



Maria Torres, Spanish Language Liaison at NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley, and Warning Coordination Meteorologist Barry Goldsmith introduce the workshop to the audience. Photo credit: Texas Impact.

## Unique Faith-Based IWT Begins Process to Build Weather-Readiness From the Ground Up

### NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley Brings Church Leaders, VOADs, Emergency Managers, and Media Together to Plant Seeds to Build Resiliency

Edinburg, TX, May 18, 2016 – Integrated Weather Teams (IWT) typically bring together a mix of NWS partners from Emergency Management, media, and academia to strengthen relationships and improve methods to communicate consistent hazardous weather messages. NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley took the IWT concept to a new level.

Forecaster and Spanish Language Liaison **Maria Torres** conceived an idea to build a Weather Ready Nation where it matters most – where the most vulnerable, least resilient communities exist. The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is host to some of the most impoverished communities in the U.S.; recent Census data showed that the two largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas – Brownsville/Harlingen/San Benito and McAllen/Edinburg/Pharr – are among the top five poorest in the nation. Tens of thousands of residents live in substandard housing, many in *colonias* – unregulated settlements or subdivisions in semi-rural areas across the Rio Grande Valley. Across the region, there are more than one thousand such neighborhoods; while many have basic water, sewer, and power, structures often include dilapidated single-wide trailers that can sustain significant damage or even demolition at winds below hurricane force.

Two common denominators among residents who live in the Rio Grande Valley are a devotion to *familia* – the ties that bind generations, and the Catholic or evangelical Christian faith. A vast majority of residents speak only Spanish at home, and a sizeable number speak English “poorly” or “not at all”. For these communities to understand the importance becoming ready, responsive, and resilient to weather hazards, the information must be trusted. Church leaders, from pastors and priests to lay

leaders and fellow congregants, are seen as trusted sources of information. The first-of-its-kind IWT brought core partners in Emergency Management, media, and academia together with faith-based leaders, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs), and other non-profits to begin building a foundation to reach out to these most vulnerable residents to help them grow their resiliency and offer the potential for nearby safe haven – whether a church or community resource center – to take refuge should a potentially catastrophic event such as destructive wind, hail, or flooding threaten.

The workshop, held at the Rio Grande Bible Institute, began with an overview of NOAA, the NWS, and the office in Brownsville and how information is served to protect life and property with presentations provided by Senior Forecasters **Mike Castillo** and **Geoffrey Bogorad**. After a short break, Warning Coordination Meteorologist **Barry Goldsmith** described the structural issues with substandard housing in recent windstorms and provided inexpensive options to help *colonias* improve resilience, then described concepts on how local faith-based leaders could be force-multipliers to help communities better understand the need to build resilience to hazardous weather, and potentially open their houses of worship *before* the storm as safe refuge prior to destruction that could cause great harm to families living in substandard homes. The event closed with a working lunch where Ms. Linda Wasserman from Texas Impact, an advocacy organization that works closely with state VOADs to build capacity for resilience among religious organizations, and Mr. Anival Henrickson from the Texas Division of Emergency Management’s Voluntary Agency Liaison office, described the importance of working together with the common goal of ensuring the safety of these most vulnerable residents from hazardous weather threats.

Among the nearly 60 persons who attended the meeting were:

- More than two dozen church leaders from the U.S. and Mexico
- Emergency Managers or representatives from Cameron and Hidalgo (County) and the City of McAllen
- KRGV-Channel 5, including a bilingual translator
- The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council
- Dr. William Donner, Professor of Disaster Studies at University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley
- A representative from the Office of the Texas Secretary of State

“We are overwhelmed with the potential this IWT has for meeting the mission to build a Weather Ready Nation where needed most – our least resilient communities,” said Goldsmith and Torres. “The growing population of Spanish speaking residents living in highly vulnerable communities across the nation urges us to build upon this work in the Rio Grande Valley and far beyond in the coming years. The large audience at this meeting attests to the importance of our shared mission.”



Group photo of attendees at the Faith-Based Integrated Weather Team Workshop held at the Rio Grande Bible Institute in Edinburg, TX. Photo Credit: Radio Esperanza staff.



Anival Henrickson of the Texas Division of Emergency Management speaks on the partnership of VOADs with faith based organizations to help disaster recovery in the Rio Grande Valley. Photo credit: Radio Esperanza staff.



Senior Forecaster Mike Castillo describes the NWS and NOAA at the opening session of the Faith-Based Integrated Weather Team Workshop.