

# All systems go

## Response to tornadoes in Eagle Pass a team effort

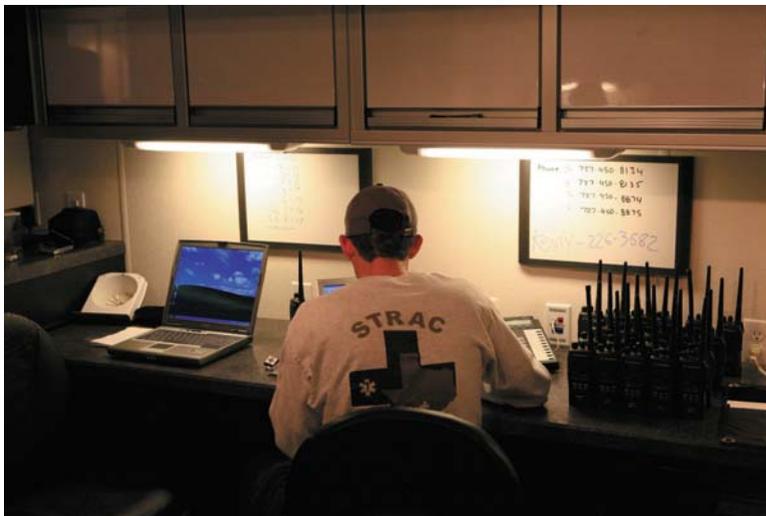
by Kelly Harrell

Early in the evening on April 24, EMS administrator Mike Farris settled in to watch *Deadliest Catch*, a cable TV show about fishing crews battling treacherous weather on the open sea. Farris also was watching the weather a little closer to home.

As emergency coordinator and administrator for several EMS systems in Southwest Texas, he knew a powerful storm developing over the mountains of Mexico might mean trouble for his crews.

A few hundred miles north in San Antonio, staff from the Southwest Texas Regional Advisory Council (STRAC) and regional medical communications (MEDCOM) monitored the storm's progress. STRAC encompasses about 26,000 square miles and 22 counties, including Maverick County, which sits on the Mexican border.

A little after 7:00 p.m., Farris' phone rang. It was Eric Epley, executive director of STRAC. A strong tornado had just hit south of Eagle Pass in Maverick County before continuing northeast toward Uvalde. Hundreds of structures sustained damaged – which



*The 38-foot STRAC command trailer was activated for the first time after a tornado tore through South Texas. Equipped with satellite technology and broadband internet access, the trailer allowed rescue personnel to download maps for search and rescue teams.*

meant a potential for scores of patients. Several fatalities had been reported. Eagle Pass Fire and EMS, the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ), had called MEDCOM early on to request help. STRAC's 20-foot mass casualty (MCI) trailer and its new, 38-foot command trailer were on the way. Epley needed Farris to manage the ambulance strike team, which coordinates emergency responders from different jurisdictions under one command during a disaster.

"The idea is that it's not just a bunch of ambulances heading down there, but to have someone be a leader and to manage those assets, lessening the burden on Eagle Pass FD," says Farris, who chairs STRAC's Prehospital Committee. "An hour and 40 minutes after Eric called, I was in

Eagle Pass."

Farris jumped in his pickup truck, driving through storms to arrive around 9 p.m. He was in constant contact with staff at MEDCOM, who passed Farris' cell phone number to ambulance crews from Hondo, Utopia, Kerrville, Edwards County and Uvalde.

Meanwhile, Eagle Pass incident command began to get a clearer picture of the situation.

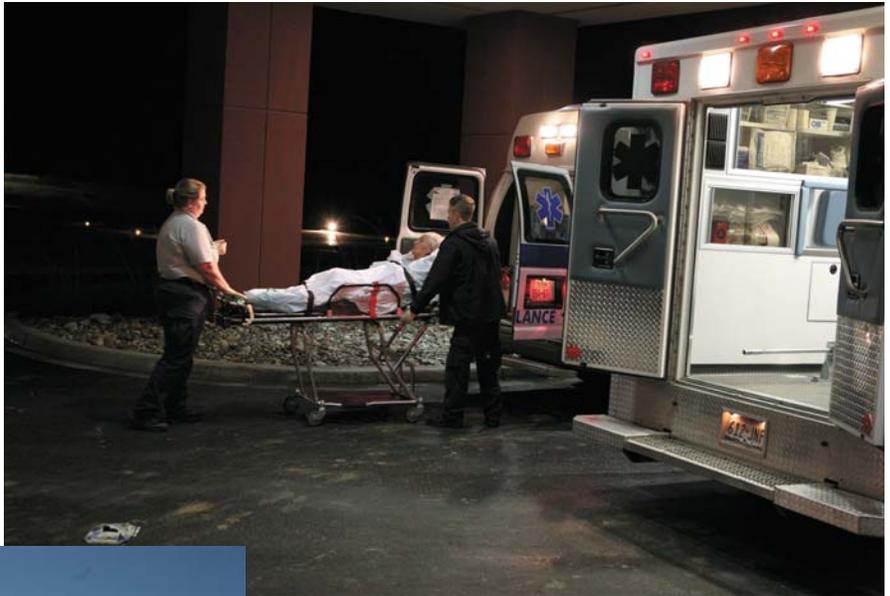
"En route to the scene, I found out that they needed us at the hospital to transport patients," Farris says. "I diverted ambulances to hospitals where we could do transfers."

Fort Duncan Medical Center, a level IV trauma center in Eagle Pass, was quickly inundated with dozens of patients. The strike team ambulances, aided by several private units already there, began transporting. Ten patients, three on ventilators, went by ground to San Antonio and Val Verde Regional Medical Center.

Adrian Davila, an EMT-I with Eagle Pass Fire and EMS for 11 years, was one of the first on scene. He also worked in the city's emergency operations center (EOC) during the event and saw how the system worked.

“As soon as something happens, we call MEDCOM and activate the system,” Davila says. “Everybody was impressed with this effort and rapid deployment.”

Farris and some strike team ambulances returned home before dawn. Many more people stayed behind. DSHS, the agency responsible for public and medical health in a disaster, sent a team of specialists from San



*The tornado that hit south of Eagle Pass on April 24 killed seven people and sent dozens to Fort Duncan Medical Center. Winds also damaged hundreds of structures.*

Antonio to handle issues such as immunizations and mental health programs. DSHS and STRAC personnel, including six people from STRAC’s emergency operations division, helped the EPFD Incident Commander manage the search and rescue efforts. They also assisted with development of an incident action plan (IAP), a component of the National Incident Management System training. Responders set up headquarters in the command

trailer, funded by STRAC and bioterrorism funds from hospitals and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Equipped with satellite technology and broadband internet, the trailer provided a way for rescue personnel to access vital information.

“We were able to download maps of neighborhoods and plot coordinates for search and rescue teams from the trailer,” Epley says.

After 48 hours, search and rescue efforts ceased. STRAC

*Ambulances from Hondo, Utopia, Kerrville, Edwards County and Uvalde responded to Eagle Pass in April as part of an ambulance strike team led by Mike Farris, an EMS administrator for several services in Southwest Texas.*

personnel headed north in the trailer, while DSHS staff stayed on the scene 10 more days to assist with public and mental health infrastructure. The response earned praise from U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt, who heard about the response from news reports.

At final tally, the twister killed seven people and injured scores more. Winds and rain damaged hundreds of buildings in Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras. The city is still rebuilding. And the different agencies and organizations are ready to respond again, just like they planned.

“When Katrina happened, we came up with all these different ideas of how we could respond,” Davila says. “It paid off – all this training we’ve had, all this planning we’ve done.” ●