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COVID-19 Field Feature

Pivoting to a COVID-19 Response in the Greater Houston Region

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CRI-TAC COVID-19 Field Features are a compilation of innovative practices implemented by the field to enhance operations while maintaining public safety and the safety and wellness of an agency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pivoting to a COVID-19 Response in the Greater Houston Region

Article by George Buenik and Jack Hanagriff

The novel coronavirus pandemic has forced health and public safety agencies across the U.S. to rethink every aspect of their day-to-day operations—and even their most reliable strategies for crisis preparedness and response.

In small towns and large metropolitan areas alike, those responsible for the safety and security of their communities have had to pivot quickly to address large outbreaks and enforce a variety of mitigation actions to help “flatten the curve” of surging infections.

As always, the top two goals have been to protect public health and welfare and to maintain the highest possible levels of resilience and ensure continuity of operations among commercial enterprises, educational facilities, government services, and even entire supply chains. The COVID-19 threat, however, required a shift in priorities.

The Houston Experience

The City of Houston and its five surrounding counties are home to 6.8 million people, spread across more than 7,000 square miles. Our metropolitan area is one of the 10 largest economies in the U.S.

Since the pandemic began, the Houston Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security has worked in close partnership with numerous law enforcement, emergency management, fire, healthcare, and other agencies in the region, alongside the private-sector companies that own a large portion of our critical infrastructure and supply chains.

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We were fortunate in having several essential mechanisms in place at the outset—which helped us as coronavirus rocketed to the top of our list of hazards and as we made the major pivot from our previous focus on preparedness and protection to one of response and recovery.

Key to our responsiveness, we already had a pandemic response plan in place. Like most plans, it had to be adjusted to address the realities of the novel coronavirus. But having a plan to train against meant that we were already in the mindset of understanding what a major health crisis would require and how we could better initiate, operationalize, and sustain our response.

Second, and even more importantly, we had solid existing relationships with various Houston-area supply chains, thanks to our longstanding critical infrastructure protection mission. (Our critical infrastructure is unique in that it is owned by a wide array of public and private-sector organizations in tandem.) Years before the novel coronavirus was a household word, we founded a regional supply chain group with both private companies and government agencies as members and with subgroups focused on the following:

- Utilities (e.g., water supply, electrical transmission, natural gas distribution)
- Food (grocery chains, convenience stores)
- Transportation (shipping, rail, trucking)
- Telecommunications (internet, wireless)

The goal of this group was to keep supply chains and critical infrastructure open during any kind of emergency. Maintaining close relationships and ongoing dialog with all key industry stakeholders through monthly meetings of this essential group and its subgroups helped us achieve that goal even as we pivoted to address an unprecedented new health and medical threat.

Once the coronavirus took hold, we made several further adjustments. The first was to activate the grocery supply chain group in response to the issuance of stay-at-home guidelines. Closely following that, the significant increase in home-bound learning and work-from-home edicts led to the activation of the telecommunications group.

Then, as the effects of COVID-19 created a surge in demand for cleaning supplies, home electronics, household goods, and pharmaceuticals, a new General Supply group was introduced, comprising building supply, office supply, and retail companies and pharmacies. As with the other groups, the motivation behind General Supply was to load-balance available resources with demand, share information, and help each other wherever and whenever possible.

Imagine the power of a grocery store knowing in advance to stock up on bleach and paper goods, or an office supply store tripling its inventory of phone chargers and wireless routers. Or picture a clinic getting assurances from its utility companies that it wouldn't have its electricity or water turned off, or a test center knowing exactly where to procure refrigerators to store test kits, or tents to protect personnel from the hot sun.

Additionally, we relied more heavily on our existing technology partners for critical capabilities like maintaining region-wide situational awareness while our leadership and personnel were isolated from each other or working from home. Vendors like VidSys, Cradlepoint, Axis Communications, and Verizon provided portable security

camera systems for monitoring testing sites, supported our mobile command posts, and expanded area internet access to bridge digital divides.

Meanwhile, our Haystax virtual operations center enabled us to access and share detailed information about critical assets, along with geotagged data on temporary testing sites and food distribution centers, as well as map layers with zip code–level COVID-19 case data and more.

Challenges

Our pandemic response has not been without difficulties, of course. One challenge was discovering the danger of asymptomatic individuals who could transmit the virus undetected, which forced us to rethink what it meant to remain open. On March 11, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner declared a week-long public health disaster. On the same day, the city’s annual rodeo and livestock show was shut down by mutual agreement of the mayor, county judge, rodeo leadership, and public health officials, in order to protect the health and welfare of the estimated 150,000 members of the general public that still planned to attend.

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Then—in July, August, and September—Houston experienced a spike in COVID-19 levels, just as many other large cities had earlier. The region went from 2- to 3-percent positive test rates to 20 percent in a matter of days (although, fortunately, we have been able to bring the numbers back down to near pre-spike levels).

Another major challenge was that the entire region came under threat from Hurricane Laura in late August, with the highest impacts on the Texas and Louisiana coasts. Although Houston was not in the storm’s direct path, our supply chain partners were, as their operational footprint covers all of Texas and parts of Louisiana.

On top of battling COVID-19 and threatening weather, Houston then had to provide support during the multiple protests that followed the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis—alongside its regular emergency responses to major fires and other significant events during the same time period.

Lessons Learned

While the coronavirus pandemic clearly has not run its course, we and our partner agencies have learned some critical lessons since it began. Here are five lessons that we believe will translate well to other public safety agencies operating in jurisdictions of any size.

1. *Be generous in sharing information and resources.* We can’t stress enough how valuable our supply chain groups were in keeping the region resilient, not just by sharing information but by ensuring that no one sector had to face excessive hardship due to lack of resources, loss of power, or closure because it was in an area under shutdown order. After all, everyone is affected, and everyone needs to help each other out.

2. *Keep your personnel safe.* Ensuring our personnel were properly protected was our top priority in Houston. These dedicated professionals put their lives on the line every day, and it is our duty to ensure they have not only the best protective gear available, but also the latest intelligence on COVID-19 cases and outbreak risk in their areas of operation.
3. *Communicate accurately, often, and consistently.* Whether messaging community members about their critical role in reducing the risk of an outbreak or complying with mask orders, or informing other jurisdictions about the availability of resources or utilities, it is vitally important to maintain unified and accurate messaging during the pandemic. Our mayor conducts daily briefings, and all agencies in the region, and even our supply chain group members, work hard to stay on the same page.
4. *Maintain an all-hazards mindset.* The pandemic was not the only crisis to hit our region. Other manmade and natural emergencies will happen, and every jurisdiction must be prepared for *any* hazard, even while responding to COVID-19. Here in Houston, for example, we're all too aware that the Atlantic hurricane season doesn't end until November 30.
5. *This is the new normal.* In our office, we often talk about how and when the pandemic will end. While it is true that a widely distributed vaccine will allow businesses and entertainment venues to start reopening, it also is likely that we all will be living in a world of at-home work, fewer social gatherings, and lots of new rules and restrictions for a long time to come.

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“COVID-19 may never fully go away.”

COVID-19 may never fully go away. In fact, many of us in the public safety community now believe the goal should be to treat our regional coronavirus response as a regular part of our daily operations rather than trying to maintain an emergency footing for months on end.

As we like to say on our team, everyone had a full-time job before COVID-19. Only now it's even fuller.

About CRI-TAC:

If you are a law enforcement executive looking for support, the CRI-TAC is here to help. Funded by the [U.S. DOJ COPS Office](#), the CRI-TAC offers no-cost, customized solutions to state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The solutions provided are tailored to the agency and informed by cutting-edge innovation and evidence-based and promising practices.

Law enforcement agencies must be prepared to respond to a broad range of issues. Because of this, the CRI-TAC can address more than 35 critical law enforcement areas. The CRI-TAC offers several types of technical assistance services, delivered by subject matter experts from the field:

- Resource Referral—toolkits, reports, and other relevant publications
- Web-based Training—recorded webinars and live online training
- In-person Training—existing and customized on-site training

- Virtual Mentoring—connections to subject matter experts to share information and promising practices via phone or video conference call
- On-site Consultation—visits to the requesting agency to collaborate with agency leaders and provide guidance on best practices and tailored solutions
- Agency Peer Exchange—assistance in facilitating meetings among agency members and other public and private sector stakeholders
- Policy Assistance – assistance in reviewing current or developing new policies

About the Authors:

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George Buenik is Director of Public Safety and Homeland Security for the City of Houston, where he is responsible for coordinating the activities of all city departments in preparing for, responding to, mitigating, and recovering from disasters, major emergencies, and special events, and for overseeing community preparedness for a five-county region. Prior to his current position, Chief Buenik served for 34 years with the Houston Police Department, retiring as Executive Assistant Chief. Chief Buenik has an MS in Criminal Justice Management and a BS in law enforcement from Western Illinois University.

Jack Hanagriff, Houston Police Department

Jack Hanagriff is a 37-year veteran with the Houston Police Department. For the last 10 years he has been Law Enforcement Liaison to the Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security, where he currently serves as the Coordinator of the Regional Risk and Critical Infrastructure Protection Program.] In this position, he shepherds the efforts of multidisciplinary stakeholders across 13 counties in the Houston region. He has developed an organization and governance structure to identify, catalog, assess, and analyze their assets, leveraging technology, federal guidance, and the private sector.

Does your agency have innovative and unique practices put in place due to COVID-19 that you would like to see highlighted?

Email us at CRITAC@theiacp.org.

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