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FEMA Nixes Grassroots Radio Station for Hurricane Evacuees

Bureaucracy KO's info source at the Astrodome

by Sarah Ferguson
September 8th, 2005 5:04 PM

Although the effort was trumpeted in the media as an example of grassroots ingenuity in the face of disaster, local officials with the Federal Emergency Management Agency have nixed an attempt by Houston activists to set up a low-power radio station at the Astrodome that would have broadcast Hurricane Katrina relief information for evacuees.

The project was unplugged even though it had key support. On Monday, the Federal Communications Commission quickly granted temporary licenses to broadcast inside the Astrodome and the adjacent Reliant Center. The station was also backed by the Houston Mayor's office and Texas governor Rick Perry. But local officials said FEMA bureaucrats KO'd the station—dubbed **KAMP "Dome City Radio"**—because of "security concerns."

"They wanted unlimited access to the buildings, which we could not give to anyone in the media," said Gloria Roemer, a spokesperson for Harris County, which has jurisdiction over the Astrodome complex. Currently reporters are allowed in only on 15-minute guided tours.

According to Roemer, FEMA officials also believed they could not allocate "scarce" electricity, office space, and phone and Internet access to the volunteer station—even though activists say they offered to run the station on batteries and use their own cellphones.

Supporters of KAMP, which was set to launch at 95.3 FM, blame red tape and bureaucrats seeking to "manage the news."

"I'm very disappointed," said Councilmember Ada Edwards, who represents a mostly black district in central Houston and had issued a letter of support for the station. "One of the real challenges of this big tragedy has been access to communication--open and honest communication. I really hoped this would be an open outlet for people to get information that was unscripted and that would really address their needs.

"But it seems par for the course in terms of how this whole thing has been

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rolling out with FEMA and the Red Cross trying to keep tight control and manage the news," Edwards complained. "It's really sad when these people feel they have to sanitize all the time."

Activists with **Houston Indymedia** and Pacifica radio first brainstormed the idea over the weekend when they visited the Astrodome and spoke to swamped relief workers and survivors desperate for information about emergency services and news from back home.

"People were asking things like how can I get my FEMA check, do my kids need shots for school, can I get a free cellphone, how do I get out information about missing family members," says Jim Ellinger, a freelance radio consultant from Austin. "This is complicated stuff that you can't really address on a booming public address system. The mainstream radio stations are more focused on broadcasting to the general public about where to donate to hurricane relief, so there was no place for survivors to go to get what they need. "

"We talked to cops, volunteers, church groups—everyone said it was a good idea," Ellinger added.

But Astrodome officials were apparently more concerned about evacuees fighting over the radios. "They were worried about noise and people stealing them or that people would be tuning in to gangsta rap on other Houston stations, which they said could incite violence," says Tish Stringer, a graduate teacher at Rice University and organizer with Houston Indymedia. After several days of back and forth, activists agreed to provide 10,000 cheap, Walkman-style radios with batteries.

They had 1,000 sitting in the parking lot and 9,000 more waiting in a warehouse--with a pledge from Sony to donate an additional 10,000 radio—when the local FEMA officials rejected the plan.

But donated radios continue to pour into **KPFT**, the local Pacifica station, and volunteers say they plan to begin distributing them anyway in hopes they can set up some kind of station in the Astrodome parking lot, or else partner with KPFT to provide news for hurricane survivors.

"Radios are powerful tools in the hands of the people," says Hannah Sassaman of the **Prometheus Radio Project**, which has helped set up dozens of low-power FM stations across the country, and has been pressing Texas officials to move forward on this one. "In a case like this, having a low-power station that can deal specifically with the needs of displaced people is a no-brainer."

Although the number of evacuees housed at the Astrodome and George R. Brown Convention Center downtown has dwindled from 25,000 to about 8,000, many of the survivors remain temporarily lodged in smaller shelters and private houses around Houston. All told, the FCC has issued some 20 temporary licenses for a low-power emergency relief stations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, including a volunteer-run station in Louisiana. "

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