



## **Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston plays a key role in Disaster Management**

By Tony Hernandez, IM Volunteer

Dr. Raouf Arafat, director of the Houston Office of Surveillance and Public Health Preparedness (OSPHP), carries more than 22 years of experience in incident command, public health preparedness and management, epidemiology and infectious disease and has worked for the City of Houston since 1999. According to Dr. Arafat Houston's current disaster management program is among the most experienced in the United States.

"Harris County has had more declared disasters than most states in the U.S., so we've had experience putting our plans into practice and seeing what works and what needs improvement," Dr. Arafat wrote in an email response. "We learned a lot from Tropical Storm Allison, took in thousands affected by Hurricane Katrina, and evacuated thousands of residents for Hurricane Rita. With each experience, we've gotten better and faster at planning and responding."

IM's disaster management program *Ready Houston!* works with Dr. Arafat and the OSPHP to prepare the faith community to respond in times of need. *Ready Houston!* also helps coordinate the response of the faith community in an emergency within the Greater Houston area

*Ready Houston!* was put to the test in the aftermath of Katrina where it was quickly discovered that they did not have a fully developed plan to handle one key group. "There would be a large number of volunteers who want to come and help." Frank Levy, IM's former director of Interfaith Relations and current Bureau Chief under Dr. Arafat. "One of the problems is that most of the volunteers, if not all, are untrained or unaffiliated. They actually become the second disaster within a disaster. Many times they don't know what to do. They're energetic and highly motivated but without proper training and proper management, they can be harmful to themselves and the community."

*Ready Houston!* capitalized on this knowledge and began to focus on four key areas.

Volunteer Leadership Corps training (VLC), whose members help recruit, train and mobilize volunteers to respond in the aftermath of disaster. They are given the crucial skills needed to manage the thousands of unaffiliated or untrained volunteers seeking to help in a major disaster scenario like a hurricane, pandemic flu, or terrorist attack. This group has the biggest need for volunteers who are willing to get trained now. This group will become key in the days and weeks just after a disaster.

Community Emergency Medication Center training (CEMC) which provides volunteers knowledge in how to operate and work within the National Incident Management System (similar to the command structures used among fire departments across the country). Upon completion of the training, volunteers are able to participate in a low-to-mid-level role during a public health emergency in the City of Houston.

*Ready Houston!* also offers trainings for Spiritual and Emotional Care Volunteer Management, and Household and Family Preparedness training. In addition to the trainings that are provided, *Ready Houston!* convenes the Houston Interfaith Disaster Response Association (HIDRA), which serves as a network for the greater Houston faith communities in time of disaster. Both Levy and Dr. Arafat agree that *Ready Houston!* Serves as another valuable tool made possible by the partnership between the city and IM.

“The reality is that we face greater challenges today in the form of disasters of every kind,” Dr. Arafat explains. “With global climate change, we've seen natural disasters on an unprecedented scale. With 9/11, we faced the unthinkable. We proved once and again that this country and local residents of a community are always able to respond to emergencies. The overwhelming response of local communities is the bread and butter of any effort. Without community involvement, our best plans remain just good intentions.”

“Houstonians have a strong tradition of community involvement and service,” Arafat continued. “Many people are very active in their faith communities and volunteer for different organizations.” Still if one doesn't have time for the trainings there are things that can be done at home or on your own. Visiting the *Ready Houston!* website ([www.readyhouston.org](http://www.readyhouston.org)) serves as a great start in developing a family emergency plan. Dr. Arafat suggests that every member of the family know their plan in addition to keeping an up-to-date emergency contact list.

Looking back at his and *Ready Houston!*'s first true test, Levy sarcastically laughed at the timing of Katrina – just over six months into the development of *Ready Houston!*.

“It was quite a special time. It was an amazing time, both for the faith community and IM. And certainly the City of Houston is, one more time, to be congratulated for, not only the fact that it did respond, but the quality of the response and the thoroughness of the response. And if that were to happen again, I know that we are better organized to handle it.”

You can find out more about *Ready Houston!* programs and events by visiting our website; [www.readyhouston.org](http://www.readyhouston.org). If your organization, business or faith community would like to host training, please contact Jennifer Posten at [jposten@imgh.org](mailto:jposten@imgh.org) or 713-533-4909.