

JUDGE ROBERT ECKELS: “WE CAN DO WHATEVER WE HAVE TO...”



As county judge, Robert Eckels (center) was instrumental in the planning and execution of support for Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Houston.

All photos courtesy of Mark Sloan.

When Robert Eckels was elected county judge, he subsequently became head of Emergency Management of Harris County with responsibilities to develop, maintain, and coordinate an emergency management plan; to activate and staff an Emergency Operations Center (EOC); to develop and assist in effective public outreach programs; to provide information for officials, the media, and residents; and to prepare for emergencies through drills and exercises. David Goldstein interviewed him on July 28, 2008, for the city’s Houston Oral History Project—Mayor Bill White Collection.

ROBERT ECKELS: [Emergency preparedness] is not just about response, but it is the coordination. We had done a series of drills every year that was called the hurricane poly exercise. We brought people in and all the county departments went through what they did. . . .

Harris County would come in and bring our resources . . . and try to not serve everybody but coordinate services among service providers. That was a unique function as we became part of a unified command, not a central command, and there is a big difference. . . . To look at what happened in Katrina, you have to go back to the training we did among ourselves and the community. . . .

Our first big test was Tropical Storm Allison. In Tropical Storm Allison, we had actually a more difficult test for Houston than the later Katrina event because it was a quarter of a million of our own people that we were taking out of their homes and having to shelter somewhere. They were not in the Astrodome, but we had 100,000 homes under water. . . . It was the largest urban flood in the history of the United States until Katrina came along. And we responded very well. Not everything was perfect. We learned a lot of lessons in that. . . .

[For Katrina] I got a call about three o’clock in the morning. . . . We had talked [earlier] about the possibility of having a shelter facility at the county. . . . The call came in, and it was, “You know, Judge, we talked about 2,500. We really need 23,750. We are going to evacuate the Superdome and bring them to Houston. Can we do that?” My response was, “We can do whatever we have to do. Start the process.” . . . That morning at six o’clock, we were having our first meetings of the team to respond to the storm, and it was the Harris County response; we weren’t at that time expecting to have to expand beyond the county although the city emergency management director came to our meeting. . . .

The group got together, started planning for the shelter operation in the Astrodome. . . . We had never planned to use the Astrodome for shelter, but we had planned for our group to be able to plan for whatever we needed to do. . . . Fourteen hours later, we were ready and open for the buses from the Superdome. . . . What happened though was it was not an organized evacuation. . . . It was chaos as people came out. The state troopers that had gone to pick up the buses were not met by Louisiana state troopers as they had thought they would be met. . . .



Judge Eckels spent time with the evacuees from New Orleans who he said “were gracious people.”



Judge Eckels believes that the one word that best describes Houston is compassion, and he demonstrated that as he helped the evacuees.

There were about thirty shelters in the Houston area that were already set up and ready for people from New Orleans . . . But the news reports were out that the Astrodome was a shelter, . . . and they were coming there first. . . . [They] were gracious people who had been traumatized by a storm. They were worn out, they were tired, they were physically compromised, they were emotionally spent, they were trying to find their friends and family. . . .

The real miracle was . . . that we had 60,000 people that were processed through the Dome and moved on to other places— from the very beginning, my vision was that the Dome was not going to become a refugee camp; it was a shelter, and we would quickly move people to a more suitable spot. . . . Many people

still did not want to leave. But we had gotten down after about three weeks to about 1,200 people from that cap of about 30,000 . . . About half of those were problem placements that either had criminal records or physical instabilities or infirmities that were going to require some kind of special housing needs. . . .

You saw the community come together in a way that no one thought possible, so I guess a short, one word description of Houston would be compassion, but it was compassion with the capacity to deliver on that compassion and really make it work for these folks. . . .

It was not without problems. Ninety percent of the people that came from New Orleans were great folks. What we did find though, as we moved people out, [was] that there was an element that were bad guys too, that came to Houston; and while ninety percent of them were good, ten percent, or maybe a few more, of a quarter million people [was] still 25,000 or so bad guys. . . .

There is a quote in City Hall that [reads] “the people are the city.” And Houston is not really a place. It is a people. We all live here. But it is the people. It is the spirit of the city. And it is evolving as a city. The people are becoming more diverse and there is a lot of talk about the strength of diversity. And I do not really see diversity as a strength or a weakness. Diversity is what it is. It can destroy a city, and you have seen that in some cities. Or it can make a city much stronger. And the challenge of diversity is uniting all of those diverse strengths behind the common vision and a common spirit. We have done that with Hurricane Katrina, and its impact on New Orleans, and our response to that in Houston. . . . If [Houston] will maintain that can-do spirit, the problems don’t get bigger, just the opportunities get bigger, we are going to be a city of big opportunities and, I think, a city that will accomplish great things. 