When Hurricane Ike hit Harris County, Texas, in 2008, the damage was substantial. The second costliest hurricane in America’s history destroyed a vast stretch of housing in the area, leaving thousands of people homeless and devastating local infrastructure. This created a host of challenges for public officials, not least of which was restoring access to water and electricity and rebuilding homes. Using funding from a Community Development Block Grant and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Harris County began its recovery process. Unfortunately, the county quickly encountered difficulties with contractors regarding code review and safety standards.

That’s when the Institute for Building Technology and Safety, or IBTS, stepped in. Working with Harris County officials, IBTS provided assistance on creating a standard operating procedure for construction management and helped complete the necessary reconstruction work.

Following their success in Harris County, Blake Ratcliff, director of economic development and disaster recovery at IBTS, and Steve Traina, IBTS branch office manager in Houston, had an epiphany. What if IBTS applied its knowledge to the creation of a tool that was readily accessible to public officials across the country?

Their idea led to the development of the IBTS Disaster Recovery Toolkit, a role-based tool that involves a multimedia, interactive approach for officials at the federal, state and local levels.

“The genesis of the toolkit is working with communities,” said Ratcliff. “As a local official, it can be difficult to understand what your responsibilities and requirements are. (Creating the toolkit) was a practical extension to IBTS’ role of helping these areas.”

As Blake explained, each entity, such as the mayor’s office or city council, has a certain narrow set of responsibilities within its jurisdiction.

Each leader has to figure out his or her area of duty and authority. The Disaster Recovery Toolkit provides specific guidance on how each leadership role should respond. For example, within the tool kit’s “Housing Recovery” online materials, there is a step-by-step guide, with detailed instructions for local leaders about how to navigate various government resources, as well as how to deal with endemic hurdles in the process. The information ranges from best practices for contractor training to grant compliance to advice on being compassionate with constituents who have lost their homes.

The disaster timeline progression link walks the user through every part of the process, from disaster planning to the initial response phase to damage assessment following a disaster event.
“Working with IBTS during Hurricane Ike allowed us to bring in necessary expertise to be on the ground with recovery efforts without expanding our staff,” said Daphne Lemelle, director of community development in Harris County, Texas. “They helped us make sure our construction people weren’t taking short cuts in safety practices.”

As the toolkit continues to develop, IBTS leaders hope the resource will eventually provide guidance that would enable an executive from a contracting firm to submit a bid more quickly and directly. Or, a community development manager could find out the easiest way to apply for a grant. Sample documents and forms for local building permitting boards also will be available on the site.

Articles and interviews bring the toolkit to life, and numerous segments will share personal stories and case studies from local officials on different parts of the recovery process.

IBTS has collaborated with a number of organizations to make this project possible, including the Federal Emergency Management Association, National League of Cities, International City/County Management Association and others.

“IBTS exists for the benefit of communities. We see (communities) repeating mistakes. These mistakes cost money. It has a direct, very painful impact on neighborhoods and the constituents that live there,” said Ratcliff. “IBTS helps people overcome those problems and have a better ability to respond and recover.”

With an information-packed resource at their fingertips, communities now will be better equipped to be more resilient and recover more quickly when disasters strike.

This mobile-friendly national project, which has been in the works for three years, should be fully usable by fall 2016. Future plans include a webinar series, a simulation, and additional interviews and articles as the project progresses.

For more information or a sample demonstration of the IBTS Disaster Recovery Toolkit, please contact Karen Johnson at kjohnson2@ibts.org [2].

Associates in Action articles highlight CSG Associates’ philanthropic efforts and public-private partnerships throughout the states.

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