

Ft. Myers Police Hurricane Charley Leaves A Calling Card

Back-Up Computer, Reliable Technical Support Prove Indispensable

By Mary Estes



Located on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River in Lee County in southwest Florida, Ft. Myers has a population of 51,323. A police force of 200+ officers patrols an area of 35 square miles.

When Hurricane Charley hit Ft. Myers, Florida on August 13, high winds clocking 145 mph smacked the city in the afternoon, and left police dispatch without power, computer, or voice communications. It also left proof that back-up communications and reliable technical support are indispensable in hurricane season.

As the winds escalated and electricity went out at police headquarters, Paul Ambrose, Ft. Myers police systems manager, made sure the back-up generator would keep dispatch online.

But Charley had another plan. At 6:30 PM, the generator shut down and, without notice, the battery reserve power failed. With no time for a controlled shut down, the dispatch computer crashed, taking with it all the active dispatch data.

Friday the 13th was about to earn its reputation. Dispatchers had no access to the 9-1-1 interface, 90 mobile units, field-based reports and records management. With cell towers disrupted, wireless calls were sketchy at best. So they went to the next best thing. They dispatched from portable battery-powered handheld radios.

“We’ve had close calls with our emergency plan before, but this was the first time we’ve had to actually use it,” said Ambrose, describing how dispatchers took 12-hour shifts and slept at police headquarters to support the 170 field officers assigned to emergency duty.

Three hours into the ordeal, things were looking up, but it wasn’t over. As soon as power came on at 9:30 PM, Ambrose took only 30 minutes to get the “hot standby” computer on line and reconnected to the network. As luck would have it, another glitch developed that this time needed immediate technical support.

Support Team Ready for Hurricanes

Geac Public Safety got the call. The company supplies and manages software for CAD, mobile, and records for the Ft. Myers Police Department.

Unable to re-establish a link to the national crime database, Ambrose called the company’s emergency support line. The



FT. MYERS PD

Paul Ambrose, Ft. Myers police systems manager, with dispatcher Cindra Dunaway. When Hurricane Charley struck the community, the PSAP lost all power for three critical hours.

problem was fixed remotely, and police dispatch was restored to full operation before the night was over.

Like many of its Florida customers, Geac activated its own emergency plan four times during Florida’s historic 2004 hurricane season. Hours before Hurricane Charley hit near Ft. Myers, in fact, Geac’s Tampa office was in the storm’s path. So, the company was well into its own hurricane plan when the Ft. Myers police called and reached one of its secure remote sites.

“Anytime a hurricane threatens, the first thing we do is send our emergency call list to all of our customers,” said Laurie Hovatter, Geac’s support manager. “We position staff in multiple locations - sometimes out of state - so technical support is not compromised, regardless of the hurricane’s path.”

Today, Ft. Myers still has signs of Charley’s wrath. Among the evidence are downed trees, twisted signs, and police officers with stories to tell about meeting Charley face-to-face. Except for several hours of inconvenience, a minor lapse in the call log, two-way radio calls and frequent requests for extra patrol, the evening could be any Friday night in a similar city. Ft. Myers Police did not skip a beat.

Next hurricane season, Ft. Myers police dispatch will be even more prepared. Upgraded computers were installed immediately after Charley made his exit. And, like the company that supplies and manages its software, the department’s hurricane plan is well rehearsed. ■

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