

Post-Storm Isaias Press Conference

Monday, August 3, 2020

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information of Volusia County

Ed Kelley - Chair, Volusia County Council

Jim Judge – Director, Emergency Management of Volusia County

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information of Volusia County

Good afternoon, I am Kevin Captain, Community Information Director for Volusia County government and this is the 11:00 a.m. briefing, Monday, August 3rd. It is a post-storm briefing for Isaias. With us today is Volusia County Chair, Ed Kelley and Emergency Management Director, Jim Judge.

Isaias passed us last night and early this morning as a tropical storm. At this point, it appears effects on the county are very minimal. We've connected with our partners at the cities and municipalities, as well as our other agency partners, and it appears everyone fared well. There are some branches and limbs that we are picking up, but nothing significant or major damage has been reported. Additionally, there are no reports of power outages as well.

I'm happy to report also that our beaches fared very well. There is minimal erosion, with only one walkover closed for repair, which should be all done by tomorrow. Beach restrooms are being inspected and will be reopened after cleaning, and portalets will be redeployed tomorrow. Toll booths are being put back into place this morning, and ramps are going to be opened as they are able to open for vehicles on to the beach, as it is cleared for reopening. Also, Environmental Management is going to be looking at the turtle nests. There has been a report of 700 reported nests on our beaches. So, as the tide recedes from this morning

This morning, as the tide recedes, Environmental Management will be assessing each nest and logging any impacts from the storm. If any of the posts that mark the nests have been compromised, they must replace those. So, this is happening currently, and as sections of the beach are cleared, they will reopen to driving.

The Volusia Beaches app, available on Google Play and on the Apple Store, provides real-time updates on the vehicle access ramps, so that's a great resource for you the public, as the ramps begin to reopen.

And with that, we'll bring up Volusia County Chair Ed Kelley, for an additional report.

Ed Kelley - Chair, Volusia County Council

Thank you Kevin and good morning everyone. Isaias, what we've always known, confirmed it; hurricanes are unpredictable.

Early last week, we began closely monitoring the potential impact on the Florida coast, and it looked that we could even have possibly had a direct hit, based upon the movement. As we know, a zag here or a jog there, makes a huge difference, but we were prepared. This is not something that we think about, or that Jim Judge, the "Man in Charge of the Year," works on all year long. But, what he did have to do in this particular one, because of the COVID, he had to make some adjustments to our standard operating procedure. And, he did that very well. Everything that he had to adjust and put into place worked well.

But, this storm did not happen to have a major impact on us. But, we were happy that that happened. But that's not always the case and we still have to be prepared. This was to be considered a dry run, but let's take those. I'll take a dry run on every hurricane warning that we have coming up. But it did give the team the opportunity to mobilize those operations that they have in place. And, Jim shared with me earlier that all of that worked and went smoothly.

Now, we've had questions about how to cope with the major storm during the pandemic; this shows that we have a great plan in place, it was executed and worked well. And while we always hope that we won't have to face a major hurricane or storm in the future, we know that we're prepared for that and I applaud our team, Jim Judge, and our entire department on what they did on being prepared.

A quick note on COVID. As the editorial pointed out in the News Journal this morning, no one is immune from it. As we know, Sheriff Chitwood, tested positive. Holly Hill Mayor, Chris Via tested positive. About 30 minutes ago I got a call from my son; he tested positive this morning. And he said the worst part about it that he had been experiencing is the things that people have, but we are all able to get it. So, take those precautions. I think two weeks ago, three weeks ago now, we started our program to back up, wash up, mask up. And so while we are not going to jinx ourselves, maybe I will Kevin, a little bit, we seem to be on a trend by people following those guidelines of masking up when you are out and

shopping. As we are having one or two little spikes caused by a surge in one particular location or something, so continue to mask up, wash up and back up. And, with that I will have Jim Judge come and share some of the particulars on what he had to deal with over this weekend.

Jim Judge – Director, Emergency Management of Volusia County

Thank you very much Chairman Kelley. Well, good morning everyone. It is a beautiful day in Volusia County. A little bit of recap on the storm and what we deal with.

Of course we monitor the National Hurricane Center and the National Weather Service out of Melbourne, but also we have proprietary products that we do utilize that really does give us information on potential storms when they are just literally coming off of the coast of Africa. And, that is called StormGeo. So, literally we began monitoring this system on July the 26th. It was a low pressure area. It was coming off the coast of Africa, but we could tell at that point there was some potential with this. So, anytime there is a blip in the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic, we know about it and we begin to monitor it. So, that is important for us to know that we are prepared. Once the storm becomes a potential threat that is when the National Hurricane Center and the National Weather Service begin to provide information for us.

And, here is the thing with this storm, one thing that I look at right away is, “What is the forecast confidence?” First thing I look at. And the forecast confidence over the first few days was low, meaning they were still trying to figure out, along with everybody else. So, the forecast confidence was low into this. So, on the 28th it was projected to go through the Florida straits and go into the Gulf as a low pressure area, because there was a lot of dry air and wind shear was affecting the system at that point. So, on the 29th, you know just another day later, well, what happened then is there were two low pressure areas, you know, down south of the Bahamas. One was to the north, one was to the south. So, we were waiting to see which one was going to be the dominant. The north, if became the stronger would pull toward the north. If it was the one to the south it would have taken it again through, again the Florida straits and into the Gulf. Well, we of course know the rest of that story. The northern side of that low pressure became the dominant and it did of course move up the east coast.

Then literally a day later, you know, we were dealing with, continuing to deal with the issues. Then, on Thursday the 30th, it did become a tropical storm. And, then on the 31st, then of course, we had the hurricane conditions. So, at one point we were literally under a hurricane warning, hurricane force

winds were going to come right into the coast. We had tropical storm force warnings inland. We were also under a storm surge watch. We also had close to a full moon so you've always got to factor that into your tides, and when those high tides are going to occur.

So, with all that, and as we planned to move forward, of course we are going to take on a lot of initiatives and notify all of our emergency management partners. We are going to participate in all of the briefings. We are going to keep the city managers informed. And then, of course, our Managers Advisory Group; very important with Chairman Kelley and our leadership to make sure that they understand the conditions that we are facing. And then, also opening up our Citizen Information Center. We brought in a small staff because of the social distancing, but we were adequately able to handle the phone calls. But that's where the phone calls that we were getting from the public were about special needs. We had a lot of calls with individuals concerned about oxygen, making sure that they could plug in their oxygen generator, and even staff came to me a couple of times just to make sure that I knew just how many calls we were getting on that.

So, you know with that we were also operating the Emergency Operations Center in a virtual format. We had everybody tied into here, about 38 different agencies; our cities, fire, EMS, law enforcement, and then we would providing briefings to them multiple times a day to be able to keep them informed. So, then, out of an abundance of caution, and then also looking at the storm, and also the National Weather Service told us on every briefing, and even on phone calls in between, all it had to do was move 10 or 15 miles to the west and we would have had even more significant conditions. And again, pushing those hurricane force winds farther inland and then also the tropical storm force winds farther inland. So, a serious situation.

You know we always want to err on the side of safety with for our public. So, out of an abundance of caution and also factoring all of the phone calls for special needs, we did open two special needs shelters. We went to Freedom Elementary and we also went to Galaxy Middle School.

Our Fairgrounds is also an excellent facility and pet-friendly. We pulled the trigger and opened up that, and our lifeguards were in that facility.

Then, we also wanted a general population shelter, so we went to DeLand High School. We messaged that quite a bit and yesterday morning we opened up all those shelters at 8:00 a.m., and we continued to monitor those through the day. And, I guess the good news was that nobody took us up on it. We had a couple of people show up at Galaxy who decided to go home.

And with that, looking at conditions coming in after 3:00 o'clock, that could potentially create problems for people on the roads, Votran was shut down. And, at that point we made the decision to close the shelters. And again, there wasn't anybody anywhere. We had one gentleman who came out to the Fairgrounds who needed a place to stay. We worked with Community Services and found that individual a hotel room.

But again, as Chairman Kelley mentioned, it was a good drill for us. We did get to practice quite a bit. We delivered cots, supplies, hand sanitizer, masks, to all of these facilities. Our school district, we are thankful for them. But again at the 3:00 o'clock timeframe it was time to shut down. When nobody is there we have a lot of staff at each one of these facilities. We want to get them home and back to their families since they were not needed.

So, you know we do save all of those supplies from all of those facilities. We're going to pack them back up, we're going to put them back in storage, and be ready to go. But, it's always easier to ramp down, than ramp up. I'd rather thank those folks and say it's time to go home, we didn't have anything. Versus the other situation hoping that nothing happens or trying to make those phone calls to put those things together at the last minute. But, as the condition changes we literally thought that we only have from 8:00 o'clock to Noon on Sunday to get those shelters open and get those people evacuated, because that was the condition. That was the hand we were dealt. Luckily the storm slowed down and actually gave us more time during the day to be able to allow folks the opportunity to seek shelter if they needed it.

Then of course it went back to a tropical storm, and so conditions looked more favorable. The storm surge probability changed. The rainfall amounts changed. One of the things that we were monitoring were the outer rain bands. Had the outer rain bands come on shore we could have gotten higher winds, we could have got more rain, but luckily it stayed even further toward the east. And, luckily at 4:15 this morning, the meteorologist with the National Weather Service, Mr. Pendergrass called and said, "Jim, you are out of the woods. They are taking down the tropical storm force warnings for Volusia County. They don't even anticipate wind or even any storm surge." And, so with that was good news that the system moved off.

Now, I am sure that my counterparts up around North Carolina, they are watching and taking those protective actions, and they are looking at this thing just as we did. Lots of difficult decisions are made. Chairman Kelley and leadership are incredible; our County Council. And, so, we always want to take and

be precautions. We want to err on the side of safety and if it's needed, it's needed, but if it's not, then we are able to shut it down and get back to normal operations.

And so, it's early August and so we have a long way to go; August, September, October, November is usually pretty quiet, but given how the conditions have been, there is just no telling. But this was a good run for us. Also, not only with the shelters; operating in a virtual environment, and at the same time being able to keep our leadership and our municipalities informed. I am proud of everybody who's involved, from Fire, EMS, law enforcement, everybody did an incredible job. The partners, the community, our city managers were right there with us every step of the way. So, we got a great community. We have great partnerships and everybody pulling together in a disaster. Of course we went through Dorian, Irma, and Matthew, so you form those relationships and those partnerships, and friendships during events like that, and it just continues to make us stronger and better at what we do.

Of course, we are going to take a look at everything we did. We're going to talk to our partners. We are going to talk to the school district. How did it go? How did we do? What can we do better? And so, that will all be taking place in the coming weeks. So with that, I thank you very much for being here today and I will turn it over to Kevin Captain.

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information of Volusia County

Thank you so much Jim and Chair Kelley. Those are excellent updates. I thank you all for tuning in and listening to us as well as we provide these updates. As the Chair and Mr. Judge had said, this storm is a great reminder of the unpredictability of storms and the importance of being prepared. So, should any other future storms threaten Volusia County, we will be ready to react and keep our residents and visitors informed. Also, if you were able to pick up any sandbags, we encourage you to keep them for the remainder of the season, as we still have quite a bit of the season to go through.

I think that we do have a few questions from Spectrum.

Question 1: Rebecca with Spectrum News 13: Mr. Judge could you talk a little bit about, this is really the first storm we've had to deal with in the midst of a pandemic, so it is different. If you could talk a little bit about some of the COVID precautions that were in place. And, how you were saying earlier, what you learned from them and how you hope to use that tool toward the next storm in this hurricane season.

Answer 1: Absolutely, you know, we always, we're going to take temperature checks as anyone comes into the facilities. We are going to hand out hand sanitizer. We do provide extra masks for individuals. We do provide, of course, food for everyone. And, of course, had we had people show up and had to shelter, then we are going to have a safety officer to make sure we are going to practice the social distancing and remind people for hand washing. We also have a lot of signage that we can place out at the shelters to remind everybody, whether it is in restrooms or just around the building. So, literally taking every precaution we can think of to protect the residents when they shelter.

And, something else I did right after hurricane Hanna made landfall in Texas, I reached out to my counterparts from Corpus Christi and other areas, also to the Red Cross that did sheltering out that way, and listened to how everything went for them. And, then I ran down our preparedness plan for pandemic sheltering and quite honestly we hit every mark in what we are preparing to do.

Of course in our special need shelters, not only do we have the school staff there at those two facilities, we also have the Health Department, who provides the medical oversight. We do have nurses out there. At the DeLand High School, of course, they have a nurse out there as part of the normal school district employees that are at that facility. But, I did ask Evac to send an ambulance out there out of an abundance of caution. I called Chief Allen from DeLand Fire, and asked if he would send a unit out just if there were people who needed to come in they could help with the temperature checks and just making sure that everything flowed real well.

At the Fairgrounds we've got lifeguards out there; they are also EMTs, so they were prepared. We had corrections officers, law enforcement staged as well so we pulled the trigger on it all. And everything we could possibly think of to make sure that things flowed smoothly. But, luckily we didn't need it, but we were really ready for every single aspect of the sheltering component for this, from the PPE, the personal protective equipment, to the hand sanitizer to the thermometers, social distancing signs, staff educated, so I am really proud of how everything went.

Question 2: And, just a follow up, as far as shelters are concerned, how are the numbers impacted? I know there wasn't a need to use them this time, but how many people could be held in the shelters for prior hurricanes and with pandemic procedures in place. Have those numbers had to shift at all to allow for social distancing?

Answer 2: That's a great question. You know, on a normal hurricane without COVID-19, we usually give folks about 20 square feet. In a special need shelter, about 60 square feet, because again, medical you

want to separate that. With COVID-19 each individual gets 60 square feet, and in shelters with special need, 80 square feet. So, in a school that may hold 250, a high school, well then obviously we can hold a lot less than that. So, that is why we need more schools. If we had, let's say, a Category two or three come in off the Atlantic, and we need to evacuate, we are going to need all of our schools. Probably about 34 different facilities, along with the Fairgrounds, and that would also include Daytona State College.

So, in order, if we felt the need to evacuate that many people, but there is always a chance that Volusia County could become a host shelter. So, we could have serious situations to our north, west or south, where individuals would need to shelter with Volusia County. So, we also need to be ready for that, so that we can open up facilities and take all of those same precautions. So, just as we may need to send people to other areas based on a significant storm, we are ready to help our neighbors as well. Thank you.

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information of Volusia County

Thank you Jim. I just want to remind anybody with a cell phone or smart phone that you can go to Google Play or the App Store, and you can download two very important apps, and many more for Volusia County, but we encourage you to download the Emergency Management app and the Beaches app as well. We also have park apps and others as well. In addition to that we also have the Community Information Facebook page as well, the Emergency Management Facebook page and other Facebook pages to follow Volusia County.

With that, we thank you for listening today. Take care, stay safe and help your neighbors.