

# Operation Sandy Claus spreads cheer after hurricane

By William Degnan, EMT-I



Fox 7 Austin reporter Nik Ciccione (right) talks with Operation Sandy Claus volunteer William "Bill" Degnan (left) about donations needed for the mission. Photo by Sherry "Cheryl" Lassiter.

In post-Hurricane Ike Galveston, recreational vehicles are a common sight as island residents set up temporary living quarters while they repair damaged homes. But outside the EMS station? When an RV turned up outside the Galveston EMS station – called simply “the Sub” – at Q 1/2 Street Christmas Week, it sparked the curiosity of arriving crews. They were in for a pleasant surprise.

## Here comes Sandy Claus

Operation Sandy Claus had come to town on a special mission intended to deliver support, encouragement, relief, comfort and sustenance to those who stayed to serve their community during and after Hurricane Ike – sometimes at great personal cost. The Volunteer Mobile Emergency Response Unit (VMERU), a group dedicated to helping first responders, had been looking for a way to help after Ike hit last September. But with limited resources, VMERU wasn't prepared to deploy right after the storm nor did they think they could be effective in that phase of the operations. After all, VMERU primarily provides rehab — hydration, electrolyte and calorie replacement — at emergency scenes, and mostly wildfire incidents at that. Besides, Galveston is by no stretch of the imagination in the primary service area for this Central-

Texas based group.

Still, VMERU knew that as the main response to the hurricane ended, the realities of the devastation and the personal loss suffered by rescuers would begin to set in. VMERU wanted to stand with them. First, a name. What to call a mission at Christmas, at the beach? Operation Sandy Claus, of course. After some phone calls and needs assessment visits to the area, a plan began to take shape.

## Elves are undercover operatives

“Elves” in Galveston provided inside information on who needed help – a stethoscope, a laptop or something under the tree for the kids. Donors chose families to sponsor and then shopped for gifts. Cookies, pies and cobblers were baked. Donations were requested, gathered, packed and loaded.

Coffee Dog, in Bastrop, offered to be a central collection point for donated items. Employees there also sponsored a family. There were plenty of donations from people on the “nice” list: individuals, businesses and faith-based organizations from Central Texas and even a Houston Girl Scout troop. Also prominent on the “nice” list were several vendors at this year's Texas EMS Conference, who provided medical equipment and supplies, socks and shirts. Sandy Claus even brought special Christmas cards that showed an ambulance on the scene of a sleigh wreck. Throughout November and December, gifts and food – including cookies and Christmas candy – piled up, amounting to more than 30 boxes of goodies. VMERU deployed and along



Walls and doors were blown out at Crystal Beach Volunteer Fire and EMS. Services are now being provided by Galveston EMS and Fire as volunteers were displaced by the hurricane. Photo by William Degnan.



*Above, Kristinana Kirkpatrick, shows off her new bear from Sandy Claus. Below, Chris Agerton, EMT-B, of Longhorn Student EMS looks at equipment salvaged from the debris at Crystal Beach. Photos by William Degnan.*

the way, picked up the support of Longhorn Student EMS. Some of the Longhorns even made the trip to lend a hand.

### **Meals at the station**

The RV arrived in Galveston the week of Christmas. Some Sandy Claus helpers prepared and served meals. Other volunteers doled out a steady flow of baked goods, warm socks, EMS T-shirts and sweat shirts, and donated medical equipment and supplies from Texas EMS Conference vendors. VMERU expanded its reach during the week, bringing meals to firefighters at two other stations and other Galveston EMS stations. Helpers even tried to make contact with other departments in the area, though without much luck. So much of the emergency infrastructure in the county had been washed away. The mission remained fluid, responding to needs as they arose. The needs of the EMS crews seemed greatest. Police and fire, being older services, appeared to have wider support systems for their personnel.

In the course of their search, VREMU discovered that living conditions were less-



than-optimal at a school being used as a temporary EMS and fire station on the Bolivar peninsula. With the only source of heat in the school office, the crews' living quarters (including the bathrooms) were colder than the walk-in cooler. Heaters and electric blankets were delivered to chilly crews on the first night of the mission.

In quiet conversations – often interrupted by tones signaling a call for the crew to race off to help others – volunteers listened to the stories. And who else could they tell? Who else would value their dedication to duty?