

Hurricane "Herb" Exercise - June 5, 2008

On June 5th, Sarasota County held a Hurricane "Herb" Exercise, which was designed to test the readiness of the county's backup EOC at Wilkinson Elementary School. In the event of a category 3 or higher Hurricane threatening Sarasota, all operations would be moved from the primary to the backup EOC.

This exercise was actually several mini exercises with multiple groups running their own exercises. Besides Emergency Management, other groups running their scenarios included the Health Department, Damage Assessment, Volunteer Reception Center, NPOD's, Pet Friendly sheltering, Red Cross, and of course, amateur radio.

The backup EOC, Red Cross Chapter House, two general population shelters, and one Special Needs shelter would be up and operational and would need communications. A week before the exercise, we assigned out a couple of our jump kits that would be needed at the shelters. On Sunday, June 1st, we tested the county's Dialogic machine, and had it call our ACS members. Those who had previously volunteered to help, were given their assignments at that time.

On Wednesday, June 4th, county equipment started being transferred and set up at Wilkinson. This included computer servers, a backup 911 system, and anything else that would be needed to continue normal EOC operations at a temporary location. A backup generator to power the building was brought in and checked out. Each of the EOC functions - EOC, call center, 911, media, communications, IT, city liaisons, etc., have their own designated first floor classrooms to operate from, while sleeping quarters would be second floor classrooms.

Thursday morning, the various scenarios kicked off. The backup EOC, along with the three shelters, have dual band antennas permanently mounted with the feed line coming down into a first floor classroom. When our folks arrived at their assigned locations, all they had to do was go to the correct room, hook up the coax to their jump kit ... and they were on the air, ready to go! A second jump kit with TNC, laptop, and portable antenna, was set up at the backup EOC to run Winlink.

The Red Cross and the two general population shelters - one in Sarasota and one in North Port - were assigned one repeater, while the EOC, the Special Needs shelter, and our MARS liaison, were assigned another. If Red Cross or EOC needed to talk, they would go to each others frequency or send Winlink messages directly to each other. When not handling messages between locations, we checked simplex capabilities between all the locations. While not readable at the backup EOC and it's low antenna, the Red Cross station was able to establish simplex contact with the shelter in North Port ... a distance of almost 22 miles.

Once the EOC staff had evacuated the "primary" EOC and arrived at the backup location, we generated an NTS message stating the backup location was operational, and passed that to our MARS liaison. He then forwarded that traffic on the MARS network up to the State EOC in

Tallahassee. This was the first time we've worked with MARS.

After about 2 hours, we shut down our portion of the exercise and released our folks and had them come to the backup EOC, where they were fed lunch.

After lunch, we discussed briefly how everything worked out. For the most part, our portion of the exercise, went well. We paired up our experienced operators with those folks participating in their first exercise, and that worked out well. Our newer folks did a great job. Besides installation and testing, this was the first time we have activated the new antenna installations at the shelters along with our jump kits. No one reported having any problems getting into their classrooms or difficulties getting things hooked up and running.

We did have one technical glitch with no audio from an external speaker. Once we pulled the external speaker cable from the back of the radio, it could hear again. We also ran into a minor problem with a personal radio being used not being preprogrammed with the working frequencies and running a European "tone burst". There still seems to be an Internet and/or Winlink issue ... some messages arrived a couple hours after being sent while some apparently were never received at all.

During the exercise, an estimated 350 to 400 people were working at the backup EOC, with a few hundred more working exercises throughout the County. 911 service was switched over to the backup EOC, where they handled actual calls and dispatched for several hours. The county's call center, was also switch over and they handled calls from the public. Power was shut down to the building for a brief period, as the switchover to the backup generator was made, but everything running on backup UPS's remained operational during the switchover.

All in all, this exercise was a very interesting learning experience for all involved.

Amateurs participating in this exercise, include:

Bob, K9SRQ - Wilkinson EOC
Darren, KC0NGR - Wilkinson EOC (first exercise)
Ed, K8DSS - Red Cross
Mary, KI4VKY - Red Cross (first exercise)
Al, KI4YEH - Special Needs shelter (first exercise)
Roxena, W1ROX - Special Needs shelter
Eddie, K4JP - Brookside shelter
Tom, KJ4BBH - Brookside shelter (2nd exercise)
Al, N8NZ - Heron Creek Shelter
Joe, WA1VNP - Heron Creek Shelter
Bill, WA2JWL - MARS liaison (first exercise with us)
Dave, K9DAV - Assignments
Ron, WD4AHZ - Wilkinson EOC

Ron, WD4AHZ
EC, Sarasota County ACS