

# Recovering from disaster

Joining a business coalition and designing a disaster plan **Interviewed by Amy Dison**

**N**ationally, 85 percent of a community's infrastructure is owned by the private sector. If a disaster occurred, participation of the private business sector would be necessary for successful recovery.

For emergency systems to respond properly to a disaster, they must have knowledge of that infrastructure and access to supplies and resources that only private businesses can provide.

"A coalition can be developed to open the communication and planning process of private businesses and public response systems," says Michael Comiskey, executive director of the Pittsburgh Regional Business Coalition for Homeland Security.

When private businesses prepare themselves for disaster recovery situations, they should work with emergency response organizations to identify and pledge their resources, says Comiskey.

*Smart Business* spoke with Comiskey about how a company can design a disaster plan and the benefits of joining a business coalition.

## How can a business prepare for a disaster?

It should develop a plan to prepare for numerous possible disasters. This should include an emergency plan for employees that provides communication before and after a disaster.

A business should speak to employees with special needs and determine an evacuation plan for all employees.

Emergency supplies should be assessed and stored.

The plan should determine in advance which employees will stay during a disaster and when those people should leave. Weather-related disasters as well as medical and terrorist plots should be addressed.

These plans should be communicated and correlated with other companies in the community.

Executives should determine how risks can be minimized and assets protected. This means that businesses such as banks and insurance companies need to develop plans that protect customers' data. These companies should look for remote storage sites and servers to ensure the security and



**Michael Comiskey**

Executive director  
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backup of all information in case of disaster. If a business is located in a flood zone, that business should look for remote storage sites, portable computer devices and proper insurance coverage.

## How is a disaster plan beneficial to a business?

Without a plan, owners don't know what to tell employees, how to protect information, or how to back up systems.

Businesses often do not know what their insurance coverage is relative to a disaster. After a disaster, there can be much anger because businesses find out that they may not receive the local, state or federal help they expected. As difficult as it is, it's much better to face the reality and then plan accordingly.

Businesses are currently not being coached and trained properly by their executives to develop their own disaster plan. Also, they are not being coordinated with emergency systems. This is important because they should be communicating with emergency response systems to outline their needs during a disaster as well as understanding what they in turn can contribute to the emergency responders.

## What does the coalition provide for the business community?

A business coalition should assist the business community in preparing itself to better respond and recover from disasters of all types. Also, the coalition should position itself to represent the business community throughout the phases in the disaster-recovery process and provide the needed interface to local emergency-response organizations, as well as state and federal organizations, as needed.

In Pennsylvania Region 13, emergency response in times of disaster is coordinated from the Region 13 Emergency Operations Center. It is important that a business coalition communicate with that representative central command to develop its role in the community disaster plan.

The coalition provides experts in the different areas of disaster planning and lets owners know where to find important information on general disaster planning as well as threat-specific disaster planning information.

## How does involvement with the coalition benefit a business?

Many large companies have dedicated resources to disaster planning. They often see the importance of such a coalition in regard to its benefit to small and mid-sized businesses in the community. These small businesses often provide services or materials for the larger corporations in the community, so large companies want to see them protected.

Small and mid-size businesses often do not have departments or the employees with the expertise to develop a disaster plan on their own, so they utilize the resources of the coalition. The coalition offers a Web site to the business community that guides businesses to the information needed to prepare and recover from a disaster. Free disaster-planning manuals and CDs are provided.

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