

2017 Florida Public Relations Association Golden Image Award Submission

Division A: Public Relations Programs

Category 5: Crisis Communication: Hurricane Matthew

Erick Gill – St. Lucie County Communications Director

Research/Situation Analysis: Before 2016 hurricane season, St. Lucie County's Communications Division updated its hurricane manual/procedures to incorporate social media. During past emergency events, (Hurricanes France and Jeanne in 2004; Hurricane Wilma in 2005 and Tropical Storm Fay in 2009) staff wrote press releases, updated websites, distributed situation reports and coordinated press briefings. However, this time around, St. Lucie County planned to focus heavily on social media. According to an October 2015 report by the Pew Research Center, 65 percent of American adults (almost two-thirds) use social media. Furthermore, a Pew study published in May 2016 found that 62 percent of the nation's adults get their news from social media. Because of these statistics, combined with the fact that there are less journalists in the newsrooms today (Treasure Coast Newspapers wrote it had half of the staff covering Hurricane Matthew than it did in 2004 for Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne), St. Lucie County felt it was imperative to utilize social media for emergency events.

Objectives: 1) Provide the county's 300,000 residents and media (local, regional and national) with timely/relevant information about Hurricane Matthew, mainly through social media, responding to questions/concerns within a 30-minute timeframe. 2) Protect public safety, minimizing injuries/deaths to residents and first-responders. 3) Increase our social media reach by 185 percent (at least 10,000 residents at a time when we had roughly 4,000 followers).

Implementation: The Communications Division Director began by sitting in conference calls with the Public Safety staff, the National Hurricane Center and the Florida Division of Emergency Management as early as Thursday, Sept. 29 and through the weekend. By Tuesday afternoon, Oct. 4, it was clear that St. Lucie County was in the storm's path with the potential to sustain a direct hit by a hurricane as strong as a Category 4 sometime between late Thursday, Oct. 6 and early Friday, Oct. 7. On Tuesday, Oct. 4, Public Safety officials agreed to close schools, so they could be used as shelters, as well as local governments by noon on Wednesday, Oct. 5 and remain closed until further notice. The Communications Director drafted/distributed four press releases and more than a dozen social media posts about protective actions the public should begin to take: Everything from shelter locations to reminders about not putting out vegetative debris for roadside pickup. The Communications Director and SLCTV Coordinator set up broadcast equipment at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) on Wednesday morning to allow St. Lucie County to stream daily press briefings directly to Facebook Live. Staff ran this feed through its video broadcasting equipment, instead of just using a smart phone or tablet, so that we could use a graphics generator to

post lower-thirds such as the Information Hotline phone number, which was being staffed beginning at noon on Wednesday. Gov. Rick Scott announced he was visiting St. Lucie County's EOC and would kick off the county's noon briefing, which was covered by more than a dozen media outlets and streamed live to Facebook. By Thursday at 7 a.m., the Communications staff returned to the EOC and stayed there through the duration of the hurricane, which arrived late Thursday/early Friday morning. Throughout the night, the Communications Director responded to social media questions, coordinating responses with the nearly two dozen agencies at the EOC: Everything from working with FPL and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to answer Tweets about safety at the St. Lucie Nuclear Power Plant to how the public can locate relatives stationed at a Red Cross shelter. A member of WPTV Ch. 5 and TCPalm/Treasure Coast Newspapers were embedded at the EOC for the duration of the storm. Throughout the night and into Friday morning the Communications Director handled live phone interviews with local television stations in West Palm Beach to national outlets including CNN and the Weather Channel. Luckily, the storm "jogged" north and only grazed St. Lucie County with Category 1 force winds. Even at a weak Category 1, Hurricane Matthew caused more than \$9 million in damages to St. Lucie County facilities. Staff used social media with the hashtag #HurricaneMatthew in the weeks after the storm to communicate restoration efforts.

Evaluation: Objective 1: Throughout Hurricane Matthew, St. Lucie County had more than 125 posts on Twitter and Facebook, utilizing the hashtag #HurricaneMatthew. More importantly our average response time on Facebook was 3 minutes. County officials received four emails, dozens of social media posts and two Letter to the Editors thanking the county staff for its efforts during Hurricane Matthew. Even the local paper, TCPalm, wrote an editorial about how well communications were handled. Objective 2: We were able to keep residents safe with a successful evacuation of our barrier island (more than 1,100 residents used our public shelters). Unfortunately, there was one "storm-related" death attributed to the storm; due to an elderly person suffering a heart-attack during the height of the storm and first-responders were unable to go out safely. Objective 3: Our average monthly reach for 2016 was roughly 3,500 people. For the month of October that jumped to 25,000 (a 650 percent increase). Additionally, followers to our page increase by 15 percent for the month. All three of our EOC press briefings were streamed live to Facebook. (For the first two, we did experience some issues with audio lagging due to poor bandwidth, but this was resolved by Friday morning).

Budget: Two of the division's four staff members worked at the EOC for four days at the EOC at a cost of roughly \$4,400.

St. Lucie County Communications Division

Organizational Overview

The St. Lucie County Communications Division is part of the County Administration Office, reporting directly to the County Administrator. The division is managed by Division Director Erick Gill and consists of three full-time employees (a media specialist, SLCTV coordinator and a digital content coordinator). Established in 2001, the Communications Division is responsible for the internal and external promotion of all St. Lucie County departments and offices that are managed by the Board of County Commissioners.

The office is responsible for all of St. Lucie County's press releases, brochures and other promotional materials, the county's website, social media accounts and government access channel, which operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week airing live meetings and original programs.

The overall budget for the St. Lucie County Office of Media Relations is roughly \$521,000 for the 2016-17 fiscal year.