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Not All First Responders Wear a Uniform

by Peter Picarillo

The following was an actual exchange between a businessman from a lower Manhattan firm and a New York City Police Officer near Ground Zero on or about September 14, 2001:



Businessman: Officer, I work at XYZ Co in that building right behind you. I need to get inside to retrieve some important documents and computer tapes.

Police Officer: I'm sorry sir; no one passes beyond this point.

Businessman: But officer, the building is fine; I'll be in and out in 15 minutes.

Police Officer: I'm sorry sir I have my orders. No one is allowed past this point.

Businessman: Officer, you don't understand this is costing my company millions of dollars a day and it'll probably cost my job.

Police Officer: (cuts off businessman) Sir, the answer is no, now I'll ask you to please leave the area.



This is an all too common scenario for businesses following an emergency event, one that does not need to occur. We have all heard the announcements following a disaster or serious emergency, "essential travel only" and "only essential personnel". The obvious problem is that no one knows how to define these terms, not even the people who are imposing and enforcing these restrictions. Ultimately it leads to confusion and unnecessary economic injury to businesses, people and municipalities; damage that could be averted through a simple public-private partnership.

In 1997 the State of New York, with financial support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), commissioned a study to explore critical business needs following a disaster. The state had experienced several presidential declared disasters in recent years prior to the study resulting in significant economic loss. The study, entitled the Joint Loss Reduction Partnership (JLRP), joined the State Emergency Management Office with representatives from major New York businesses. It sought to determine critical needs viewed from a business perspective following a disaster. The study concluded that the number one critical need identified in each region was rapid access to the workplace *following the emergency*. Unfortunately, nothing was in place to facilitate this need.

As a former police officer I can appreciate the need to take and maintain control of a situation during an emergency. That philosophy didn't change much later as an emergency manager; however, during that career I also worked closely with the private sector, experiencing how the corporate world viewed disaster recovery from a business viewpoint. I thought it would be possible to find some common ground but ultimately the public and private sectors do many of the same things – only toward slightly different goals. Both business and government try to protect life and property within their jurisdictions, but business' ultimate goal is survival of the firm. Not a bad economic goal for municipalities to consider.

After the final JLRP report was released in 1999, the private sector participants in the study decided to push for active change by forming a not-for-profit

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corporation whose purpose was to represent businesses interests in disaster recovery. The Business Network of Emergency Resources (BNet) immediately set out to define a way to integrate corporate concerns into civil emergency response actions. Shortly afterwards, the Corporate Emergency Access System (CEAS) was introduced, pioneering the "corporate first responder."

The CEAS is essentially a credentialing system that allows companies to pre-identify employees and critical service providers that are essential to business continuity and recovery. Credentials are typically allotted as a percentage of the amount of employees at a given worksite. The intent of the program is to allow businesses limited access to a worksite in a restricted area by means of a recognized credential to perform business recovery activities, not to conduct usual business. The challenge now was to convince the rest of the world that not all first responders wear uniforms.

Driving the Politics

One of the major challenges faced by BNet was to alter a powerful paradigm within municipalities and public safety agencies – first responders wear uniforms. The first challenge is – if corporate first responders are not wearing uniforms, how do we tell them apart from the curious? The second challenge is – if we can identify them how do we protect them from harm and when do we let them in? These are gray areas indeed but cities like New York (which learned about business access during 9/11), Buffalo and Boston have decided to address the issue with public-private partnerships and the Corporate Emergency Access System (CEAS).

The Black and White of the Blue

What BNet has devised in the CEAS is a simple model for identifying critical business employees that is recognized by local law enforcement. It must be available to governments when a crisis threatens. It is also an excellent way for municipalities to demonstrate to existing and prospective businesses that it is concerned about their recovery. On the public safety side CEAS aids local law enforcement in exercising proper discretion and helps achieve normalization. From the business perspective it facilitates the recovery process and keeps the company, its customers and employees moving forward.

Programs like CEAS should first be developed locally; this is especially true in New York State, which is a "home rule" state. Local officials often disregard programs developed and deployed by outsiders; they would rather become a participant by choice.

Despite early acceptance, we cannot gauge CEAS effectiveness until it is used during a real emergency. A critical key to success lies within police agencies enforcing the program. The primary concern is that police would not recognize the credential once CEAS is activated. The only way to ensure police acceptance of CEAS is to include the program in department patrol manuals.

Going Forward

Public-private partnerships will play key roles as we improve our nation's resilience to disasters and terrorism. CEAS is the first big step to raising the awareness of government that emergency response does not end at search and rescue. It is truly a win-win for all stakeholders.

About the Author

Peter Picarillo, CBCP, is a retired NYPD Sergeant and former founder and Director of Public-Private Initiatives for the NYC Office of Emergency Management. He currently manages Picarillo Consulting, a strategic management consulting practice. www.picarilloconsulting.com. For details on BNet's Corporate Emergency Access System visit www.bnetinc.org.



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