Hurricane Irene brought with it a range of devastating impacts across our vast region. More than a month later we, along with dozens of counties around the region, continue to struggle with these impacts. At the same time my agency is leading an after-action review process with our agency and stakeholder partners to analyze what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better.

We have spent the past six years building the most comprehensive and operational Coastal Storm Plan in the nation. Anyone who has spent more than a few minutes with me has heard our planning assumptions: Worst-case Category 4 hurricane; 31-foot storm surge; 3+ million residents to evacuate; 600,000+ evacuees to shelter; 501 Hurricane Shelters, 8 Special Medical Needs Shelters, and 65 Evacuation Centers to open and operate (our motto is “Safe, secure, staffed, and supplied”).

In my experienced opinion, the Coastal Storm Plan worked. But rather than describing tactics, the Plan lists roles and responsibilities for each piece and gets the right agencies in the right place to simultaneously mobilize, activate, operate, and execute their respective operations. These include the Unified Operations and Resource Center to manage sheltering operations, the Healthcare Facility Evacuation Center to manage hospital and nursing home evacuations, and the Logistics Center to manage resources.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the Coastal Storm Plan relies on our best asset, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), to tie all of these pieces together. The EOC gets the right information to the right people at the right time (including City Hall and the field) to enable them to identify and quickly address those inevitable problems that will arise.

An example of this was the mayor’s evacuation order that added dozens of healthcare facilities to a mandatory evacuation within hours of the arrival of gale force winds. The Healthcare Facility Evacuation Center, with more than 20 staff from city, state, and non-profit partners, worked closely with the EOC to identify the transportation resources and destination beds we needed to accomplish the mission.

Hurricane Irene was an enormous challenge for NYC and resources and destination beds we needed to accomplish the mission.
When it became evident that Irene would make landfall over New York City as a Category One Hurricane, the New York City Office of Emergency Management activated its Coastal Storm Shelter Plan. At the heart of this plan is the Unified Operations and Resource Center (UORC – pronounced “U-Rock”), an interagency task force led by NYC Department of Homeless Services and NYC OEM. The UORC operates from a stand-alone facility established when the shelter plan is activated so that the massive coordination effort required for the emergency shelter system can run parallel with the NYC Emergency Operations Center (EOC) without diverting personnel from other storm-related operations.

Prior to landfall, City agencies deployed more than 70 representatives to run the UORC along with subject matter experts from the Regional Integration Center (RIC) team. The UORC staff would oversee the sheltering operation from set-up to demobilization.

As the storm approached, UORC staff guided 65 Evacuation Centers, 82 Hurricane Shelters, and 8 Special Medical Needs Shelters through the mobilization process, addressing issues such as facility set-up, logistics, shelter stockpile delivery, and the assignment and training of staff so that the facilities would be ready to receive evacuees.

Throughout the event, as evacuees arrived and the storm made landfall, the UORC maintained communication with all facilities in the shelter system, identifying planning concerns and gaps, as well as critical decision points for City leadership. The UORC also collected information on evacuees, facilities, and staff, and issued reports on a regular schedule to become part of the NYC EOC Situation Reports. At the peak of the event, the UORC had coordinated a system with more than 5,000 shelter staff and approximately 10,000 evacuees.

The UORC staff focused particular attention to the needs of those in the shelters with functional and access needs, including the medical requirements of residents from several nursing homes that unexpectedly evacuated the Rockaway Peninsula and sought refuge at New York City’s Special Medical Needs Shelters.

After the storm passed and it was safe for evacuees to return home, the UORC coordinated the demobilization of the shelter system, including providing accessible transportation to those with functional and access needs so that everyone who was sheltered in the system could return home safely.

The UORC – Coordinating NYC’s Emergency Shelter System

Hurricane Irene Meets the RIC

As Hurricane Irene churned in the Atlantic Ocean off the Carolinas, many emergency operations centers in the NY-NJ-CT-PA region and their associated coastal storm plans had already been activated. All forecasts showed the storm tracking directly through the center of our region. It was not a question of whether we would be hit, but how hard. A crucial question remained: could emergency management operations get big enough fast enough?

Recognizing the wealth of planning knowledge at the RIC, the RCPT called on the team for support. This activation presented an opportunity to see our plans in action, and to test our Interagency Task Forces (ITF) as a mechanism for coordination and problem solving.

By Thursday August 25th, the entire RIC staff was integrated into NYC EOC’s 24-hour rotation to work on the following operations: sheltering, evacuation, transportation, debris management, critical infrastructure, logistics, and health and medical. RIC staff assigned to the sheltering mission were detailed to the NYC OEM UROC, (see article above).

As the storm approached the Carolinas on the morning of August 26th, RIC staff within the UORC and in the field were troubleshooting issues related to the opening of Evacuation Centers, Hurricane Shelters, and Special Medical Needs Shelters throughout the five boroughs. RIC Executive Director Steven Gutkin responded to individual evacuation centers and shelters to help organize staff and increase the effectiveness of the facility.

By late Saturday evening (August 27th) when tropical storm-force winds arrived in the region, approximately 10,000 persons and their pets occupied the City’s shelters without incident, and shelter supplies to sustain seven times that client population for four days had been delivered and deployed.

As Irene departed the region, residents returned to their homes and the shelters began to close. The RIC logistics team remained to augment the NYC OEM logistics operation of demobilizing the stockpile and retrieving the unused supplies to be transported back to the City’s warehouses. At that same time and following a request from New Jersey State Police OEM, several RIC staffers deployed to assist in setting up shelter operations in Paterson, NJ. It had become apparent that approximately 5,000 residents of a housing complex would be evacuated due to rapidly rising flood waters from the Passaic River. The RIC team responded, setup a shelter, and later transitioned over the operation to the American Red Cross.