

Lessons from Katrina

With New Orleans District Fire Chief Gary Savelle

Charlie Dickinson – CD

Gary Savelle – GS

Fire Equipment Protection

Caption: Charlie Dickinson. Acting U.S. Fire Administrator.

CD: At a crisis comes opportunity. America's fire departments can learn by studying and analyzing how the New Orleans Fire Department handled Katrina. The fire department needs to protect itself. From buildings to apparatus to equipment, all those will be needed after the disaster to ensure that they can serve the public that's going to need their help desperately. I think you'll learn a lot as you listen to District Chief Gary Savelle tell the New Orleans Fire Department's story.

Caption: Emergency Plan to Relocate Equipment.

Caption: Gary Savelle. District Chief New Orleans Fire Dept.

GS: Well, I had us a plan...treated us very well all the way up to the storm and actually through the storm. You know, because we had experienced...we had experience with hurricanes before. Never catastrophic like this. So we actually had a good foundation and a good base what to do to prepare for a hurricane and the plan worked really well for that. I actually lost 24 engine houses out of 34 due to flooding, but we only lost three pieces of equipment because we had a plan to get them elevated, to get them out the water in case of rising water and all of that work. None of our personnel was injured. During the storm event, we had a place for every fire company to go to as our last refuge. So all of that worked really, really well. Some of our apparatus were isolated, you know, because the rising water came up around them, they were on high ground, and some of them were isolated. But a lot of them we had staged along the river. And so we got a lot of apparatus back in service really, really fast. So, in the initial stages where there was fires on dry land we could get to, we did have...we were able to effectively fight those fires. The only ones we couldn't get to were the ones in deep water, which the apparatuses couldn't go into that deep of water anyway.

Caption: Decontamination.

GS: Well, everybody got a lot of shots, for one. As soon as the Health Department could get up and running, they gave a lot of shots. But we really even encouraged decontamination. We started decontaminating the apparatus, then it would go into the flood waters, then it would come back into our decontamination zone, then we would wash it off. When it got back to base, we'd do a more thorough decontamination. Just to try to make sure everybody washed their hands, we had hand washing stations. Just tried to use as many sanitary precautions as possible. Luckily, we never had any kind of disease come through our camp and so that was really good.

Caption: Your Plan is a Living Document.

CS: Well the “Hurricane Guidelines”, built into it is that it has to be revisited every year because if you write a plan, you don’t revisit it, after five or six years it becomes irrelevant, all right. So, built into the plan, the first – June first – of each year, it has to be revisited. Every last refuge, all of our contacts, everything is updated into it. And it keeps us very relevant. And so even the areas of last refuge we used for Katrina are no longer relevant for this season. A lot of them changed. It’s because it’s constantly updated and upgraded all the time. And it keeps us prepared and rearing to go. So, yes, I would say we are prepared.

Caption: Be Prepared to Lose All Communication.

GS: And it was a lot of redundancy built into our radio system. And dispatches...dispatch was actually on the very edge of the flood zone, where the flood was. That’s right off of one of the ridges; it’s called Mary Ridge, that goes through New Orleans. And, of course, we lost city power; we lost that during the storm. We had a backup generator that kicked on and the radios were still fine and then as the water – as the flood water – started rising, they had to go ahead and evacuate fire alarm. And they left it, the dispatchers, but the emergency generator was running and everything was still okay. We didn’t need the dispatchers there to keep the radios running. Eventually, the flood waters got deep enough where it drowned the backup generator. So when that conked out, we actually had a backup generator to that on top of a high rise building in the central business district in New Orleans in the Energy Center. And that generator was kicked on automatically and was running. What we didn’t know was a piece of debris...was atop of a high rise building, a piece of debris flew through a radiator, caused a leak, and caused the generator to overheat. And when it overheated, it went ahead and shut down. And the backup to that generator was batteries. And those batteries then took over the charge for about three to five hours, I’m not quite sure how long it was, but we were running on battery power for a while. But once the batteries ran out, well then that was it. So by that evening, the day of the storm, we lost all of our communications. And there was a mutual aid channel that we could use, a national mutual aid channel that we tried to go to, but everybody in the city, everybody in the west bank of neighboring municipalities, everybody was trying to use two channels. And it was just too much. We just couldn’t communicate and talk on it. So what we’d do was we basically had regrouped back at headquarters and then at night we went back to Algiers base. And we’d go there. And there was no night operations the first couple days because we didn’t have communications. And then first thing in the morning, we would take the fire department, we would drive on top of the Mississippi River Bridge, the big bridge that goes over the river, and down into New Orleans and stage there because we were up high and could get a good view of the city. And if we could see smoke come up, we would send engines down to go see if they could get to it to fight the fires. So we worked in little independent pockets until we could get communications back. When you lose electricity, you lose communications, you go back to the Flintstones.

Firefighter’s Family Protection

Caption: Charlie Dickinson. Acting U.S. Fire Administrator.

CD: Out of crisis comes opportunity. America's fire departments can learn by studying and analyzing how the New Orleans Fire Department handled Katrina. The New Orleans Fire Department District Fire Chief Gary Savelle will share insight into how your department can prepare now for the following during a disaster. Family protection. Nothing's more important to a firefighter that's faced with a disaster to know that his family or loved ones are accountable and they are safe. It's paramount that the departments understand how important that is to have a plan to do that. I think you will learn a lot as you listen to District Chief Gary Savelle tell the New Orleans Fire Department's story.

Caption: The Family Evacuation Plan.

Caption: Gary Savelle. District Chief New Orleans Fire Dept.

GS: Three words: Evacuate, evacuate, evacuate. We really encourage our families to evacuate. Because if the families aren't at their homes waiting to be evacuated, then the firefighters that are there, they know their family is safe. Their families in Shreveport, they're in Houston, they're in Atlanta, they're fine. And so they can work. So that takes a big load off your mind when you're working in a catastrophic environment like that and you know your family is safe. The only thing the family needs to do is have a plan. Don't wait until the storm's knocking on your doorstep. When I say by have a plan, you want to take all your important papers, have them in a box – insurance papers, deeds, titles – you know, all of them, and the most important things – birth certificates, passports – you know, whatever. Have that where you can quickly put your hands on it – family photos, things like that – just what's important, you know. You're not going on vacation, but you just want to take the most important things with you. And a few changes of clothes. Usually say three to five days of clothes and food. But the best thing to do is to get that together and evacuate and leave the area, especially if you are in a flood prone area. You know, one of the old sayings with hurricanes is "you hide from the wind but you run from the water". It's the water that kills people in hurricanes, mainly. So, if you don't think you're going to flood and you decide to ride it out, just think about this stuff, you know, and evacuate. You might make it through the storm, but then you have to make it through the aftermath. Now, my house in New Orleans, it took approximately four months before we got electricity. Now, is that something you want to deal with? You know, why stay in your house if you're not going to have electricity for three or four weeks after a storm? You're going to have anyway, so you'd just as soon leave before the storm comes and just protect yourself. So that's what we really stressed to all of our families, is to evacuate.

Caption: Personal Evacuation Form.

GS: Now, we actually have a Personal Evacuation Form every firefighter must fill out. And it's where his family was going to be evacuated, his or her family was going to evacuate to. If they're going to go to an aunt or uncle's in Shreveport, we want to know their phone number, their address, how to contact them so just in case something was to happen to that member, let's say after the event we need to contact their family, we

want to have a way of doing it. And we even want to know what they're doing with their pets, any special medications the firefighter needs, in case we get isolated again we can give that to the Health Department They all made sure they had that medication for them, so we've gotten a lot more comprehensive since Katrina but it's the...let's say it's one of the lessons that you live and learn. My wife, I was actually talking to the day before the hurricane and she was up in Shreveport and playing Texas Hold 'Em Poker and they were having a good time so I knew that she was okay. Well then when the storm was actually hitting, I was talking to her on a cell phone early on in the storm when we still had communication, and this was before the levee broke. And then after the levee broke and everything started going to hell in a hand basket, well then that's when we lost cell phone communications, all that communications. So I wasn't able to talk to her until like five days later and she was watching everything on TV. It was okay for me because I knew she was okay, but she was actually in Shreveport, northern Louisiana, watching all of this on TV and she didn't know if I was okay. And so it wasn't until we got a chance to talk to her, you know, so that was pretty hard on her. And that's something that we try and address with that Personal Evacuation Form.

Caption: Complacency Kills.

GS: If you're complacent, then you're going to get caught short. You're going to be surprised and then you're going to be caught in an attic, in a roof, in a water like a lot of people in New Orleans were. They just didn't think it was going to happen to them, you know. They rode out hurricanes before, "I can ride out this one." Now, this one was different, you know, so "do you feel lucky?" I mean, that's how you ask yourself. I mean, you want to ride on out, you know? I don't want to take that chance with my life. Or my family's life. So, that's why I won't get complacent.

Firefighter Self Protection

Caption: Charlie Dickinson. U.S. Fire Administrator.

CD: Perhaps the most important thing is to protect the firefighters themselves to ensure that you have a relocation plan for them so that they can survive the disaster itself so when it is finally mitigated so that they can go to work to help the community they serve. Out of crisis comes opportunity. America's fire departments can learn by studying and analyzing how the New Orleans Fire Department handled Katrina. I think you'll learn a lot as you listen to District Chief Gary Savelle tell the New Orleans Fire Department's story.

Caption: Areas of Last Refuge.

Caption: Gary Savelle. District Chief New Orleans Fire Dept.

GS: The areas of last refuge, again, is part of our plan before the hurricane season. We go out and we establish these contacts with all these different businesses or buildings in the area. And when our base camp was in Algiers, Engine 17. Just happens to be next door, it was that Little Sisters of the Poor; it was that retirement home for nuns. And the captain went over there before hurricane season and talked to Mother Superior, established a relationship, explained what we were looking to do in the event of a

catastrophic storm. And Mother Superior agreed to allow for firemen to ride out a storm in their building. And that number eventually swelled to 1250, but...But.... Yeah, all of those agreements were in place. They were just handshake agreements, but they were all in place before the hurricane season started. We didn't wait until there was a big storm sitting on our doorstep and then we were going to go run about where we were going to put our people. We wanted all of those things already taken care of prior to hurricane season. And that's part of the plan. The handshake agreements worked because, again, part of the plan is if the city comes under hurricane watch, we go back and confirm with the area of last refuge like, "Hey, remember we talked two months ago," you know. And it worked...it worked well for us, but FEMA didn't really like that because there wasn't a land use agreement contract already in place. And so when it came to reimburse the people for the usage of their property, I think that became a big headache for FEMA. So, the handshake agreement, even though it worked for us, we try not to do that now. We go through a legal department to try and get land use agreements with all of the areas of the last refuge. Every year, every year we have to go and reestablish. In fact, the Little Sisters of the Poor, that building was sold or that building is in the process of being sold, the buyer's through due diligence now so we are unable to use that building for this hurricane season. So we had to find another one. So every year it's revisited.

Caption: Boats.

GS: So we never had any boats at all for Katrina. And since then, the Leary Foundation has actually purchased flatboats and actually given them to the New Orleans Fire Department. I think it was 16, 18 flatboats. So now the fire department's going to have flatboats that we can take to our areas of last refuge. We have to go there, first off to save our people if they need to get out, but if not they can start effecting rescues in surrounding areas to save people. So that's been a tremendous help.

Caption: Selecting Areas of Last Refuge.

GS: And areas of last refuge had to meet certain criteria. And one of it was it had to be at least three stories high and that was because of flooding. That was the main thing we were considered about. We always said you run from the wind.... I mean, you run from the water, you hide from the wind. But we can't run from the water because we have to stay in the city to respond all the way to the last minute. And then once the events over to start responding again. So we can't run. We have to be there. But we also have to stay if the city floods. So to mitigate that and to protect our people, we evacuate up. So we make sure we elevate it at least three stories high. Another criteria is it has to be a center core type build, which is a...the strength of the building is in the center hallways and the elevators. It's like a modern high rise building. That way...you don't want to be next to the windows because, like I said, in my hotel room, the window never blew out but the whole room got soaked with water because the wind...the window was bowing so much because the pressure of winds that the water was going around the window pane. So you don't want to be in that room in case the window does blow out. You don't want to be injured. So what you can do is with these center core buildings, the personnel can go into the stairwells and the center core and then they're protected by

all the cinderblock. And that's the strength of the building and so they can ride out a really strong storm in that center core. And that's why we're required to do that.

Caption: What to Pack.

GS: And we have an itemized list of what we recommend the firefighters to bring in. Believe it or not, that's toiletries, insect repellent, sunscreen. Believe it or not, that was very important. And food and water was also part of it. Now we give them a lot more support with MREs, the meals ready to eat, and bottled water. But still, you want to make sure you have water and clothes. But sunscreen and insect repellent was pretty important.

Caption: Firefighting Amid Civil Unrest.

GS: Well, it became very scary. Okay. When the social order breaks down and someone's walking down the street and you don't know if they're a good guy or a bad guy, it's a very unsettling feeling, it really is. And so what we had to do was we could only go in convoys or in groups if we had to go out on a mission. So, say we had to go do something, you just couldn't send one engine out because of the safety. I mean, safety became paramount for our people. And so it definitely hampered our rescue attempts and actually suppression activities because we were going into areas where there was actually gunfire. And so we actually had firemen that were armed. This is before...this is early on in the incident before the mutual aid got there, and the military, and everybody else showed up. We had firemen that had their own weapons and would actually stand guard while we were fighting fires, it was very unsettling to see that. One thing I can say though, I don't know of any fireman that was shot at or you know fired upon. We had a lot of gunshots. We think a lot of it may have been people trying to get our attention, you know, to go to rescue them with a boat. Personally, though, if you're going to fire a gun in the air, I don't think I'm going to go get you, you know, because it's a little unsettling. But they.... But I don't know of any fireman that were actually fired upon.

Caption: A Built-In Support Group.

GS: And then the support group with each other because...was really very important because, remember, probably about 80 percent of firefighters lost their homes in this event while they were still working the event. And they knew they lost their homes during this event. And they couldn't contact their family. But what happens was we would all regroup every night back at the base camp at Algiers and so we would all sit around and talk and so it was a good support group because, you know, nobody knows more about what you're going through than other firefighters. Especially when the experience is, you know, he's losing his home, too, and everybody is going through the same thing. It was a really good support group there. And it sort of...it just happened that way. But it worked out really good until eventually we could get in touch with the families. And it was a scramble, you know, when cell phones weren't working. Some guys couldn't get in touch with their families for a week. I couldn't get in touch with my wife for five days, you know. So, yeah, it was very difficult. Very difficult to work through

that. But when you have no communications, there's almost nothing you can do, you know. You just got to stay focused from the job.