



# Texas Emergency Hurricane Hotline Outsourced to India

## A Community Reaches Out to 'Local' Business for Help

By CHARLOTTE SECTOR

**Sep. 28, 2005** - As Hurricane Rita roared towards them, more than 300 people called the local emergency number broadcast all around Nacogdoches County in East Texas. What they didn't know was that the operators on the other end of the phone were 7,000 miles away in India.

With power down and limited means of communication, Nacogdoches County Judge Sue Kennedy, who acts as the emergency coordinator, decided to set up a phone bank to help people out. She called a local firm that runs call centers and asked if they could help the community. Effective Teleservices, based in Nacogdoches, had a power generator big enough to keep a phone bank running but management didn't want to put employees in harm's way by making them come to work.

So the Operating Officer, Matthew Rocco, offered what he had proposed to his other clients: He could redirect calls to the company's offshore site in India, in a city north of Mumbai.

Kennedy didn't hesitate.

"In disasters we respond more quickly with the help of our local businesses and move much faster than by waiting for federal or state aid," she said.

She and her staff polished off a script with vital information regarding the location of ad-hoc shelters and what people needed when they left home.

"We wanted to make sure they [the operators] kind of understood and could give specific answers to questions," Kennedy said.

### Who You Gonna' Call?

Across the globe, Jim Iyoob, the director of operations at the Indian call center site, gathered 15 of his customer representatives and trained them to work the emergency hotline. Iyoob had lived and worked three years in the Nacogdoches area so he was able to give additional information to his staff before Kennedy's people called to see if the "local" hotline worked.

The operators passed the test and within hours the switchboard was lighting up in sun-drenched Gandhinagar – a world away from hurricane-battered East Texas. The Indian operators offered words of encouragement to concerned Nacogdoches callers, and there were no reports of problems during the operation, Kennedy said.

Iyoob explained that despite the distance and lack of familiarity, his representatives were given the information necessary to do the job. Over the span of nearly 30 hours, the Indian operators got about 25 calls an hour. Iyoob credited the technology for making the entire process seamless, and he was proud of his operators for agreeing to work overtime to help American hurricane victims.

On top of the 300 emergency calls, his other employees responded to 15,000 calls re-routed from the two Texas call centers.

### **Outsourcing -- Helpful or Harmful?**

"I absolutely believe anything can be outsourced with the right leadership and the right people doing the right job," Iyoob said.

In his opinion, outsourcing got a bad rap because businesses haphazardly sent everything abroad without local workers being trained to understand American customs.

About 90 percent of the calls go off without a hitch, he said, explaining that a lot of his time is spent monitoring operators. When he's had to take "escalated" calls from upset customers, he said it's usually because a family member or a friend has lost a job to outsourcing.

Iyoob considers outsourcing a growth potential for everyone concerned. In the case of Effective Teleservices, he said, the company has been able to grow in India *and* in the United States, bringing new opportunities to Americans and Indians.

Back in the United States, Rocco also sees outsourcing as a win-win situation.

"We provide services that help customers manage costs, and in turn that helps the consumer because it keeps prices low," he said, adding that U.S. companies can take those savings and reinvest them in their firms.

### **Ensuring Privacy on a Global Stage**

Lee Price, research director at the Economic Policy Institute couldn't disagree more.

"When you shift work abroad, you don't end up with more total jobs in the U.S.," he said. In his view, a company may gain more money or add jobs, but that doesn't mean the country gains overall.

Just as manufacturing and production jobs have waned over the last 30 years, Price predicts the same for white collar jobs, saying we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg.

"I think we're going to see a lot more white collar work being done remotely where no face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction is needed."

He cites technological advances as well as the growing numbers of new players joining the global market as all-too-powerful forces to fend off.

"Both the IT revolution and the Chinese, Indian and former Soviet Union entering the market will be good for overall prosperity and world peace 20 years from now," Price said. "But the question is, how do we deal with it now?"

He worries how companies can insure confidentiality regarding financial statements, medical records and other sensitive material if their entire back offices are overseas.

Price commends the East Texas company for lending a hand in times of need but questions whether it could have been done locally. He also thinks people ought to know where the services are coming from.

He also believes the government at the federal, state and local levels needs to evaluate the net effects of outsourcing on the overall economy and do everything they can to sustain job growth in the United States.

As soon as Hurricane Rita ran its course, employees at the Texas offices of Effective Teleservices returned to their usual routines at work. Meanwhile in India, employees were celebrating the company's two year anniversary and its blistering expansion.

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