



Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Parole Division

The Parole Division supervises offenders released from prison on parole or mandatory supervision to complete their sentences in Texas communities. Parole officers monitor an offender's compliance with conditions of release and society's laws, applying supervision strategies based on an assessment of each offender's risks and needs. Offenders must report to parole officers and comply with release conditions established by the Board of Pardons and Paroles, and violations can result in increased supervision, arrest or re-incarceration.

Parole Division facilities are located throughout the state, including along the entire length of the Gulf Coast. Pamela Thielke, director of TDCJ's Parole Division, described how her staff deals with the inevitable hurricane strike. "Preparation and practice drills help ensure that parole staff, our clients and our equipment are protected during extreme weather events. Each spring we make sure parole offices have adequate food and supplies on hand in the event of a storm. We make sure everyone knows that, if floods are expected, they should move their hard drives off the floor and state vehicles to a safer place."

Every year, before the beginning of hurricane season, Parole identifies clients who may have to be evacuated during a storm. This includes offenders who are monitored, sex offenders, and those residing in facilities

who have no alternate housing options. This list is updated every two weeks during the hurricane season. Before the hurricane was over, hundreds of parolees and probationers were evacuated from halfway-houses, treatment centers and from their homes in the community.

and Parole continued to have daily teleconferences among regional management, myself and my deputies, and anyone else we needed to add, such as other agency divisions." Parole Division deputies were in the central command center in Huntsville if they hadn't been dispatched to a remote location.



Hurricane Harvey flood damage at a TDCJ parole office.

During the storm, TDCJ division directors worked from the emergency command center in Huntsville. Thielke noted "That worked out really well, being right there, at the front-line, to oversee operations. We were having daily teleconferences with agency leadership,

Constant communications allowed for effective collaboration and response. Teams of Parole employees, led by a team leader, reported directly to a division deputy to tell them how response actions were working. Cell phones, laptops and chargers were kept

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on hand to take to evacuation sites. Parole managers kept updated staff emergency contact lists available at all times for any emergency that may have occurred. That way, even when an unexpected emergency comes up, supervisors can account for and communicate with staff members. Agency cell phones proved especially useful for taking photos of extensive and detailed client evacuation lists, which could then be exchanged electronically.

Thielke described how Parole worked to make sure all clients were accounted for during the complex evacuation process. "We worked with CID and Private Facilities to set up a protocol where nobody would be evacuated from a prison unit until the parole director, parole deputies and CID chain-of-command all knew that the person was leaving and who they were leaving with, so there was no chance of losing a client. As issues came up, we were constantly evaluating what people needed. If clients got restless, we came up with ways to keep them occupied at evacuation sites."

Parole officers, assisted by Reentry and Integration Division staff, helped transport many offenders, so most of the agency's large transportation vehicles would be available for other uses. When possible, Parole staff even coordinated with clients' family members so they could come and pick them up. Due to Hurricane Harvey, more than 970 parolees and probationers were transported and temporarily housed in safe areas around the state, including several secure CID facilities away from the coast, where they were kept separate from the unit's regular inmate population and safe from the storm's reach.

Parole staff came in from areas unaffected by the storm to help supervise clients who had been evacuated to a secure facility in a safe area, and they worked in coordination with correctional officers to make sure potential problems were quickly identified and resolved. Parole also rotated different staff teams to help keep everyone fresh and alert to attend to their client's needs.

Even during a disaster such as a hurricane, offender release processing must continue and Parole worked with other agency divisions to continue these operations. Releases to Harris County were suspended during the flood event, but release operations continued elsewhere. Thielke noted, "We were able to adapt because we've had experience in working through other, smaller weather events. We deal with these problems all the time with smaller storms and floods, even a broken down bus. We know how to respond. Staff already has been through these kinds of adverse situations." She continued, "Adaptability is the key, we stress it beginning in the training academy, that we have to be flexible and adaptable, because we're dealing with people, human nature, and you can't always predict what they will do and how they'll react."

Almost all Parole facilities damaged by Hurricane Harvey are back in use, though some cosmetic fixes are still being made. The number of employee response teams has been reduced, but daily meetings and monthly video conferences are still held to help reestablish a sense of normalcy.

Thielke underscored how the division managed to continue parole operations despite

the widespread catastrophic effects of Hurricane Harvey. "Preparation and practice make up the foundation of an effective disaster response. Every spring we go back and review emergency response drills, so everyone knows and understands their responsibilities." She went on to praise the work done by Parole Division employees, to include the collaboration with other divisions and agencies, saying "They stepped up and performed at high levels with very little needed direction. Even under difficult circumstances, our employees don't need a lot of direction to accomplish the division's mission."

Thielke summed up her observations by noting "Good communication and strong leadership are essential. Our agency's leadership works hard to make sure we have the right people in the right position. If you do that, all divisions will be able to make the right decisions. I credit my deputies and all Parole staff for understanding the agency's action plan and their individual duties, for making good preparations to deal with a record-setting hurricane, and for identifying potential evacuees early in the game. Unfortunately, we've had prior experiences dealing with disruptions due to extreme weather, so the practice allows us to get better and better." ▲