

Summary

EMD sends the alerts to 400+ businesses and business associations that have signed up for them. The division is also actively signing up new business associations, chambers and economic development organizations that can act as multipliers and forward the alerts to their members and constituents. One major subscriber and partner is the Association of Washington Business, the state chamber representing 6,800 businesses ranging from Microsoft and Boeing down to mom and pop stores.

Background

When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers grew concerned about seepage at the Howard Hanson Dam early in 2009 and warned of a 1-in-3 chance that the Green River Valley could flood, the Washington State Emergency Management Division (EMD) took quick action to assist King County and its communities in planning for a potential large-scale flood.

The dam protects the valley's manufacturing plants, distribution centers, public facilities and residential neighborhoods in the floodplain. The worst predictions warned of a higher chance of a 10-foot-deep flood during rainy seasons for the next three to five years until a long-term fix could be engineered. Major flooding could cripple the region's infrastructure through electricity and gas outages, water supply interruptions, and major highway closures.

EMD began receiving an "overwhelming number of requests from businesses for preparedness assistance," says Wendy Freitag, the division's Special Assistant for Corporate Relations. Fortunately EMD had a program and system in place for communicating with businesses. The year before, the division had installed a third-party, password-protected communications system called PIER (Public Information Emergency Response), which they tailored to post key planning, response and recovery information online for businesses to access, as well as to send businesses real-time emergency alerts. Throughout 2009, as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and King County issued updates on the status of the dam and emergency planning for the valley, EMD posted the information to its PIER Business Information site and sent alerts to businesses.

"Private sector organizations want to feel like full members of the team," Freitag says. "That's how I approach private sector companies and associations: as full members of the team with the same access to information and training wherever possible."

Goals and Objectives

One of the main objectives of the program was to develop a reliable, accessible, two-way business communications platform. Using the PIER system, EMD groups business subscribers into contact lists of 18 Critical Infrastructure sectors, with additional lists for

businesses that don't fall into those sectors, prime among them small business. About 88% of all Washington employers have fewer than 20 workers, according to 2008 data. For this reason, Freitag explains, "It's important for small businesses to learn how to become more resilient, for us to provide them with tools for preparedness, mitigation and business continuity planning."

To ensure public and private sectors are sharing situational awareness, the PIER site also allows businesses to communicate back to the state. Businesses can send an inquiry on any topic at any time, and state liaisons will respond in real time as quickly as possible. In November 2009, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced that it had completed interim repairs at the Howard Hanson Dam and reduced the risk of flooding to 1 in 25. EMD continues to communicate to businesses and individuals that the risk is still significant, and to provide them with information to prepare for and mitigate against the risk of flood.

Description

Freitag says the need for the state to establish closer relationships with private sector organizations became evident in Dec. 2006, when a major windstorm knocked out power to 400,000 customers around Puget Sound, and the state and its utility companies had trouble creating a common operating picture of power restoration.

Dick Walter, Vice President of Operations at the Association of Washington Business, notes that EMD then elevated the presence of private sector organizations within the state's emergency management operations as an objective of Major General Timothy J. Lowenberg, Adjutant General of the State of Washington. Lowenberg serves as commander of all Washington Army and Air National Guard forces and Director of the state's Emergency Management and Enhanced 911 programs.

Also part of Lowenberg's team is EMD Director Jim Mullen, who has a history of engagement in private sector partnerships having directed a pilot project of the FEMA Project Impact program initiated in 1999. That program's success in Seattle where Mullen served as Director led him to believe that national rhetoric about public /private collaboration was not being matched in practice. "If you use a word like partnership, there are mutual obligations and there must be a mutual commitment of effort. Too often government has talked about partnering but forgets to contribute much. Our approach was to acknowledge that part of our success with the private sector was linked to keeping businesses operating. To do that we needed to understand their requirements and they needed to understand and know what we were doing."

To run EMD's new Corporate Relations Program, Mullen hired Freitag, who had worked in positions for FEMA, Washington Mutual and Microsoft and was a former business continuity planner and private sector planner. One of Freitag's first efforts was to establish a partnership with the Association of Washington Business. The state invited the Association to designate three of its staff members to be trained as business liaisons and serve in the state's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during large-scale events. The state also updated its EOC procedures, organizational charts, and plans to reflect the

addition of business liaisons. The partnership was timely: the liaisons were activated a few months later in Dec. 2007 during severe storms and flooding, declared as presidential disaster DR 1734.

In addition, Dick Walter of AWB was named to represent the state's private sector as a member of the governor's Emergency Management Council. "When people think of our Association, they usually think that our focus is on 'don't raise taxes,'" Walter says. "People forget this aspect of public and private sectors working together, for survival of our communities."

The Corporate Relations Program strives to offer partnership opportunities for private sector organizations on an ongoing basis in all phases of emergency management. Since the launch of the program, public and private sectors have worked together on training courses and workshops, exercises, creation and distribution of business preparedness and planning guides, and programs to coordinate volunteers and donations.

Requirements for Success

Freitag noted that the best-prepared businesses were those with a good emergency response continuity program, redundant forms of communication, and a good plan to keep their operations intact. She added that some companies have superior logistics capabilities which the government should be tapping into to make sure critical supplies are available to the public. "It's more effective for us to leverage those private supply chains and put government in a supporting role. Companies that can adapt their supply chains, win. They show a profit, pay their employees, and continue to provide a tax base for critical government services. And government has reduced costs if we don't have to distribute goods into communities."

Resources

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Links

[Washington Emergency Management Business Portal](#)
[NEMA article identifying the portal as a Best Practice](#)

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