

Dennis has everyone's attention

By [Mike Saewitz](#)

SARASOTA COUNTY -- As county leaders began rounding up volunteers before the heart of the hurricane season, they couldn't quell concerns about Hurricane Dennis, the storm that flooded streets in Haiti and Jamaica as it gained strength Wednesday.

"Anytime there's something out there, we might as well take it seriously after last year," said Dennis Stover, of the Friendship Volunteer Center, a Sarasota County nonprofit group.

Forecasters tracking Hurricane Dennis on Wednesday said it may reach the western part of Cuba by Saturday, but it's too early to tell whether it will turn east toward a state that saw more than its share of hurricanes last year.

"If it goes further east than we think it will, then it could be a more significant event," said Chris Hennon, a National Hurricane Center meteorologist in Miami. "It's not too likely at this point, but it's still too early to eliminate that possibility. Definitely, don't let your guard down yet."

At 11 p.m. Wednesday, the storm's center was about 280 miles south-southeast of Guantanamo Bay. Dennis was packing sustained winds near 85 mph as it moved west-northwest near 15 mph, the Hurricane Center said. Hurricane-force winds stretched 25 miles.

A National Weather Service meteorologist said Dennis could strengthen to a Category 3 storm with winds of 110 to 130 mph and land anywhere from Pensacola to New Orleans this weekend.

"There's that window," said the meteorologist, Paul Close, who's based in Ruskin. "The whole west coast of Florida is still in that cone where it could go."

The July storm is a month earlier than Hurricane Charley, which surprised everyone by turning east and battering Charlotte County last year.

Volunteers streaming into Charlotte's emergency operations center in the days after Hurricane Charley contributed to the post-storm chaos there. Some do-gooders who showed up complained that no one knew what to do with them.

Leaders in Charlotte, Manatee and Sarasota say they learned from the overwhelming, but disorganized, support following Charley's Aug. 13, 2004 arrival.

They are working to gather and coordinate volunteers now in case a major storm strikes again.

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In Manatee, staff members are working to identify locations to distribute ice and water. In Charlotte, two organizations are signing up would-be volunteers.

At a meeting early Wednesday, Sarasota's top emergency official appealed to a group of 80 pastors, rabbis, and church leaders to register their group with the disaster relief effort.

Chuck Johnston, Sarasota County's interim emergency management director, said he and County Administrator Jim Ley came up with the idea of creating community outposts after witnessing the chaotic post-hurricane efforts across the state last year.

Johnston talked to the faith leaders about setting up an "N-pod" -- a Neighborhood Point of Distribution -- for the quick delivery of water and ice to those whose homes were hit by storms.

Stover, who's helping to coordinate volunteers, said that there's a list of more than 2,000 Sarasota County residents ready to help.

"I hope we don't need it this weekend," Stover said. "None of us want to go in active mode, but we're much better prepared this year than last."

Emergency officials in Sarasota say that Dennis, the fourth named storm of the 2005 hurricane season, does not necessarily signal that there's more to come.

"Mother Nature's going to do what Mother Nature's going to do," Johnston said. "We may have a real active early season, and September could be very quiet. It will only take one to hit us to hurt."

While he hopes Dennis won't be that hit, he warned that "everyone needs to be vigilant and watch this thing."

Staff writers Jamie Manfuso and Cory Schouten contributed to this report, which contains information from the Associated Press