

Answering the Call

South Carolina Department of Corrections Responds to Historic Flooding

By Clark Newsom

Extreme Weather Conditions and Catastrophic Flooding

In early October 2015, South Carolina endured several days of torrential rains, totaling over 20 feet in many areas and leading to catastrophic flooding. Nineteen deaths and a damage estimate of more than \$1.5 billion to homes, businesses, roads, bridges, dams and other essential infrastructures were attributed to the extreme weather conditions.¹ Flooding from the sea-coast to the midlands forced many individuals to be rescued from their homes or vehicles. The leadership and staff of the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC) were rightfully concerned for the safety and security of more than 21,000 inmates housed in the state's 24 correctional institutions.

"We haven't seen this level of rain in South Carolina in 1,000 years," Governor Nikki Haley said at the time. It was reportedly the Palmetto State's biggest natural disaster since Hurricane Hugo in 1989, and meteorologists agreed it was one of the most prolific rainfall events in modern U.S. history. Of South Carolina's 46 counties, 24 were severely affected

and required assistance from FEMA, the National Guard, the American Red Cross, the Small Business Administration and countless other federal, state and out-of-state entities. It was estimated that over 700 families lost their homes, some due to insufficient resources to make necessary repairs.²

The First Response

SCDC's first concern was to make sure its prisons continued to operate safely for its employees and the inmates, thereby ensuring the security of the neighboring communities, as well. Thanks to teamwork and training, the SCDC workforce rose to the challenge. The weather caused many building leaks, power outages, and downed trees and flooding, which damaged fencing and lighting, and impaired roadways to and from prisons. Fortunately, the facility operations across the state were properly maintained, so the storm caused no security breaches and no injuries within the department.

At the time of the storms, SCDC had been growing its own produce to feed inmates. The storm caused nearly \$200,000 in damages to

Flooding at the Wateree River Correctional Institution farm



Photos courtesy the South Carolina Department of Corrections

South Carolina floods in October 2015 damaged roadways.



Inmates at Wateree River Correctional Institution packed sandbags.



The storm caused immense damage and floods in the Columbia, South Carolina, area, October 2015.

Sandbags were used to shore up dams.

Despite the material damage, the performance of SCDC's correctional officers and non-uniformed staff in the emergency situation was exemplary. Staff from all divisions worked hand in hand around the clock to make sure that everything was running as smoothly as possible.



Left: SCDC employees distributed clothes to flood victims.

Bottom: SCDC Director Bryan Stirling (center) presented a check from CPOF to employees victimized by floods.



crops, hitting soybean and wheat particularly hard. “Because of the extreme wet conditions, wheat and oats could not be planted on time or at all,” said Mark McCown, director of the Support Services Division. “Every day [that passes] after normal planting time decreases yield on the crops, so dollar value cannot be accurately determined until later.” Road access related to the soaking rains and flooding has continued to cause some problems. Officials say they may need to strengthen bridges — as well as dikes in ponds and river levee systems — that were weakened by water breaches.

Staff, Inmates Pitch In

Despite the material damage, the performance of SCDC’s correctional officers and non-uniformed

staff in the emergency situation was exemplary. Staff from all divisions worked hand-in-hand around the clock to make sure that everything was running as smoothly as possible. “Whether it was our food service, commissary and canteen making sure everybody was fed or facilities management just keeping the lights and power working, it was extremely gratifying to see how our employees pulled together,” said Sandra Barrett, deputy director of programs and services. “Everybody pitched in and worked long hours to help each other out and get the job done.” While making sure the mission was successfully being met, SCDC’s leadership and employees also joined fellow state agencies in responding to the many needs of other South Carolinians affected by the storms.

Inmates and employees at the Division of Industries headquarters in Columbia produced nearly 5,000 emergency signs for the South Carolina Department of Transportation to replace those lost or damaged on roads and highways destroyed by flooding. Employees working beside inmates from Wateree River Correctional Institution in Rembert filled and distributed over 55,000 30-pound sandbags and 360 2,000-pound sandbags that were used to shore up broken dams around the state. Staff and inmates also acted as heavy equipment operators to assist with extensive repair of the Columbia Canal and Riverfront Park.

During and for weeks after the flooding, Inspector General Brian Bolchoz and 16 of his agents from SCDC’s police services provided support for security checkpoints and helped patrol areas of need along with fellow local and state law enforcement officers. SCDC was quick to come to the aid of its own employees, many of whom suffered losses of homes and property due to the flooding. The local chapter of the Correctional Peace Officers Foundation, whose slogan is “Taking Care of Our Own,” provided much needed financial assistance to many employees regardless of whether or not they were members of CPOF. Individual institutions also held numerous fundraisers for their employees victimized by storm damage.

To form what is called the “One SC Fund,” SCDC and other state agencies joined well-known celebrities from the state: Stephen Colbert; Darius Rucker; Steve Spurrier, the former University of



Above: (left to right) State Adjutant General Robert Livingston, Governor Nikki Haley, Director Leroy Smith of the Department of Public Safety, and State Emergency Management Director Kim Stenson participate at a news media briefing, Oct. 4, 2015, in Columbia, South Carolina.

Right: Inmates at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia made road signs.



South Carolina football coach; Dabo Swinney, the Clemson University football coach; and Governor Nikki Haley. This fund bridges the gap between existing resources and the unmet housing needs of flood victims. One SC Fund is supporting nonprofit organizations that continue to provide relief and recovery efforts to victims of this particular storm. State agencies, like SCDC, established the fund as a charitable payroll deduction to make it easier for state employees to make financial donations.

For Stirling, the actions of SCDC personnel on the job and in service to the state during this unparalleled weather event have been a source of great pride.

SCDC employees at headquarters in Columbia and throughout the state also took time from work to help their neighbors. Over 40 uniformed and non-uniformed personnel, including Director Bryan Stirling of SCDC, distributed clothing donations

at a local high school to aid area flood victims. Leath Correctional Institution (LCI) in Greenwood collected bottled water and accepted donations from employees to help aid the community. Inmates at LCI also crocheted hats and scarves for victims and made baby dolls for children staying in temporary shelters. With support from a local merchant, these items were sent to North Charleston, which was identified by the Red Cross as an area in greatest need of assistance.

Staff from the Kershaw Correctional Institution (KCI) provided meals for National and State Guard troops deployed from the midlands of South Carolina to the Charleston area. KCI Warden David Dunlap used his own personal RV to transport the volunteers from the prison and act as a command post. Employees at Lower Savannah Pre-Release Center in Aiken collected 52 cases of bottled water in cooperation with the

Aiken County Sheriff's Office and other local law enforcement organizations, and sent them to flood victims in Columbia. These are just a few of the selfless acts that characterized the performance of SCDC's employees during this crisis.

The South Carolina Disaster Recovery Coordination Office (DRCO), made up largely of state employees who were commissioned by Governor Haley to assist with flood recovery, is well-represented by SCDC staff. Russell Rush, the agency's director of occupational safety and worker's compensation, also doubles as DRCO's assistant to the director of support and long-term recovery. Rush says that more than 45 different volunteer organizations from South Carolina and across the U.S. have been active in the disaster recovery.

For Stirling, the actions of SCDC personnel on the job and in service to the state during this unparalleled weather event have been a source of great pride. "The herculean effort to help fellow staff, neighbors and South Carolinians across the state while keeping every institution running on normal operations is an impressive feat," said Stirling. "It goes to show what we all can accomplish when we work together."

ENDNOTES

¹ South Carolina Emergency Management Division. 2015. *October, 2015 statewide flooding incident*. Retrieved from www.scemd.org/component/content/article/21-home-page/public-information/219-severe-flooding.

² Ibid.



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