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Preparing for disaster

Companies ready to give aid if state is hit by catastrophe



Brian Dunlap, executive director of New Jersey Business Force, working in space donated by CIT Group in Livingston. The six-week-old pilot program is a partnership that brings together businesses, hospitals, and other organizations that volunteer to give assistance in the event of a disaster.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Linda A. Johnson, Associated Press

If terrorists attack or a catastrophe strikes in New Jersey, corporate leaders plan to make sure state and local authorities responding to the emergency have all the backup they need.

Under a unique public-private partnership that could become a national model, major corporations, hospital networks, and other organizations are volunteering to help with such things as transportation, communications, assisting victims, and cleaning up damage — on a moment's notice.

"What we're trying to do is proactively align the resources to be available so that the state has much more muscle in its response," said Brian J. Dunlap, executive director of the six-week-old New Jersey Business Force. "It can go anywhere from getting drinking water to a site to could we get access to your corporate helicopter."

Other resources he's lining up include pledges that the state could temporarily use rental cars, delivery vehicles, backup generators, cellular phones, medical supplies, and corporate broadcasting centers, plus volunteers trained in tasks such as administering vaccinations and directing

traffic away from a disaster.

Pledges of the use of property are also important, including parking lots that could be used for triaging the injured or decontaminating chemical attack victims, corporate communications centers that could become temporary command posts, and hotel rooms and cafeterias where victims of a disaster could be taken.

New Jersey Business Force is a pilot project of the 21-year-old group Business Executives for National Security, or BENS, which works with the Pentagon and Department of Defense to make their operations more efficient.

Retired Air Force Gen. Chuck Boyd, president and chief executive officer of Washington-based BENS, said the group decided to set up the project after New Jersey philanthropist and businessman Ray Chambers asked what they could do together to improve security in New Jersey. Chambers donated \$500,000 to underwrite most of the start-up costs, said Boyd, adding that four other states already are interested in starting such a program.

He said New Jersey is a good place to start because of the capabilities and resources of companies here and its

vulnerabilities. Those include potential terrorist targets such as nuclear and chemical plants, transportation hubs, and the state's proximity to New York and Philadelphia.

"With 9/11, everybody just jumped in to help, but there wasn't any coordination," Dunlap said.

He recently moved into donated office space at the Livingston headquarters of CIT Group. The commercial and home-equity lender is one of 12 charter members donating money and pledging resources to New Jersey Business Force.

CIT's chief executive, Al Gamper, is recruiting other members to help the state and to ensure that his company and others can keep operating in a crisis.

"The further we get away from 9/11, the more complacent people get," Gamper said. "We ought to be prepared for contingencies that might come up in the area of terrorism.

Boyd said BENS briefed Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge on the idea early on.

"He said, 'You develop this thing in New Jersey and make it work and it will be the template,'" for other areas, Boyd said.

Department of Homeland Security spokesman Brian Roehrkasse did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

Dunlap and two newly hired assistants are coordinating efforts with state agencies including the Office of Emergency Management Acting Attorney General Peter Harvey said the state Domestic Security Preparedness Task Force that he chairs is developing strategies to protect New Jersey and ensure that crucial industry services such as communications and power aren't knocked out.

"We're way ahead of most states," Harvey said, adding that New Jersey Business Force increases the state's capabilities.

One of its first projects is creating a database for the state showing each member's resources and their locations,

so emergency officials can immediately tell what's available near the site of a crisis. An early version is to be ready by June 15.

Verizon Communications, for example, has cellular telephones, banks of pay phones warehoused on trailers, secure buildings with backup power systems, and about 6,000 trucks and vans with drivers, said Verizon New Jersey president Dennis M. Bone.

"We're saying to the emergency community, we will work with you in a time of emergency. If we can help you we will," he said.

Prudential Financial, the insurance and financial services giant, likewise has facilities and staff statewide. They include claims adjusters who could assess damage; accountants who could help process claims for disaster aid; and volunteers trained to give vaccinations, serve as drivers, and help with disaster cleanup, said company spokesman Bob DeFilipo.

Two of the state's biggest hospital systems, Saint Barnabas Health Care System and Atlantic Health System, have mobile trailers set up with medicines, decontamination tents, and other specialized equipment.

Clothing and accessories retailer United Retail Group has a large distribution network that could deliver clothing to disaster victims. Stevens Institute of Technology has a maritime center with a new port security program and close ties to many businesses. And Pfizer Inc. makes antibiotics, antiviral drugs, painkillers, and other medications useful in emergencies.

DRS Technologies has donated \$25,000 like other charter members. It also plans to donate office space, and is checking which employees could be trained to help in emergencies, said chief executive Mark Newman.

"We wanted to support it because we believe in what they're doing," he said.

The New Jersey Business Force

This partnership says it will focus on high-priority areas where the unique expertise of the private sector can complement ongoing state efforts and provide genuine contributions in preparing for and responding to catastrophic events or terrorists attacks:

An Internet-based Business Response Network will inventory the capabilities needed in an emergency — transportation, warehouses, communications, medical supplies, construction equipment — and identify companies willing to provide these services on short notice.

A business volunteer training program will prepare companies and employee volunteers in discreet tasks that the state requires but lacks resources to execute in an emergency or rehearse in advance.

A rapid medical distribution plan will draw on resources of participating transportation, trucking, shipping, and freight companies to ensure that vital medical supplies reach hospitals during an outbreak of an infectious disease.

SOURCE: New Jersey Business Force Web site