

THE HISTORY OF ORGANIZED SEARCH AND RESCUE IN FLORIDA

In the early 1980's, two fire departments, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue (at that time known as Metro-Dade Fire Rescue) and the Fairfax County Fire & Rescue Department, operated under an agreement with the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) of the U.S. State Department to provide international search and rescue assistance in times of disaster. During these early years, assistance was provided to the countries of Mexico, Philippines and Soviet Armenia.

In 1991, FEMA further developed the US&R team concept into a federal response plan which involved over 20 teams who were geographically dispersed throughout the country, with local public safety departments as the sponsoring agencies. FL-TF1 (Miami-Dade) and FL-TF2 (Miami) were recognized as part of this newly formed National Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) Response System.

Based in part on the response seen with Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and the Murrah Federal Building bombing in 1995, personnel from HCFR, SPFR and TFR began training personnel and purchasing equipment to support a local US&R team (Type 3) in 1996. This team would subsequently be designated as FL-TF3.

During the period of February 22-23, 1998, Florida was struck by a series of tornados that caused damage across multiple counties along the I-4 corridor of Central Florida, including the Greater Orlando area, which killed 42 people and caused 260 injuries. Local officials called for search and rescue resources but because there was no list of resources or way of requesting response, a general call through the media was made. This resulted in a disorganized response of state and local search and rescue (SAR) resources.

Untrained personnel responded with untrained dogs. The lack of a credentialing system resulted in officials deploying search teams throughout the affected areas. Handlers "cleared" areas only to have victims located much later in the debris. Handlers and searchers fought over search areas, their dogs fought with each other resulting in the responders becoming part of the problem.

As a result of this disorganized response, the Governor tasked the State Fire Marshal's office with organizing, typing and devising a method of alerting SAR resources. In the summer of 1999, a summit was held at the Florida State Fire College. All known SAR team leaders in the state were invited, including FL-TF 1 & 2, who did not attend. The Director of the Florida Fire College, Rand Napoli, asked members of the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association (FFCA) to assist him in facilitating this meeting. The group was divided into 3 groups; governance, standards and typing. The group was tasked with developing resource typing complete with training/certification requirements and a means of organizing the resources. The group was given a year to come to agreement on these issues, or the governor would turn over all SAR response to the Fire Marshal's office.

Kathy Johnston, Ron Rogers, Pat Abrams, Kevin Rolfe, Verne Riggall and others served on these work groups. The governance group discussed the best way to organize and govern the group. Because of the short time frame for completing work, and the cost associated with creating a non-profit organization, the group opted to form as a section of the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association. The group was formally brought into the FFCA as a section in January of 2000 with Kathy Johnston being elected as Chair and Ron Rogers Vice Chair. The section began work on the task of typing the SAR resources, which at the time consisted of "all SAR resources".



By August of 2000, a draft typing document was presented to the committee for approval. The document included typing for wilderness SAR resources and US&R resources. The US&R resources were typed so that each type served as a building block for the next (e.g., a Type IV was a building block for a Type III, etc.). The idea being that all levels of US&R would have the appropriate level of training and equipment to deal with an incident in their jurisdiction and be able to make appropriate size up decisions regarding additional assistance. Several type IV teams would be able to respond together and create a Type III resource and so on. The idea being that no one jurisdiction would be responsible for sustaining a higher level team if they could not do so.

The typing document was incorporated in to the State Emergency Response plan in April of 2001. FASAR began developing information to coordinate these resources which culminated in the development of a Search and Rescue Resource Typing Policy. This Policy established four types of US&R resource ranging from a basic Type 4 team to a Type 1 Task Force.

After the events of September 11, 2001, it was determined that additional US&R resources were needed in the state. A strategy was then formulated to enhance the then Type 2 team in Tampa Bay to a Type 1 and to build additional Type 2, 3, and 4 resources throughout Florida.



The need for these resources was validated during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. During this two-year period, the Florida US&R system (FLUSAR) employed the FASAR typing policy to rapidly respond to the needs of the citizens. As illustrated during Hurricane's Charlie, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Dennis, Katrina, Rita and Wilma, the FLUSAR system not only improved coordination, but it revolutionized the response to wide area post hurricane response. This model has now been adopted by FEMA as the standard for post-hurricane US&R response.

As a result of the threat to the Florida Keys by Hurricane Rita, SAR planning for an impact on barrier islands and the Keys identified a potential issue with post-hurricane access due to the loss of land access to the Keys. To address this gap, FLUSAR has developed an Air Deployable Search and Rescue (ADSAR) model. ADSAR addresses the deployment of US&R teams to areas

that are inaccessible by land vehicle and areas where response time has been compromised by the incident situation.

Given that the Southeastern United States, and the Gulf Coast in particular, have significant potential for disaster. Logic dictates we retain an “all-hazards” approach to meet these forces of nature as well as to counter the effects of accidental and man-made disasters upon the community. As made evident by these and other events, awaiting federal resources in an emergency does not adequately serve our citizens’ needs.