

Tyler Junior College Medical Special Needs Shelter Operations

“Taking the Fear Out of Evacuation”

By Brian Turman

The journey for Tyler Junior College’s involvement in medical special needs sheltering began in late summer, early fall of 2005. One of the nation’s most devastating hurricane events was at the forefront of everyone’s mind, Hurricane Katrina. With mass evacuations of hundreds of coastal and low lying areas, the City of Tyler and several of the local churches became general population shelters for evacuees primarily from the Louisiana Gulf Coast area. Our past president, Dr. William Crowe, had college staff visit some of these shelters to determine if Tyler Junior College could become involved in future sheltering events should the need arise.

Little did we know that some two short weeks after Hurricane Katrina the citizens of the Texas Gulf Coast would face a similar disaster, Hurricane Rita. With little more than 48 hours’ notice, Tyler Junior College was activated as a designated medical special needs shelter for the Orange, Beaumont, Port Arthur area along the Texas coast. As the special needs guests arrived in a sea of confusion due to traffic problems, some of which had travelled by ambulance and bus for over 24 hours, the Tyler Junior College sheltering experience began. For 17 days the college, along with the Texas Department of Health and Army Medical Rangers, college faculty, staff and students, supported and cared for over 300 nursing home- type guests with a single goal in mind, to allow these guests to return home in a better condition than when they arrived at the college.

At the conclusion of this first shelter, the operation at Tyler Junior College was commended as a best practice model by the Surgeon General’s Office, just the beginning for Tyler Junior College and its commitment and service to the special needs population during evacuations in Texas.

Included in the first shelter were guests from a nursing home in Silsbee, Texas, a facility owned by the Cantex Corporation. Cantex approached the college with the idea of contracting for future evacuation needs of their facilities located in Silsbee, Vidor, and Groves, Texas. This, to our knowledge, had never been attempted before.

The college met with Cantex company officials and signed the first contract for planned point-to-point evacuation of medical special needs. The rest is now history. Fortunately, for the years 2006 and 2007 there were no evacuations necessary for these Texas coast nursing home facilities. A great relief for all parties, including Tyler Junior College.

Old man weather flared up in grand style in the months of August and September 2008 with two evacuations for the Cantex Texas coast facilities with the onset of hurricanes Gustav and Ike. These two weather events were less than 10 days apart. Tyler Junior College cared for 250 residents from the contracted Cantex facilities for 5 days during Hurricane Ike and 7 days during Hurricane Gustav. During these two shelters Tyler Junior College was visited by our local Texas Department of Health and a

neighboring college to view the TJC shelter operation. Local health officials were most complimentary of the way the TJC shelter operated and its entire organizational plan.

In March 2008 Tyler Junior College was presented an award by the Commissioners Court of Smith County for its efforts in medical special needs sheltering. TJC President Dr. Mike Metke was very excited and commented that through this shelter operation the 3 Promises of the college were met: (1) A Quality Education, (2) A Vibrant Student Life, and (3) Community Service. In June 2009 Brian Turman and Randy Melton, coordinators for the Tyler Junior College shelter operations, will be recognized by the Cantex Corporation at the company's annual awards dinner in Frisco, Texas.

Sharing this shelter operation plan with other colleges and universities has been a goal for both Turman and Melton since the first shelter in 2005. In the fall of 2008 LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas, signed a similar contract with Cantex to facilitate additional nursing home properties along the Texas Gulf Coast. In September 2009 Turman and Melton will be presenting the Tyler Junior College shelter model in a program format at the Texas Association of Chief Community College Student Affairs Administrators conference in Tyler and in November 2009 will present the program again in Honolulu, Hawaii, at the annual meeting of the National Association of College Auxiliary Services meeting.

"Taking the Fear Out of Evacuation" not only is the motto of the Tyler Junior College shelter operation, but was humbly bestowed upon the college in 2005 by Martha Jo Reeves, the administrator from Silsbee Convalescent Center, Silsbee, Texas. Tyler Junior College is honored to uphold this motto and to continue to offer medical special needs sheltering for the Cantex properties in Texas.