agencies and the private sector were faced with a massive cleanup. Unfortunately, recovery operations did not meet the expectations of the residents. Bickering among government officials irritated many observers and there were even outbreaks of looting. Although 8,000 National Guard troops and 27,000 active-duty US military personnel were eventually deployed, critics argued that the response had been poorly planned and executed. Government agencies, businesses and private citizens had simply not contemplated the need for advance planning and practice to cope with a storm of this magnitude.

A couple of years later almost to the day (August 13, 2004), Hurricane Charley found victims being supported quickly and efficiently by agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA < <http://www.fema.gov/> >). Officials in Florida and FEMA workers were generally praised < http://www.usatoday.com/weather/hurricane/2004-08-26-charley-fema_x.htm

> for the immediate distribution of ice, water and food door-to-door within the first 24 hours after the storm struck. Emergency communications were up and running at once and search-and-rescue operations were effective. The first day of the disaster saw emergency toilets, air conditioning, tents, showers and medical emergency rooms in place.

In the next articles in this series, I'll look at specific lessons learned and practical recommendations for how to prepare for regional and national emergencies.

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