Soon after Hurricane Harvey struck the Texas coast, Gov. Greg Abbott announced the leader for a new commission to aid recovery: John Sharp ’72, chancellor of The Texas A&M University System.

Sharp asked Abbott, “Do I get to keep my day job?” In truth, his day job was a large part of why he was tapped.

As chancellor, Sharp was head of several state agencies already on the ground helping Texans in the hurricane’s path: rescuing people trapped in high waters, handing out health kits and basic supplies, setting up command points and coordinating donations and rescue workers.

It’s unusual for a public university system to include any state agencies—A&M’s is the only one in Texas that does.

Three of its seven agencies, and a number of System staff members, took on even more roles as the Governor’s Commission to Rebuild Texas got to work on its mission of rebuilding public infrastructure and connecting local leaders to state and federal resources.

“There was no better group to ask to lead this commission than The Texas A&M University System, because we have all the right players, all the right responsibilities,” said John Barton ’85, then a System associate vice chancellor who quickly also became a key staffer of the commission.

Among the System strengths put to use: firefighting/disaster response, search and rescue coordination, and a network that stretches across every county in the state.

**TEEX AND TEXAS TASK FORCE 1**

Since its origins in 1940, the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) has offered training for police and firefighters, along with other occupational and technical training.

Today, it also sponsors an urban search and rescue team, Texas Task Force 1, that has responded to more than 100 events since its creation in 1997.

But Harvey was different. “I’ve been director for 11 years, and it’s by far the most significant event we’ve had to deal with,” said TEEX head Gary Sera. “A hurricane just decides to stop and rain for three days right in the biggest populated area in Texas.”

Harvey made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane, stalled over Southeast and South Texas dumping rain for days, circled back out over the Gulf, picked up strength and hit western Louisiana. The storm and its catastrophic flooding claimed the lives of at least 94 Texans.

The task force was in place before the storm hit and deployed 248 team members...
SEARCH AND RESCUE: Texas Task Force 1, partnering with Texas National Guardsmen from the 272nd Engineer Battalion, prepares to help evacuate Houston residents during Hurricane Harvey.

BEFORE THE STORM: The Forest Service uses its long-acquired skill at responding to natural disasters to set up staging areas, move resources in, and deploy incident management teams to help coordinate with local officials.
with seven dogs. Its sibling, Dallas-based Texas Task Force 2, mobilized 79 members and four dogs. They joined with more than 1,400 other state and federal responders, according to TEEX.

In 22 days of Harvey deployment, these combined teams evacuated 35,046 people, rescued 12,982, checked on 4,354 sheltering in place, and scooped up more than 2,000 animals, according to the A&M System.

Task Force 1 coordinated ground-based search and rescue operations. The Coast Guard and other military, including Texas’ forces, handled air-based operations. “We worked very closely with them,” Sera said.

In a typical water rescue you might see in news footage, Sera said, “That helicopter is being flown by a military pilot; that swimmer is a Task Force 1 member.”

Post-deployment, Sera said, TEEX continues to have a large role in recovery, including compiling data and helping counties assess damage costs. A team of 20 employees from TEEX and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service trained with FEMA to help local officials write requests for federal reimbursement.

And Sharp has already proposed a future task force much like Texas Task Force 1, but focused on recovery—specifically, many of the same areas in which TEEX is helping Texans now.

**TEXAS A&M FOREST SERVICE**

Firefighting was among the earliest jobs of A&M’s forest service, created in 1915.

Today, the agency responds to thousands of wildfires, in addition to its work conserving forests, aiding landowners and fighting infestation and diseases such as oak wilt.

Along the way, the Forest Service has become proficient at arriving in an area and quickly coordinating responses to natural disasters. The agency predicts needs and moves resources to the area; then its incident management teams arrive.

Director Tom Boggus described the agency’s “unified command” approach as standing side by side with local officials.

“What’s a main need of a county government or anybody when they get hit with a disaster like Harvey? Well, first thing you do, you’ve got people that need the basics: They need food, water and ice. The power companies will come in and help restore power, but before that happens, they’ve got to be taken care of,” he said.

During initial Harvey response, Boggus said, the agency coordinated 1,921 truckloads of ice, water and MREs (meals ready to eat) through nine staging areas. They also helped mobilize 974 firefighters from other areas with 145 engines and 44 boats, responding to 2,056 calls.

Normally when the power is back on and the grocery stores are opening, “we go home,” Boggus said.
"That’s getting into recovery mode.” But when the Commission to Rebuild Texas was created, the Forest Service took on additional roles.

In four days, staff revamped a Forest Service app that tracks distribution of food, water and blankets — expanding it to track different types of local needs and responses. The app was shared next with Florida’s Hurricane Irma responders.

“Then we started tracking fire departments, because that’s our bread and butter,” Boggus said—conducting damage surveys of 344 fire departments and helping secure emergency grants to replace equipment. They helped towns such as Rockport, Fulton, Refugio and Victoria assess the extent of damage to trees on public land.

And tasked with getting rid of plant-based debris, they found a solution: using special emission-reducing incinerators to burn 82,000 cubic yards of waste.

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION SERVICE

Sharp was tapped to head the Harvey commission Sept. 7, 2017. The next day, more than 100 county extension agents in the 42 hardest-hit counties basically started a new job that continues today.

They became conduits for local officials to report their needs straight to the commission.

“You get up and you touch base with your judge and your mayors ... report by 2 o’clock every day on the issues in your county,” said Dr. Susan Ballabina, then executive associate director of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. “At the end of the day, I aggregate all the 42 reports and I send them to the governor’s office and to the chancellor.”

Sharp “knew Extension has professional educators in all 254 counties in Texas. And he wanted to use those people as kind of the front door to the commission,” said Ballabina, who since has become A&M’s deputy vice chancellor for agriculture and life science.

The agents worked seven days a week for the first three months, then scaled back to five days a week. Putting the Forest Service’s new app to use, they submitted more than 5,000 reports, from concerns with mosquitoes and debris to displaced residents (although the state’s land office is handling housing issues, while the commission focuses on public infrastructure).

One example of many issues reported: Workers were using an office in Corpus Christi to sign up thousands of residents for short-term federal aid to buy food, but lost the use of that site. Nueces County extension agents “got on the phone and hustled and used their connections to find another location,” Ballabina said. Within 24 hours, they’d secured a new site at a vacant shopping mall that even offered plenty of parking.

Before their new role as local liaisons began, extension agents had already been assisting with Harvey recovery as part of the agency’s regular mission. “We cared for thousands of animals; we set up supply points where hay and feed were donated,” Ballabina said.

Agents helped distribute 5,100 tons of hay and 1,648 tons of other animal feed; gave residents 3,500 disaster kits with personal hygiene items; and helped test 1,195 private wells for water contamination.

Like local fire, emergency and other workers, county agents felt the effects of Harvey themselves.

“Some of them were impacted personally, and some of them didn’t have extension offices to go to because they were destroyed,” Ballabina said.

“We’re very, very proud of the way they have responded.”

MORE A&M RESPONSE TO HARVEY

• Texas A&M collected 100 inspiring stories of ways Aggies helped at tx.ag/Harvey100
• Watch how the Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team aided animals at tx.ag/VETkbtx

AID FROM THE ASSOCIATION

• The Association allocated $200,000 to help A&M Clubs in the storm-torn areas, and partnered with the Texas A&M Foundation to create a Harvey help forum online at tx.ag/HarveySupport and to offer scholarships for incoming freshmen who might not have been able to enroll because of Harvey’s impact on their families: tx.ag/Harveyschol. The Association provides Student Assistance Funds to help current students in dire straits; applications for those grants can be made through the Texas A&M Division of Student Affairs.