

NEWS

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County Fire staff departs tonight to assist Gulfport

A four-member County Fire Incident Management Team will depart late tonight for Gulfport, Mississippi, to assist the Gulf Coast city in its recovery from Hurricane Gustav and help the community prepare for future disasters.

The team's primary mission will be to support the city's efforts to create a written Incident Action Plan that would include a scenario based around a Category 4 or greater hurricane.

"We are following through on a commitment the county made following Hurricane Katrina to help Gulfport in times of need," said Board of Supervisors Vice Chairman Gary Ovitt, who has maintained contact with Gulfport Mayor Brent Warr. "Gulfport has made the same commitment, having sent fire officials to assist San Bernardino County during last year's wildfires."

San Bernardino County Fire Chief Pat Dennen said the team is heading to Gulfport with three objectives: "Support the people of Gulfport during their greatest time of need, follow through with the promise we made to support city infrastructure after a major incident, and lastly, develop an Incident Action Plan that can be used by the city in the future."

The Incident Action Plan will be shared by Gulfport and the County of San Bernardino, and will contain specific information about each jurisdiction, including phone numbers for key personnel and maps of the city and county with Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) coordinates for important public facilities.

"In preparation for a major disaster such as a hurricane or earthquake, we recommend that people have an out-of-state contact they can call after the incident," Dennen explained. "This is the same concept, just on a larger scale. If Gulfport has a disaster they can call San Bernardino County, and we will already have a copy of their plan, phone numbers for key personnel, and maps of the city with GPS coordinates. If we have a disaster, Gulfport will have our information."

"This may be the model the rest of the nation follows for disaster planning," Dennen said.

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Members of the team heading to Gulfport are Division Chief George Corley, Division Chief Tim Wessel, Division Chief Alan Stocker, and Battalion Chief Gary Bush. It is anticipated that they will be in Gulfport through Friday and return Saturday.

The county's relationship with Gulfport began shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, as the county sought to provide direct relief to a fellow local government agency, and became aware of Gulfport's plight.

The county provided nearly \$70,000 worth of assistance to Gulfport, including more than \$42,000 in gift cards donated by county employees to help the people of Gulfport purchase clothing, home repair items, and other essentials. The county also organized donations of surplus vehicles, power tools, generators, and other recovery tools from cities within the county and rented trucks and deployed staff to deliver the items to Gulfport in Katrina's wake.

Three weeks after Katrina the county conducted a fact-finding mission to Gulfport. Disaster responders from the county and several cities spent time with their counterparts in Gulfport, and much of what was learned during the mission was incorporated into the county's disaster plans.

The Board of Supervisors also passed a resolution formally adopting Gulfport, and Vice Chairman Ovitt has continued leading the charge to assist in Gulfport's recovery by organizing economic development efforts for the city.

The county's relief efforts were honored with a 2006 National Association of Counties Achievement Award and the 2006 Inland Empire Red Cross Humanitarian Award.