

CHAPTER SIX

BEST PRACTICES

During the course of this project, through the discussions with the Florida transit agencies and the Florida DOT staff, the questionnaire responses, the review of the system emergency plans, and through the four major presentations and forums, a number of best practices were discovered. This chapter provides a listing of several of these exemplary practices so they can be shared and copied by the other Florida transit properties. The best practices are listed by common groupings and are not in any prioritized order. Occasionally, specific transit agencies are mentioned and credited with the practice to permit specific follow up, if desired. However, in many cases, several other agencies also had implemented these steps and procedures.

Best Practice #1: Good Emergency Plans

Many of Florida's public transit agencies have very complete and specific hurricane emergency plans. It should be noted that no single format was used, but all contained the critical report components detailed in Chapter Three. Quite often the plan format conforms to the style used by the local governments. The key point is that every transit agency should have a complete hurricane emergency plan.

Four agencies whose hurricane emergency plans would be excellent references are Pasco County Public Transit (PCPT), Pinellas Suncoast Transportation Authority (PSTA), Hillsborough Area Regional Transit (HARTline), and Broward County Transit (BCT).

Among the key elements included in these plans were very detailed key personnel contact lists, checklists by functional area of actions to be undertaken, and timelines for before, during and after the event.

Best Practice #2: Memorandums of Agreement or Mutual Aid Agreements

Transit agencies should, either by themselves or through their local governments, develop pre-established Mutual Aid Agreements with other key agencies within as well as with adjoining areas. These agreements will formalize and authorized assistance during storm events and facilitate financial reimbursement.

Best Practice #3: Coordination with Local School Board Transportation

Transit agencies, working through ESF-1 at their local EOC's, should establish working relationships with their local school board transportation departments to access their transportation resources (i.e., vehicles, drivers staff, fuel, etc.) for emergency response. In most cases, a local school board's bus fleet is much larger than the local transit agencies' and includes several smaller specialized vehicles. Sarasota County Area Transit and Space Coast Area Transit are excellent examples of this win-win relationship.

Best Practice #4: Clarify Staff Expectations and Duties

Each transit agency should clarify the expectations and duties of their employees during emergency storm events. If mandatory, these expectations should be part of the employee job description. If voluntary, prior commitments should be obtained to insure proper staffing for emergency response. St. John's CAC uses a "prior commitment" form that the employee signs off on providing their commitment.

Best Practice #5: Staff Training

The best-prepared emergency response plans are of limited value if the transit agency staff is unaware of what is expected of them. Emergency response plans must be living documents. Transit agencies should conduct ongoing staff training (both for new and current employees) that provides a thorough background on the agencies plan, details of their duties and responsibilities of each employee, and provides the employees with the background and necessary training to successfully implement the plan.

Polk County Transit provides an excellent example of an interactive employee training exercise that all their employees and associated agencies conduct prior to the start of each hurricane season.

Best Practice #6: Mock Training Drills

Similarly, transit agencies should conduct training drills and mock exercises both at their agency level, as well as participating in local and state EOC exercises. Such activities provide a means to assess transit agency staff's understanding of the plan, their responsibilities, and the critical interrelationships with community partners.

Best Practice #7: Education

In addition to providing staff training, each transit agency should also provide and disseminate hurricane preparedness information to employees, their families, and passengers. Adequate family emergency planning is essential to allow key personnel to be free to perform their emergency response duties.

Similarly, it is important to provide passengers with both general hurricane preparedness advice and specific directions for how to access transportation services during a storm event. This education is critical for special needs passengers requiring specialized transportation evacuation services.

Best Practice #8: Maximum Wind Level Policy

As the hurricane intensity increases, there becomes a point where it is unsafe to continue evacuation operations due to the high winds. This is especially critical for transit buses that offer a large profile for the wind and makes them susceptible to unsafe operation for the driver, the passengers and the public. To provide a balance of extending the mass evacuation as long as possible, as well as other supporting functions, most EOCs and transit agencies establish a maximum wind level threshold at which operations are ceased and the buses and support vehicles return to the garage or seek other shelter.

Responses from the transit agencies returning the questionnaire revealed the use of a range of maximum wind thresholds – from as low as 30 miles per hour (mph) sustained winds to as high as 50 mph. The most common limits were 40 and 45 mph sustained winds.

Most agencies looked to their local EOC for advice in establishing their maximum wind threshold. Some agencies used 39 mph sustained winds as their threshold since that is the definition for “tropical storm force winds.”

Unless conflicting with guidance from your local EOC, the use of 39 or 40 mph sustained winds as the threshold at which bus services should be ceased seems to be a prudent standard.

Best Practice #9: Bus Parking and Deployment Strategies

Another area that a wide variety of responses was found was the strategies that transit agencies use to park and/or deploy their bus fleet during a storm event. This is an area where there is no correct answer, but depends upon local conditions and situations. Some general guidance and practices employed included:

- Moving buses out of flood prone areas
- Using perimeter fencing to minimize the impacts of flying debris
- Parking the buses “nose-to-nose” to minimize debris striking the windshields
- Parking the buses inside structurally safe facilities where available
- Avoiding parking buses inside marginally safe facilities
- Parking the buses in front of the bus facility garage doors to protect the doors
- Tying down the engine compartment doors and front doors to keep closed during high winds and to avoid damage by wind driven rain
- Splitting your fleet between two or more locations to maximize the survival of at least part of the fleet
- Avoiding parking near light poles, trees and similar potential hazards

Best Practice #10: Fueling Fleet and Staff Vehicles Prior To A Storm Event

Although self-explanatory, it is important to remember to fuel the bus fleet and support vehicles prior to any storm event, as well as secure additional fuel for main fuel tanks. It is recommended that fueling of your fleet be added to the action lists within each agency's emergency plan.

Best Practice #11: Communication

Transit agencies must be prepared for disruptions in their communication systems during and immediately following storm events. Wind damage to radio towers and cell phone towers will disrupt reliable reception for primary communication systems. Telephone systems, especially today's more sophisticated telecommunication modules, may become non-functional. The lack of electricity may limit access to telephone communications, especially if they are routed through internal systems. Each agency should plan for redundancy and expect disruptions.

Best Practice #12: Batteries

Anticipating loss of electrical power, transit agencies should purchase extra batteries for both their portable radios and cell phones. Additionally, vehicular charger units should be purchased and/or installed to permit recharging of both radios and cell phones.

Best Practice #13: Electrical Generators

During the 2004 hurricane season, numerous communities were without electrical power for extended periods after each storm event. To allow transit agencies to resume their critical post-storm functions, access to a minimum amount of backup electrical service is essential. Backup generators should be acquired and installed. Ideally, the units should power all of the transit facility functions, but a minimum should be able to provide access to the fuel system, radio communications, and electricity to power a minimum of lights, electrical outlets, shop equipment, and functions to permit the transit agency to maintain service until normal power is returned.

Best Practice #14: Facility Protection

Transit agency facilities should be considered as essential facilities that must remain functional and accessible after any storm event. When designed, transit facilities should be hardened to maximize their storm survival as well as to provide a storm shelter for key personnel. Existing facilities should be assessed to determine weak links and proactive retrofits and supplementary actions should be programmed and undertaken on a priority basis. Storm shutters should be installed where appropriate.

Best Practice #15: Fare Suspension Policy

Transit agencies, especially fixed route systems, should consider establishing a no-fare policy that could be instituted in times of emergency response. Such a policy facilitates quicker loading, is more user friendly to many first time passengers, and eliminates the security and money handling issues related to fare collection.

Best Practice #16: Pre-Established Evacuation Routes

Transit agencies may elect to establish evacuation routes and bus assignments in advance of the storm event. This allows the system passengers (especially the transit dependent passengers) to be made aware of the transit service that will be made available. From an agency's perspective, it facilitates a quick response and implementation of the evacuation service. Broward County Transit is an excellent example of this approach.

Best Practice #17: Homeless and Transient Population Evacuation

Broward County Transit is also to be commended for taking proactive steps toward planning for the evacuation of the community's homeless population to hurricane shelters. Working with community homeless agencies, BCT has pre-established pick-up locations at which the community's homeless can congregate in an organized manner to be transported to shelters.

Best Practice #18: Pre-PSN Planning

Florida’s transit agencies, working through the EOCs ESF-1, are often responsible for or play a key part in the evacuation of “people with special needs” (PSN). Working proactively with the local EOC and ESF-6 and ESF-8, transit agencies can help add structure to the registration and evacuation routing for this vulnerable population groups. The use of the transit agency’s paratransit and CTC scheduling software can improve the all aspects of the PSN process.

Best Practice #19: Use of Volunteers on Evacuation Buses

Effective and efficient bus evacuation can be greatly enhanced by adding staff in addition to the bus operator to assist in the loading and unloading of vehicles and communication with shelters and other agencies. Several transit agencies have utilized other non-driving personnel and/or volunteers for this function. Polk County Transit has successfully developed a relationship with the local school board to have teachers volunteer to assist with the bus evacuation process.

Best Practice #20: Shelter Management Practices

Much confusion exists around the logistics of getting people to and from the evacuation shelters. Incomplete information, the lack of a central point of contact, and other associated factors lead to inefficient deployment of transit resources. A point of contact needs to be established at each shelter that will focus on the transportation needs of that shelter. This could include meeting the arriving buses, escorting the transported passengers into the shelter processing area, and arranging for return trips in an organized manner. Transit agencies should work with the shelter sites and ESF-6 to establish this contact. In some instances, it may be in the transit agency’s interest to place a staff person on site.

Best Practice #21: Compensation Policies

Public transportation personnel at all levels of the organization make personal sacrifices and go above and beyond the line of duty during storm events. Transit agencies should make sure that their compensation policies do not penalize those employees who

respond during storm events. Such policies may have a short-term economic savings for the agency through not having to pay overtime, but in the long run will negatively impact the employees' willingness to respond in future storms.

Best Practice #22: Employee Support and Assistance Programs

During and after emergency events, transit agencies must remember to support their most valuable asset – their employees. This support can come in many forms, including offering Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).

The VOTRAN bus system presents an excellent example of responding to this need. VOTRAN allows the employees and their families to use the VOTRAN facility as an emergency shelter. VOTRAN offers day care assistance and respite during extended power outages.

Best Practice #23: Debriefing

As the emergency storm events draw to a close and transit service returns to normal, it is essential to take some time to debrief the emergency response experience. Transit agencies are encouraged to have their staffs maintain logs of their actions during the storm events. At the conclusion of the event, an overall summary of actions should be compiled, key statistics of services rendered detailed, the chronological timeline of events committed to writing, and finally, an assessment of what went right, what went wrong and what lessons were learned, should be documented.

This information should then immediately be used to update the transit agency's emergency response plan (Best Practice #1).