



SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

**Horizon Bay communities executed thorough disaster plans
and learned even more about dealing with crisis
when Hurricane Ike hit last fall**

By Whitney Redding

THE IDEAL CRISIS READINESS PLAN FOR ANY SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY IS ONE THAT IS SO THOROUGH AND RELEVANT THAT IT HAS A LONG SHELF LIFE—BUT LEAVING EVEN THE BEST PLAN ON

THE SHELF TOO LONG CAN MAKE IT INEFFECTIVE. To be most effective, crisis plans should be works in progress. If plans don't get exercised periodically, or at least reviewed critically, providers risk losing disciplined control of their response during an actual crisis, of having staff members who are unacquainted with their roles, or of having to make expensive back-end fixes to return to business after the crisis.

Assisted Living Executive recently asked a provider that has had repeated exposure to natural disasters, Tampa, Florida-based **Horizon Bay Retirement Communities**, to walk it through an actual crisis—specifically, last September's Hurricane Ike. Leaders at the company share their planning strategies, impart their lessons learned during Hurricane Ike and previous storms, and offer advice for the next time residents are suddenly in harm's way.

The Three S's

Ike had a devastating impact on several Horizon Bay residences in Houston. Hundreds of residents had to be evacuated, an entire roof was lost, dining rooms were inoperable for weeks, and dozens of apartments were seriously damaged. But it also was a breakthrough experience for the company. Having honed their procedures based on responses to past storms, the company successfully mobilized a prearranged disaster team that was on site well before Hurricane Ike made landfall.

"This is the first time we put together a prearranged disaster team and had it really work," says **Tiffany Cobern**, senior vice president of operations. "Because we took a proactive approach, we already had assigned roles for a crew of 18 people who flew to Houston and immediately began supporting our community teams."

Horizon Bay's master crisis plan resides in the office of **Michael Ulm**, vice president of human resources. Every May, just before hurricane season, Ulm puts together a multidisciplinary disaster preparedness team of about 25 people. During a series of conference calls, the team works its way through a long checklist, including questions like: Do the various regions have all

the supplies they would need in a crisis? Where are the mobile generators? Who will be responsible for what?

"It's the same prep for any storm," Ulm says. "It's the three S's: Supplies, security, and staffing."

During the run-up to a hurricane or blizzard, Ulm is the company weatherman, watching the radars and hosting frequent conference calls with executive directors in the storm's path. When a community does get hit by a storm, Ulm monitors the situation remotely and helps coordinate the relief effort that will follow.

When Hurricane Ike started barreling

FAST FORWARD

- Expect a community's crisis team to stay in place for several days after the event. Those staff members—not corporate execs—will dictate when it's the right time to get back to business as usual.
- Plan and contract for post-storm cleanup and repairs now, or risk even longer waits for getting residents back to their normal living arrangements after the storm.
- Executive directors and other community-level staff must be prepared for communicating with anxious residents, who most likely will want to return to the community before it's ready for them.

toward Houston last September, six Horizon Bay communities were in its path. The first judgment call was whether to evacuate any of them.

Horizon Bay wanted to avoid reliving Hurricane Rita, when a mandatory widespread evacuation resulted in everyone leaving town at the same time, which quickly clogged local roadways. During Rita, road trips that should have taken 45 minutes took excruciatingly long. Still, evacuation usually beats the alternative, Cobern explains. "Evacuation is always the best option for residents because we don't know how long it will be before we get the power back."

In preparation for Hurricane Ike, Horizon Bay advised all of its Houston-area residents to evacuate voluntarily. It held town hall-style meetings a week before the storm and disseminated a three-page flyer on hurricane preparation. In the end, only one community—the Terrace at Clear Lake—was subject to mandatory evacuation, and most of those residents were already on their way out when the mandate was announced at 7:30 a.m. on the day before the storm.

"By the time I got down there at 3 in the afternoon, they had 80 percent of people evacuated already," recalls **Lee Warrick**, regional director of facilities management. "By 9 p.m., everyone was gone."

Most Clear Lake residents went home with relatives; only a handful had to be transported to another Horizon Bay community. Before evacuation, residents cleared window areas and covered cherished belongings with plastic. The sales and marketing team established a 24-hour hotline so evacuees and families could receive running updates of the storm and answers to their questions.

While Houston area staff was busy moving residents out, Ulm's disaster team was busy making plans to move in. About a dozen executive directors, maintenance directors, nurses, and others who descended on Houston from across the country were selected in part because of their experience with previous storms. They met at a hotel two days after the storm, where Regional Vice President **Tommy Wood** set up a temporary headquarters.

Prepared for Ike

Warrick, a maintenance director, and two maintenance employees volunteered to stay at Clear Lake during the storm. Every

apartment was searched multiple times to ensure no residents or pets were left behind, which was confirmed by a blue tag on each door. Elevators, kitchen equipment, and all 600 PTAC (packaged terminal air conditioner) units were disconnected to prevent damage from power surges.

As the skeleton crew hunkered down for the night, violent winds clocked at 140 miles per hour tore apart the roof, blew down trees, and twisted the steel roofs of carports like rags. Electrical power was lost within a couple of hours, not to be re-

gained for two weeks. Over the Internet, company officials watched as a security camera at Clear Lake showed palm trees blowing sideways.

During the storm, Warrick kept in touch with his company by cell phone, with a satellite phone as backup. While repairs would have to wait until the storm passed, his crew was able to report damage and pass along real-time reassurances to residents who called the company hotline with concerns about their apartments.

After the storm, the roof at Clear Lake was all but destroyed, and 140 of 270 apartments were badly damaged, particularly where rain had penetrated the roof on the top floor.

Meanwhile, staff members at other Horizon Bay properties stayed overnight and walked the corridors in teams, knocking on doors, handing out water and flashlights, and checking on residents.

After the storm, the roof at Clear Lake was all but destroyed, and 140 of 270 apartments were badly damaged, particularly where rain had penetrated the roof on the top floor. "There were more shingles on the ground than on the roof," Warrick says.

Cleanup had begun before the storm hit, when Horizon Bay confirmed that its contractors, including disaster recovery specialists, were lined up and ready to go. There was no need to collect bids and no danger of price gauging. Thus contractors started working on the roof at Clear Lake the morning after the storm, while the rest of the neighborhood was still dazed.

As a result of pre-hurricane preparations, Horizon Bay's Tampa office also had provided a thorough Excel spreadsheet to all affected communities for tracking everything from discretionary expenses to labor time lost. "If you asked, 'What is the most amazing thing you guys did,' I'd have to say it was getting people back within a three-week period," Warrick says.

Collateral Damages

Other Horizon Bay communities also experienced extensive damage and prolonged outages. The voluntary evacuation—as well as a decision to prepare meals for the whole weekend before the storm hit Friday—turned out to be prescient for the Terrace at Memorial City, since the use of both dining rooms was lost for more than a month and full power was not restored for eight days, says **Calvin Brown**, executive director. By the time the storm hit, only

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about 150 of 490 Memorial City residents were still on the premises, as well as a handful of evacuees from Clear Lake.

After the storm, the challenge at Memorial City was to serve residents and conduct repairs without power, while communicating with evacuated residents eager to return. A generator provided power to the kitchen, while residents ate in a makeshift outside dining area. The staff gave out bottled water and made a nurse available.

While contractors quickly got to work

on repairs, Horizon Bay chose not to send in a large contingent of staff reinforcements right away. Rather, the company waited a couple of days, until the community's own highly invested team was ready to relinquish control.

"That was a lesson we learned from Rita," says Ulm. "The executive directors won't go home for two or three days after the storm. It is their ship."

Each affected community could count on receiving one disaster team member as an "anchor," as well as two or three

"floaters" who checked with Wood at his hotel every day to receive their daily assignment. Ulm says such flexibility is critical. "Don't assume where you're going to go before you get there. Get to one location and then coordinate," he advises.

They also had learned from 2004 hurricanes in Florida that it is better to send in a small, experienced multidisciplinary team than a well-meaning multitude with little or no experience in actually running a community. And, perhaps as a result, Horizon Bay did not experience any of the employee retention issues that some companies experienced after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"If anything, it galvanized the culture. It's a very expensive team-building exercise," Ulm explains. "When times are tough, it makes the difference—is this just a company, or is this a family?"

Horizon Bay also established a hurricane relief fund that raised \$16,000, which the company then matched, and sent checks to employees in need. They also recognized people who had gone well out of their way to lead and encourage the staff.

"No one was hurt in Clear Lake, but the executive director every day would get people together to chant 'We spiked Ike'," Ulm notes. Fittingly, employees received a railroad spike engraved with "We spiked Ike, September 2008." □

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