2011 Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)
Rodeo fire suppression activity.
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Even though the hurricane season was quiet for the Texas Gulf Coast, 2011 was still a busy year for the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HCOHSEM). Through its many activations, exercises and outreach programs, HCOHSEM managed to enhance its disaster preparedness and contingency plans and improved its dissemination of public information.

HCOHSEM worked closely with the public and private sectors to develop new and innovative ways to respond to the wide range of emergencies that threaten our region.

The persistent drought presented HCOHSEM with wildfire dangers not seen in more than half a century. In response, HCOHSEM drew upon lessons learned and reached out to emergency responders to mobilize available resources to help combat the fires affecting our region.

In 2011, HCOHSEM was recognized by the Emergency Management Association of Texas for providing timely and accurate emergency information through its Regional Joint Information Center (JIC) website and for its Business Commodities Plan, designed to help support local government response efforts during an emergency.

HCOHSEM has made great strides in using new and emerging technologies and concepts to protect the safety and well-being of our residents. New social media initiatives, as well as a continued commitment to engage all of our stakeholders in training programs and contingency plans give our region a solid foundation that will help us forge ahead into 2012.

Sincerely,

County Judge Ed Emmett, Director
Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management
HCOHSEM is located at the Houston TranStar building in west Houston.
The Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HCOHSEM) will be a national model of best practices in emergency planning, preparation, response and recovery.

HCOHSEM will help prepare, safeguard and protect the residents and property of Harris County from the effects of disasters through effective planning, preparation, response and recovery activities. To accomplish this mission, HCOHSEM will:

- Develop, maintain and coordinate a comprehensive emergency management plan.
- Activate and staff an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to coordinate and support efforts to respond to, and recover from, emergencies and disasters.
- Develop and assist in the delivery of effective public outreach programs.
- Collect, provide and disseminate information for elected officials, the media, our residents, partners and other stakeholders.
- Train, educate and prepare for emergencies through the development and delivery of effective classes, drills and exercises.
Port of Houston. Courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard (USCG).
With a population of more than 4.1 million, Harris County is the most populous county in the State of Texas and the third most populous county in the United States. Harris County consists of 34 cities, including Houston, the nation’s fourth-largest city. Nearly 1.6 million people live in unincorporated Harris County and rely on the county to be the primary provider of basic government services. Harris County has 54 fire departments, more than 125 law enforcement agencies, 22 major watersheds and more than 1,200 municipal utility districts.

Proximity to the Gulf of Mexico makes Harris County vulnerable to hurricanes, however it has seen its share of other incidents. The Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management (HCOHSEM) is ready to activate its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) for any natural or man-made disaster. In the past, the EOC has activated for emergencies that have included weather events, health related events, hazardous materials, industrial accidents and, most recently, wildfires.

HCOHSEM is on alert 24/7 and always ready to exercise its basic emergency management plans. The agency is on constant watch and meets the growing expectations of public safety officials and the population it serves by:

- Coordinating and maintaining comprehensive emergency management plans
- Successfully activating the EOC to coordinate and support local, state and national efforts in response to emergencies
- Hosting and participating in dynamic public education and outreach programs
- Timely and accurately informing residents, elected officials, the media and important partners and stakeholders
- Vigorously working together with partners in comprehensive classes, drills and exercises to prepare for and respond to all emergency situations

Harris County hosted numerous meetings with local, state, national and international organizations that visited its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to study lessons learned and best practices. Countries that visited the EOC in 2011 included: China, Russia, Poland, Turkey, Great Britain, Libya, Vietnam and New Zealand.
HCOHSEM Activity Distribution by Type for 2011

- Activations/Responses/Monitoring: 1477 (38%)
- Inter-Agency Meetings: 1133 (30%)
- Media Inquiries/Intervews: 443 (12%)
- Presentation/Outreach Events: 424 (11%)
- Exercises/Drills/Training: 185 (5%)
- Community Advisory Committee Meetings: 52 (1%)
- Emergency Operations Center/TranStar Tours: 73 (2%)
- Communication Products: 52 (1%)
HCOHSEM continues reaching out to partners to gather regional input and participation to sustain a national model of best practices for regional planning. In doing so, HCOHSEM was able to assist jurisdictions with basic planning concepts so that all emergency partners are prepared to respond to any type of disaster. The success that this brings is the ability to mount an all-hazards approach to making our community more resilient.

This presented HCOHSEM with an opportunity to both sustain and enhance current contingency plans and better assist other regions. With its Business Commodities Plan in place, HCOHSEM ensures the accessibility of vital business commodities for the residents of our region in conjunction with the Harris County Points of Distribution plan. Both plans were put through drills and exercises to keep them current and ready to implement quickly should the need arise.

This did not go without recognition. The Emergency Management Association of Texas (EMAT) honored HCOHSEM with two “Excellence in Emergency Management” awards for its Business Commodities Plan and for providing timely and accurate emergency information through its Regional Joint Information Center (JIC) website.

One of HCOHSEM’s earliest activations monitored winter weather conditions. Public safety messages and media interviews were conducted to remind residents of the dangers of freezing temperatures. The Regional Joint Information Center (JIC) kept the public updated on road, school and government office closures.

In February, HCOHSEM provided support for the Harris County Citizen Corps CERT Rodeo. This annual event gives participants from across the state a chance to test medical operations, search and rescue, fire suppression, incident command, emergency preparedness and hazmat recognition skills.

In the spring, the State of Texas Functional Needs Support Services Integration Committee released guidelines to ensure that sheltering requirements were met for the people of Texas. In support of these guidelines, hurricane presentations and other outreach events bringing together various sectors of the community were conducted to disseminate vital information regarding disaster preparedness, as well as possible evacuation and sheltering in the event of significant tropical threats.

HCOHSEM prepared for hurricane season early on by providing its media partners with Public Service Announcements (PSAs) that were broadcast by local television and radio stations. The PSAs remind viewers about the importance of being prepared for hurricane season. HCOHSEM believes that it is always important that residents not become complacent because our area is still a target for devastating storms. By the end of hurricane season, HCOHSEM had offered about 250 disaster preparedness presentations to help residents prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster.

With the increased threat of wildfires across Harris County, Commissioners Court enacted a burn ban on April 19, 2011. The burn ban continued through the end of the year due to the scarcity of rain, high temperatures and a rash of outdoor fires. This also led Harris County to become the largest area in Texas to implement a community wildfire protection plan, based on a collaborative effort by local government officials and the Texas Forest Service. The development of such a plan helps residents assess community hazards, identify potential risks and set goals that will mitigate issues that arise, such as problems with topography, water sources and expected fire behavior. It also gives community leaders an opportunity to educate the public and develop strategies for emergency response and evacuations.
July 2011, satellite image of Tropical Storm Don. Courtesy of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).
Despite an extremely active hurricane season, the Texas Gulf Coast was spared in 2011. According to experts, most storms were turned away by an anomalous trough of low pressure along the East Coast that steered storms moving towards the United States back out to sea.

Of the 19 storms that formed in the Atlantic, only seven became hurricanes. Irene was the lone hurricane to hit the United States and the first one to do so since Hurricane Ike struck southeast Texas in 2008. Irene was also the most significant tropical cyclone to hit the Northeast since Hurricane Bob in 1991.

The Gulf of Mexico saw only two tropical cyclones during the 2011 season. In July, Tropical Storm Don formed in the Yucatan Channel and moved northwest up the Gulf of Mexico. Don weakened to a tropical depression as it made landfall near Baffin Bay in south Texas. Rainfall totals were less than one inch and winds peaked around 36 mph, according to offshore buoys.

In early September, Tropical Storm Lee made landfall in central Louisiana. Lee spawned 38 tornadoes, the second most on record for a tropical storm.

### 2011 Harris County Zip Code Evacuation Map
DC-10 air tanker used by Texas Forest Service (TFS) to help fight wildfires. Courtesy of TFS.
The past year was one of the driest years on record for the State of Texas. According to experts, the scarcity of rain caused in part by the La Niña phenomenon resulted in one of the worst heat waves in the state’s history. The extreme conditions contributed to wildfires, affected the state’s agricultural economy and forced water rationing.

HCOHSEM’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was activated several times in 2011 to monitor and assist with wildfire emergencies.

One of the busiest wildfire activations took place during the Labor Day weekend. Dry conditions and high winds ignited wildfires in many parts of the state as well as in areas in and around our region.

While fires ravaged Bastrop County in central Texas, Harris County kept a close eye on the Riley Road Fire that quickly spread over three nearby counties. This tri-county event burned 18,000 acres and 75 homes in Waller, Grimes and Montgomery counties. Fire departments from all over Texas, California and Florida assisted during this fire that took about two weeks to extinguish.

HCOHSEM, in coordination with the Harris County Fire Marshal and the Harris County Sheriff’s Office, closely monitored the ongoing fires, and was ready to assist local response agencies if the fires moved into Harris County.

Closer to home, a massive fire scorched about 1,500 acres at George Bush Park in west Harris County, twice in the same week.

Since the governor’s initial statewide disaster proclamation on December 21, 2010, Texas has responded to more than 26,000 fires that have burned more than 3.9 million acres. State and local response costs are estimated at more than $330 million.

COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLAN
In 2011, Harris County became the largest area in Texas to implement a community wildfire protection plan, a collaborative effort of the Harris County Fire Marshal’s Office (HCFMO), the Texas Forest Service (TFS) and local fire departments. Harris County joined 14 other counties and 57 communities in Texas that have implemented wildfire protection plans.

The increased danger of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) to the threat of wildfire was clearly demonstrated throughout the spring and summer of 2011. HCFMO is committed to increasing public education efforts on wildfire mitigation, performing a county-wide risk assessment to map and identify the most at-risk areas and promoting the use of defensive space and fire resistant materials in development projects. In addition, HCFMO will work with local fire departments to strengthen wildfire suppression capabilities.
U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) at work. Courtesy of USCG.
The HCOHSEM collaborates with local, state and federal partners to prevent, protect against, respond to and recover from natural and man-made disasters, health emergencies and terrorism.

Partner agencies include the Harris County Sheriff’s Office, Harris County Fire Marshal’s Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard, Federal Communications Commission, State of Texas, the local Fusion Center, and countless first responder organizations as well as other local, state, national and international partners.

HCOHSEM contributes to security efforts in one of America’s largest cities by maintaining a database of critical infrastructure and key resources, engaging local jurisdictions in emergency planning, disseminating accurate and timely information to all stakeholders and monitoring significant events in our area and in areas all over the world.

HCOHSEM also designs and conducts exercises and drills to improve emergency preparedness planning and response; and manages state and federal grant funding for emergency management, homeland security, and other preparedness programs.

**GRANTS**

In 2011, Harris County was awarded $11.8 million from the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI), $25 million in Port Security Grant Program (PSGP) funds, $50,000 from the State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSP), $280,845 from the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) and $31,893 from the Citizen Corps Program (CCP).

Grant monies from UASI, PSPG SHSP and EMPG are provided to meet planning, organization, equipment, training, and exercise needs at the state and local levels to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from man-made acts and other catastrophic events.

The CCP grant provides funding to bring community and government leaders together to coordinate the involvement of community members and organizations in emergency preparedness, planning, mitigation, response, and recovery.

**EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER (EOC)**

In the last year, the EOC enhanced its Geographic Information System (GIS) and digital real-time mapping capabilities. The GIS is a set of tools that captures, stores, analyzes, manages and presents data linked to multiple geographic locations. GIS data is used to maintain situational awareness and a common operational picture during an emergency. The GIS team generated more than 260 maps for internal requests and external partners and generated floor plans for a new EOC.

The Texas Department of Transportation is expected to approve final plans for a new EOC during the first quarter of 2012, followed by the construction phase that could take up to 18 months. New state of the art technology for situational awareness and communications will be installed in the EOC, which will provide more than 100 work stations for various emergency response agencies during activations. The new EOC is scheduled to be completed prior to the 2013 hurricane season.

**CITIZEN CORPS PROGRAM**

The Harris County Citizen Corps Council is a nationally recognized program that coordinates with such volunteer groups as the American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, the United Way and other partners to identify volunteer opportunities in the community. The Citizen Corps programs include the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), the USA on Watch/Neighborhood Watch Program, Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), Fire Corps and the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC).

Harris County Citizen Corps has earned numerous awards for effectively supporting emergency services year round. In 2011, members of Citizen Corps worked tirelessly to assist emergency response workers in the widespread Texas wildfires that devastated many regions in our state.

**SUPPORTING LOCAL JURISDICTIONS**

In 2011, HCOHSEM was enlisted by area jurisdictions to enhance logistics and planning capabilities during area wildfires caused by widespread and sustained drought conditions in the State of Texas. The interactions between jurisdictions enriched the best practices of all involved by the heavy flow of information in the effort to fight the fires.
October 2011, refinery upset.
ON-CALL
The On-Call program provides response partners with 24-hour access to a trained staff member for the reporting of significant events and after-hour resource requests. The calls range from severe weather inquiries to assistance requests for high impact chemical spills.

In 2011, On-Call received 2,643 documented notifications requiring more than 660 hours of staff time.

INDUSTRY
HCOHSEM continues working with the Harris County Hazardous Materials Response Team (HCHMRT) to provide liaison and safety officer support on large-scale incidents. In 2011, HCOHSEM provided emergency communications support for facilities and jurisdictions. The liaison and safety officer also responded to wildfires within Harris County to provide support for incident commanders.

HCOHSEM has been and continues to be active in nine Industry Community Advisory Councils and Panels (CAC/CAP) and eight Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC). In 2011, a new advisory panel for the communities on the northeast end of the Houston Ship Channel serving the cities of Galena Park and Jacinto City was created.

The office is actively involved with fire and EMS associations and workgroups at the local, county, and state levels. Of particular interest, 2011 was the kickoff of the Statewide First Responder Credentialing Committee. The program not only assists in verifying the identity of first responders but also tracks their skills and training. This increases the ability of incident commanders to maintain on-scene security and ensure that responders have the requisite skills and training necessary for a particular task.
Texas Division of Emergency Management Chief Nim Kidd meets with elected officials at pre-hurricane briefing.
In 2011, the Emergency Management Association of Texas (EMAT) honored HCOHSEM with an Excellence in Emergency Management award for its Business Commodities Plan, which is designed to help support local government response efforts during an emergency.

The Business Commodities Plan was created to work in conjunction with the Harris County Points of Distribution (POD) plan. It establishes how businesses and government can work together to provide the necessary assistance specific to the needs of the community affected by disaster.

The plan focuses on the following criteria:

- Which major commodities businesses are open or closed?
- If there are businesses open, where are they located?
- Are the businesses located close to POD locations?
- Are there ample businesses open to accommodate the surrounding communities or are POD operations still critical in the area?
- Which major commodities businesses are preparing to open and what is the estimated timeframe for resumption of operations?
- Are the open businesses operating at normal levels or are commodities limited?

Understanding where commodities are readily available to communities is critical during times of recovery. HCOHSEM’s Business Commodities Plan was listed as a best practice on the FEMA Public-Private Partnerships for Emergency Preparedness web page.

**ALL-HAZARD MITIGATION PLAN**

In an effort to maintain constant preparedness, the Planning section takes part in the Harris County All-Hazard Mitigation Plan. Hazard mitigation means to reduce or alleviate the loss of injuries and property damage resulting from natural and man-made hazards through long-term strategies. The Hazard Mitigation Plan itself is a prerequisite for eligibility to state and federal mitigation grant funding that is updated every five years. There are 22 other incorporated jurisdictions in Harris County that participate in making appropriate changes and upgrades, making them eligible for funding through the updated plan.

### ANNEXES

HCOHSEM maintains its advanced emergency management profile by submitting updated annexes to the state for its approval. Annexes are the specific plans to plan for, respond to, recover from and mitigate hazards.

This year saw the agency update an additional 10 annexes from the previous year. Annexes dealing with Sheltering and Mass Care, Radiation, Transportation and Firefighting were among those improved. Annexes are reviewed frequently to ensure that changes in population, technology and infrastructure are incorporated into existing plans.

Meetings have been held with other county emergency management coordinators within the Houston-Galveston Area Council region, bringing planning outside of Harris County to the 13-county area, so as to coordinate planning regionally and enable continuity of operations.

### TRANSPORTATION ASSISTANCE REGISTRY (TAR)

HCOHSEM plays a critical role in serving people with functional access needs (formerly special needs) before and during emergencies. Every year, designated planners update the transportation registry list for Harris County and participate in several projects aimed at helping residents requiring evacuation assistance.

Individuals who need evacuation assistance can dial 2-1-1 and provide their contact information and any medical needs that may require special transportation. In June, the TAR database was used several times to assist residents in north Harris County who needed help evacuating due to wildfires.
February 2011, winter weather activation.
The accelerating pace of technological development and the need to ensure regional interoperability are two of the challenges faced by the Logistics section in 2012.

Upgrading the disaster communications infrastructure was a top priority in 2011. Among the lessons of Hurricane Ike and other incidents, was the discovery that landlines and cellular service are highly vulnerable to service interruption. The addition of satellite telephones as well as a multi-line, internet telephone system for field deployment significantly enhances the ability of HCOHSEM staff to operate when standard telephone systems fail. In addition, portable communications systems allow for field operations should that become necessary.

To bring interoperability to an unprecedented level, logistics converted HCOHSEM’s entire radio system to Project 25 compliance. Project 25, or “P25,” is a digital radio standard that is used by federal, state and local public safety agencies in North America to digitize and enhance logistics capabilities.

Even with upgrades to telephone and digital radio systems, amateur radio continues to be an important communication tool in the EOC. The EOC’s ham radio system uses various frequencies to securely send and receive time sensitive information, and video images can be transmitted using the Web Link wireless system. During significant events, the radios are manned by volunteers from ARES, the Amateur Radio Emergency Service.

As referenced above, volunteer organizations are a vital component of disaster recovery efforts. Managing those groups is a tremendous challenge and one that the Logistics group works with regional partners to solve. The result is the creation of Volunteer Reception Centers (VRC). A VRC registers, screens, and places spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers in available opportunities during disaster situations. The goal is to link volunteers with requesting agencies and organizations or recovery related activities. The agency accepting the volunteer is responsible for identity verification, criminal history checks (if assignment requires it) and skill credentialing.

A county logistics plan was developed to streamline and expedite fulfillment of materiel requests from HCOHSEM partners. The logistics section also continued to participate in training and exercises that reinforced best practices and make the section more efficient and better prepared.

Logistics is also taking the lead in assisting with the design of the new EOC. Past lessons, new technology and the innovative ideas of Logistics personnel ensure that this new EOC will not only be built with wide-reaching capabilities in mind, but with ideas that will streamline and make existing plans and capabilities more cost-effective.
November 2011, nationwide Emergency Alert System (EAS) test.
Preparedness is achieved and maintained through an ongoing cycle of planning, training, exercising and corrective action. Ongoing preparedness efforts among those involved in emergency management activities ensure coordination during times of crisis.

HCOHSEM, in collaboration with federal, state and regional partners, conducts and participates in training and exercise events that strengthen the ability of the local emergency management community.

In 2011, HCOHSEM hosted nine training exercises and participated in an additional 31 partner exercises. Our office held two Web EOC training sessions for partners on the software used during activations, which involved around 65 participants. There were three full scale drills, and 12 out-of-state trainings were brought to the region. Training conducted with important private stakeholders was carried out in an unprecedented level.

HARRIS COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICES TABLETOP DRILL
The Harris County Community Services Department holds a bi-annual tabletop drill to bring together organizations under Annex O of the Harris County Basic Plan, which deals with providing human services such as food, clothing, compensation and mental health services to disaster victims. The tabletop exercise brings together regional emergency managers in order to prepare for the aftermath of natural disasters and other emergencies. The 2011 drills focused on ice storms and hurricanes and brought together public and private stakeholders to ensure that Harris County would be ready for these types of weather events.

SECUREX 2011
Securex 2011 was conducted by the U.S. Coast Guard to validate the Houston-Galveston Area Maritime Security Plan and test communication procedures. The exercise brought together numerous emergency management partners and private stakeholder organizations. The scenario posed was the explosion of a major bridge along the Houston Ship Channel involving casualties.

NATIONWIDE EAS TEST
HCOHSEM provided support for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) before and during the first-ever, nationwide test of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) on November 9, 2011. The purpose of the test was to assess the effectiveness and reliability of EAS to alert the entire country during a nationwide emergency. The nationwide test was timed to coincide with the end of hurricane season, and before the beginning of winter, when severe weather circumstances often impact large areas of the country.

The unique nature of the EAS test raised concerns about the potential for public confusion. To help prevent this, HCOHSEM, in partnership with the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Local Emergency Communications Committee and other local government partners conducted an aggressive public education campaign in the days and weeks prior to the EAS test. In addition, HCOHSEM invited representatives of those agencies to monitor the test in the Emergency Operations Center.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), an important lesson learned from the first-ever test was that when all technical areas are properly addressed, the National EAS functions as intended.
Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) at 2011 competition.
Inherent to the HCOHSEM mission, and consistent with its strategic priorities are community outreach and public education.

**HARRIS COUNTY CITIZEN CORPS**

The Harris County Citizen Corps (HCCC) creates opportunities for individuals to volunteer to help their communities prepare for and respond to emergencies by bringing together local leaders, resident volunteers and the network of first responder organizations, such as fire departments, police departments and emergency medical personnel. The goal is to have all residents participate in making their communities safer, stronger and better prepared for preventing and handling threats, crime and disasters of all kinds.

The Citizen Corps’ 40,000 plus members obtain information from the Citizen Corps website, Facebook and Twitter. HCCC uses social media to communicate with its members and inquiring residents about its programs. It provides news and safety messages and is also a venue to call for volunteers to respond to emergencies.

Citizen Corps programs include the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), the Neighborhood Watch Program (NWP), and Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), Fire Corps and the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC).

**TEEN CERT**

Harris County Citizen Corps also oversees Teen CERT, a program that educates students about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills including fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization and disaster medical operations. Since its inception, it has coordinated with 158 high schools and has trained more than 5,500 high school students.

Due to increased interest in Teen CERT, two day-long drills were held at the Humble Harris County Fire and Sheriff’s Training Academy. The teen teams trained to respond to Harris County community emergencies. Teen CERT expanded in 2011-2012 school year to include 35 schools in 17 Harris County school districts.

To date, volunteers and partner organizations have logged millions of volunteer hours serving our community. Harris County Citizen Corps has earned numerous awards for effectively supporting emergency services year round.

For more information about HCCC, go to www.harriscountycitizencorps.com or call 281-JOIN NOW (564-6669).
Social media tools.
HCOHSEM is committed to providing the most accurate and immediate disaster information to the residents of Harris County. To that end, the communications group has improved and calibrated its messaging capabilities to accomplish those goals.

Additions to the Regional Joint Information Center (JIC) website launched in 2010 continued through 2011. Recent improvements include additional links so that residents can learn more about disaster preparedness, obtain real-time electric power outage data and register to receive important information through Harris County Alerts.

As a voice multiplier for regional partners in both the public and private sectors, HCOHSEM continues to refine its Joint Information Center (JIC) plan to ensure information submitted by JIC participants and other partners can be easily rebroadcast. In addition, protocols for social media have been integrated into established Standard Operating Procedures. This will help ensure message consistency in the event of an emergency.

**SOCIAL MEDIA INITIATIVES**

In early 2011, HCOHSEM integrated Facebook and Twitter into its communications plan. This significantly improved interactive public messaging capabilities and has enriched emergency communications.

Studies show that people are relying more on social media, mobile technology and online news outlets to learn about ongoing disasters, seek help and share information. Social media is making a big difference in emergency communications because it allows real time updates, and quickly informs people about what to do and where to go during a disaster.

Social media interaction during the George Bush Park wildfire last September validated the effort to expand HCOHSEM broadcast capabilities to include Facebook and Twitter. Beyond simply providing up-to-the-minute situation reports and road closure information, social media proved to be an effective means of generating intelligence from the community. The majority of the information gathered about road conditions and closures came directly from residents. Once verified, that information was sent back out to the public. Moreover, monitoring social media gave HCOHSEM a new tool to address rumors and false information immediately.

While a relatively small incident, the fire was an excellent test of recently developed emergency messaging protocols for use of social media. The Federal Emergency Management Agency published a Practice Note about the incident in October, 2011. The Practice Note highlights HCOHSEM’s use of all available resources to disseminate information accurately and rapidly. HCOHSEM is now sharing this practice with emergency managers across the country.

**REGIONAL PUBLIC INFORMATION PLAN**

In the past year, HCOHSEM has worked closely with Houston Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) partners to develop and implement an Emergency Public Information Plan (EPIP). The EPIP is an important element of the regional response plan aimed at protecting the public, property and the environment. The regional response plan and annexes emphasize close coordination and collaboration between the jurisdictions and agencies operating in the region.

During major events, the public, media and key stakeholders have an exceptionally high demand for situational awareness and depend on the information provided by the JIC, located in the Houston TranStar facility.

As part of the process of developing and implementing the EPIP, a Functional JIC Exercise was conducted in May 2011 at the Harris County Emergency Operations Center. The exercise was to validate the JIC functionality outlined in the EPIP in a simulated large-scale response.
2011 Resilient and Ready Workshop.
The office works closely with faith-based organizations, the business community, school districts and other civic groups to promote disaster preparedness at all levels.

In early October, HCOHSEM partnered with the Houston Area Red Cross to host a meeting facilitated by CrisisCommons, a non-profit organization based in King County (Seattle), WA. CrisisCommons seeks to advance and support the use of open data and volunteer technology communities to foster innovation in crisis management and global development.

Following the success of the CrisisCommons event was a showcase for emergency preparedness never before seen in Harris County. HCOHSEM partnered with Target Corporation to mount “Date with Disaster” at a major theater in southeast Houston. The strategic location was chosen due to the large at-risk population living in a storm surge inundation zone. Attendees viewed disaster preparedness videos and interacted with first responders from our region. Emergency vehicles on hand included hazmat fire trucks, a U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat, a 20-patient capacity ambulance and the Harris County Sheriff’s Department’s S.W.A.T. tank. The “Ready Heroes” also entertained and educated residents of all ages, all with the purpose of creating more aware and prepared residents.

HCOHSEM partnered with the Neighborhood Centers and Harris County Precinct 2 for the Save the Children “Resilient and Ready Workshop,” a disaster education and resiliency building workshop that combines cooperative games with disaster education to provide a fun and experiential way for children to learn about preparedness. A sum 1,130 children participated in this program that took place during the summer and fall of 2011.

Other campaigns throughout the year included Flood Awareness Week in March, Severe Weather Awareness Week in April, Hurricane Preparedness Week in May, the 2011 Hurricane Workshop in June, Lightning Safety Week in June, National Preparedness Month in September and Fire Prevention Week in October.

In all, HCOHSEM conducted more than 250 outreach events and presentations. The agency also logged more than 75 tours of the Harris County Emergency Operations Center and Houston TranStar to public officials, foreign dignitaries, senior citizen groups, students, and other members of the community.

Numerous HCOHSEM hurricane brochures, disaster guides, Ready DVDs, Citizen Corps publications and other educational items were distributed to the public in multi-language formats to fit the information needs of our diverse regional community.

Residents can request a presentation by visiting our website, www.readyharris.org, and filling out an online request form.
Emergency Public Information: The Harris County, Texas, Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management’s Implementation of a Social Media Protocol

DESCRIPTION
In the summer of 2010, HCOHSEM recognized that it needed the ability to disseminate emergency public information to its residents through social media. The office began by observing how other emergency management agencies utilized social media, including how they disseminated information and what information they posted to social media sites. HCOHSEM then developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for managing social media information received from partner agencies. The office also developed a social media template for drafting, reviewing, and approving alert messages, Web site posts, and other related information. In January 2011, HCOHSEM launched a Facebook page and a Twitter account. HCOHSEM uses these to post information and to provide links to its joint information center (JIC) Web site, www.readyharris.org, and to link to its partner response agencies.

2011 Summer Drought and Wildfires
Texas experienced more than 20,000 wildfires in 2010 and 2011, which burned approximately 5,781 square miles and destroyed 7,439 structures. In addition, the State suffered from a drought during the summer of 2011, which exacerbated the wildfire threat. President Barack Obama declared a disaster (FEMA-4029-DR) on September 9, 2011, for areas affected by the wildfires since August 30, 2011. As of September 30, 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency had designated 22 counties for individual assistance and had provided $8.6 million of assistance.
In recent years, HCOHSEM practices have been recognized by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Emergency Managers Association of Texas (EMAT), among others. Efforts to improve evacuation, communications and resource planning are now models for cities throughout the nation.

In 2011, EMAT recognized the Business Commodities Plan and the Joint Information Center plan at their annual meeting.

Also in 2011, FEMA published a Practice Note highlighting HCOHSEM’s use of social media as an emergency communications tool.

HCOHSEM planners developed the Business Commodities Plan (BCP) to help ascertain the availability of resources for the community after a major incident. The BCP is a cooperative effort between HCOHSEM and major retailers in the region. Not only does this assist in determining Point of Distribution (POD) locations, but it also provides HCOHSEM with information about the availability of basic necessities that it can communicate to the community.

The Joint Information Center (JIC) plan developed by HCOHSEM is a framework for collaborative communications during a major incident. Centered on the www.readyharris.org website, the JIC plan provides for constant, timely information flow from incident commanders and government agencies to the general public. It provides a central coordination point where emergency information is gathered, analyzed and distributed so that authorities speak with one voice.

Previous awards include:

- 2010 Honorable Mention: National Citizen Corps Achievement Awards – Celebrating Resilient Communities
- 2010 FEMA Practice Note: Interactive Hurricane Evacuation Map
- 2009 DHS Lesson Learned: Joint Information Centers: Increasing Personnel to Operate a Phone Bank after an Incident
- 2009 FEMA Practice Note: Zip Code Based Evacuation Plan
- 2009 National Citizen Corps Council Achievement Award for Volunteer Integration
- 2008 Honored by President George W. Bush at the White House
- 2007 President’s Call to Service
- 2006 Governor’s Volunteer Award for Community Capacity Builder
- 2003 Best Practices Innovation Award from the Texas Association of Counties