Natural Disaster Management at West
Includes overview of Hurricane Season 2017
Preparedness is the Best Response

As multiple hurricanes approached the U.S. mainland with unbridled ferocity throughout Hurricane Season 2017, West’s Safety Services resolutely conducted business as usual.

At West, “business as usual” means strict adherence to proven and rigorous protocols to activate and implement Incident Command as needed. Long before Hurricane Harvey, and subsequently, Hurricanes Irma and Maria, struck landfall, our Incident Command Team had been activated in response to a potential network threat.

We are dedicated to providing the best service possible to our customers, even in the most dire and unpredictable circumstances. Our decisions on any day are based on the best possible information available, and informed by policy—preplanned, preemptive protocols that we’ve tried and tested to meet any challenge.

PLAN FOR THE WORST; EXPECT THE BEST

The West 24x7 Network Operations Center (NOC) continually monitors the health of all of our systems and remote networks; utilizing multiple proactive and reactive monitoring solutions. Without interruption, our technical analysts maintain a watchful eye over 7,000 circuits to Automatic Location Information (ALI) nodes across the U.S.

When disaster strikes, West is ready with a proactive, measured response. When Katrina and Rita struck in 2005, we were ready. Neither were we blindsided by Superstorm Sandy in 2007, or Hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008, or Earl in 2010. 2017 was no different. Every crisis survived is an opportunity to analyze and improve. In each of these instances, our systems remained intact.

Throughout a crisis, dedicated network engineers proactively assess evolving conditions to make qualified decisions based on the best information available. The primary focus of Incident Command is to manage the network and communicate with our carrier customers and PSAPs to ensure constant coordination of efforts.

INCIDENT COMMAND TEAM (ICT) CONVENED

At West, an “incident” is defined as anything that has the ability to affect customers somewhere. West adheres to a very strict protocol for Incident Command. Foresight is everything; incident teams are identified, placed and trained in FEMA procedures as common practice, well in advance of crisis situations. Once an incident is declared, each member is well-prepared for their role and how to respond.

As Irma barreled toward the Florida coastline, a team of West’s technical Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) convened to determine how to mitigate potential effects of the hurricane on our Miami data center. The Network Access Point (NAP) of the Americas is a massive, six-story, 750,000 square foot data center and internet exchange point and serves as Safety Services’ redundant data storage center. The building was designed to withstand Category 5 hurricane-level winds.

Even so, the ICT immediately and pro-actively began developing a plan that would ensure business continuity and prepare for disaster recovery without undermining the infrastructure that maintains essential, life-saving connections.
FIRST THINGS FIRST
The first task was to determine if any West systems or infrastructure might be at risk. It is much easier to recover systems that are brought down gracefully than if they crash. The NOC, data center, technology and customer teams were all fully engaged as Incident Command prescribed preemptive actions to ensure the safety of the network and call processing applications. Customers were notified that the technology was in place to safely and seamlessly make the transition from the Miami NAP to another viable facility outside of the Irma's path.

ZERO CALLS IMPACTED
Although the NAP building did go to generator power on Sunday, it was back on facility power on Monday. West teams were ready. Just as seamlessly as the Miami data center was taken out of queue on Saturday, it was brought back up on Monday. The connections were then tested, just like any other deployment.

Customers realized no impact. There were no brownouts in the 9-1-1 centers supported by Safety Services and no sustained impact to the West network and systems. Meticulous planning, continual monitoring, and responsive action ensured that not one call was affected.

AFTER THE STORM
Standard procedure for West's ICT is to remain on alert and activated long after this type of event seems to be over. We take all appropriate measures before, during and after an incident to ensure the availability of West resources.

Protocol dictates that all communications, decisions and actions are strictly recorded. Once the incident is past, every detail gathered is analyzed to see what went well and where we can make improvements.

Anything learned as a result is used for preparation for future cataclysmic events. While it's impossible to predict the chaos that weather systems can deliver, we protect our network and keep our systems safe and meet any network challenge with a prepared, measured, informed response.

From the onset, the most important aspect of managing this crisis was collaboration between Network and Operations teams and field technicians who had boots on the ground to support PSAP needs. When everything was back to normal, one team member said, "This was only about protecting 9-1-1 and saving lives."

“This was only about protecting 9-1-1 and saving lives.”
- WEST TEAM MEMBER
SAFETY SERVICES INCIDENT COMMAND OVERVIEW:

Incident Preparedness Meetings
Incidents are evaluated on a holistic, case-by-case basis. West stakeholders from multiple disciplines including Operations, NOC and Account Management review detailed inputs from Subject Matter Experts and discuss potential impacts to the network (including data), staffing and specific logistic plans.

Incident Management and Staffing
West has a long established incident command structure and process, and maintains two fully functional command centers. During a disaster, we operate the command center with increased staff, monitoring, alarming and customer communications. In addition to our field personnel, we work closely with our service partner network to ensure nationwide support coverage.

High Security and Hazard Access
West coordinates with federal, state and local governments to maintain “incident-only” access credentials. This allows West to enter, as needed, any damaged areas to repair data centers or assist carriers with onsite support.

Transportation Network
West tracks airport and highway openings and closings and stays up-to-date on the location of staging areas in impacted cities and states. This information assists us in making expedient travel decisions when repairs or onsite support are needed. Additionally, West participates in the FAA/DHS restricted airspace access program to ensure our personnel and equipment can reach critical areas that would be otherwise restricted for general aircraft.

Department of Homeland Security and Federal Communications Commission
West queries and remains in constant contact with federal agencies in Washington, D.C., including the FCC. To organize and direct our response, we also participate in briefings with the National Coordination Center (NCC), a division of the Department of Homeland Security. Based on the severity of the disaster, planning meetings with the NCC can range from daily to hourly. West partners with the NCC to provide situational analysis and submits reports to the FCC’s Disaster Information Reporting System (DIRS).

WHY CHOOSE WEST
West’s Safety Services is in the business of 9-1-1, but it’s also personal. After all, we’re all potential consumers of the most essential service anyone requires. We help carriers, alarm companies and organizations of all sizes connect millions of subscribers, employees, students and end users to the nearest emergency assistance, and we arm thousands of public safety agencies and first responders with critical data points to locate those individuals and coordinate the best response. As innovations emerge to make our lives more connected and convenient, we focus on the ones that make us all safer.

Ready to learn more? Connect with us: west.com/safety-services, 877.862.2835 or safetyservices@west.com.