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Louisiana's emergency room

By Rebekah Allen (Contact)

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Gustav, Capital Region residents feasted on red beans and rice, crawfish étouffée and pasta Bolognese, a menu that isn't what you might expect after a natural disaster. But restaurateurs were not satisfied knowing their regular customers were eating chemically heated, government-issued Meals Ready to Eat.

More than 400,000 meals were cooked and distributed through mobile-food kitchens to people in 15 parishes affected by the September 2008 storm. The cost was about \$5.50 per meal, compared to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's \$8.50 per pre-packaged MRE. As a result, local restaurants got work, and hurricane victims received hot, delicious meals.

That kind of cooperation is the idea of Louisiana's Business Emergency Operations Center, where officials from disaster management and the state meet with stakeholders from business and industry to address their needs and utilize their resources.

BEOC opens June 2, one day after the start of what hurricane forecasts have predicted will be an above-average Atlantic season, in a 3,000-square-foot building donated by LSU Chancellor Michael Martin on the South Campus.



MOVING IN: Louisiana's Business Emergency Operations Center opens June 2, one day after the start of what hurricane forecasts have predicted will be an above-average Atlantic season, in a 3,000-square-foot building on LSU's South Campus.

The center's partners include Louisiana Economic Development, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, LSU's Stephenson Disaster Management Institute and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's National Incident Management Systems and Technology Institute.

Business leaders from Louisiana's banking, communication, oil and gas, restaurant, retail and utility industries have been invited to participate in the center, representing a massive public-private partnership designed to make the state more self-sufficient during emergencies.

"We're going to keep businesses in the loop and look at problems from a business perspective," GOHSEP Director Mark Cooper

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says. "We want to put money in the Louisiana economy versus sending money to Washington. If there's a way that business and industry can do things cheaper and more effectively, then we're going to use them."

In addition to initiating immediate-response efforts, the state-of-the-art facility will offer disaster prevention and recovery.

"It's going to give us a centralized location," says Wendy Warren, a spokeswoman for the Louisiana Restaurant Association. "Being able to plug in, and being in one place where all the communication is, is going to be very helpful."

Unexpected trial run

BEOC was born of a need to respond after hurricanes, but it's currently receiving a test run as the Deepwater Horizon disaster threatens several of the state's most important industries.

Researchers and industry representatives have been discussing the economic impact of the oil spill. Experts are offering guidance for business loans and grants, and LED is checking out other businesses that are offering goods and services to alleviate effects of the spill. LED Secretary Stephen Moret is spearheading BEOC; he'll report its findings to Gov. Bobby Jindal.

"There's lots of technology and products out there that people have come out with," Cooper says, "and LED is vetting that info, then providing it to BP and the Coast Guard."

The oil spill is a different type of disaster from that to which Louisianans are accustomed because no federal emergency has been declared, and the rig operator has accepted responsibility. Also, the impacts will evolve over time and likely will affect the area for years to come.

Through conversations with businesses and industries, BEOC will be able to help aggregate commercial losses and potentially advocate for businesses when it's time for them to receive compensation.

Lt. Col. Joey Booth, SDMI's executive director, says the spill has been a test for BEOC and allowed the center to smooth out some weaknesses before the hurricane season.

"We are testing, developing, designing and improving," he says. "We are providing services now,

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but when we transition into another disaster, it will be easier because of the lessons we are learning."

Setting the bar

BEOC is setting an agenda for other states that are looking out for their business interests. Cooper says FEMA and emergency management directors from other states will be watching Louisiana's model; he says there also has been some interest globally.

"Louisiana has another really tremendous story about how to do disaster management the best," Booth says. "We've learned dearly over the last few years."

BEOC will not have an operating budget, but will be funded through a combination of public and private donations. The facility was donated, and it will be renovated with money from LED as well as Homeland Security grant money obtained from LSU and Louisiana-Lafayette.

Dell donated computers and other technology, and Entergy donated \$250,000 for additional renovations. Cooper says some training and planning will be volunteered by participating industries.

BEOC only will be activated during declared emergencies, but it will be training and planning with businesses during down times. Cooper says businesses are being encouraged to outline disaster plans, including the gathering of supplies and the swapping of contact information for employees, ensuring that businesses can resume functioning as soon as possible.

"This is the new wave," Booth says. "It's an all-hands-on-deck approach. The majority of our infrastructure is in the private sector, and we must find ways to protect and engage the business community."

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