



NASSAU COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

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**DATE:** June 13, 2008

**FROM:** Nancy Freeman, Emergency Management Director

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Nancy Freeman'.

**RE:** Pathfinders' Task Force; Florida Statewide Hurricane Exercise, 2008

**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:**

As the Emergency Management Director for Nassau County, Florida, I am responsible for the safety and well-being of approximately 70,000 citizens spread over more than 625 square miles. Also, I am honored to serve the emergency management profession as a Technical Committee member of the national Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP).

During a recent statewide exercise, I was introduced to a response concept called Pathfinders Task Force (PTF). Being unfamiliar with the concept, I was initially somewhat skeptical that a large volunteer force could be quickly organized and deployed to a local jurisdiction to perform essential post-disaster functions that would normally be conducted by trained field response teams. After the field exercise in my County, I can give Pathfinders my highest recommendation.

When first told about how a 1,500 person task force had combined local, state, military, and volunteer responders to perform needs assessments in southern Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, I asked three questions:

1. What will the resource do for my county?
2. What will I need to do to support it when activated?
3. What will it cost my county?

The Task Force demonstrated the answers to these questions during the exercise in Nassau County last week:

1. A Type III Pathfinder Task Force performed 1,698 geocoded and Excel-sortable damage surveys in two hours. The same Task Force went door to door with 80 volunteers from seven states and collected 679 homebound survivor questionnaire forms per hour.
2. Although it was simulated during the exercise, the Task Force has the capability of being fully self-supporting for the first 72 hours, including bringing in its own portable kitchen to support 5-7,000 meals per day along with fuel, forklifts, tents, trucks, generators, etc. After the initial 72 hours, the Task Force can be sustainable

from local resources, if available, or through state logistical support. The PTF logistical needs were specified ahead of time in concise formats.

3. The volunteer hours documented by the Task Force can be used as local match toward FEMA Public Assistance reimbursement (if a federally-declared disaster and subject to FEMA approvals), resulting in limited disaster-related costs to Nassau County.

This Task Force has my highest recommendation for the functions performed in Nassau County. In order to provide critical disaster relief to survivors within the first 72 hours, it is vital to obtain data that reveals the “ground truth” of the disaster’s impact. The Task Force organized and deployed a large contingent of volunteers in the simulated impact areas within the critical 72 hour post-impact window, gathered vital data related to damage and human needs using state-of-the-art technology, and immediately communicated the information to the County Emergency Operations Center.

In its initial Situation Report for the exercise, PTF supplied the EOC with information vital to our operation. For example, within minutes of receiving the information, we were able to sort data, and prioritize and assign resources to locations of specific need such as assigning downed power lines to utilities, and major road blockages to our public works’ crews. We had a vivid map of neighborhoods that had been surveyed, depicting homes where individual data forms were completed. This allowed us to rapidly assess survivor needs and estimate initial economic impact of the disaster.

With a follow up Situation Report, PTF marshaled more than 100 volunteers who responded in a regional deployment from seven states. The Incident Management Team (IMT) registered the volunteers, provided credentialing, and then went through training and orientation. Following an operational briefing, the IMT deployed five Strike Teams throughout the County, going to mailboxes to collect real, geocoded, and time/date stamped reports from Nassau County’s homebound survivors. Each hour, information from the equivalent of 1,000 survivors was gathered with names, addresses, welfare checks, and special needs, and made available to the local EOC. PTF truly did become the eyes and ears of our local EOC.

As an Emergency Management Director, I believe this Task Force is a great asset to the County’s emergency operations in that it performed critical functions requested by the EOC, but required very little oversight and management by the Emergency Management Director or EOC staff. I have no hesitancy whatsoever in both recommending and requesting this Task Force when the need arises.

I believe the Pathfinder Task Force could be replicated in communities nationwide. Even with the artificialities of the exercise, the Task Force more than capably demonstrated the ability to gather and deploy a large volunteer contingent to support local disaster operations. A Pathfinder Advance Team could rapidly deploy anywhere in the country, assess local needs in coordination with local emergency management, and quickly fill in its ranks with local volunteers. After the initial response, management of the operation could be transferred to local leadership with IMT capabilities.

Finally, it was refreshing to see volunteers fully incorporate NIMS guidelines, deliver a full Incident Action Plan (IAP), and impose a strict chain of command which answered to the local EOC for its directives and objectives. The Pathfinder Task Force prototype exceeded all of my expectations.

A special commendation and thanks for the extraordinary efforts during this exercise go to the 101 volunteers, the Eagles Wings Foundation, its Pathfinders' Task Force Leader, Scott Lewis, and Active Community Team Services and its leader, David Canther.