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New Anti-Terror Role for Private Sector: Functioning as 'First' First Responder

In the new age of terrorism, the private sector has been drawn into the community of first responders, like it or not. "Unless a terrorist's target is a military or other secure government facility, the 'first' first responders will almost certainly be civilians," the 9-11 commission staff noted in its report. Given that 85 percent of the nation's critical infrastructure is in private hands, "homeland security and national preparedness therefore often begins with the private sector."

The staff suggested three critical elements for private sector preparedness: an evacuation plan, adequate communications, and a plan for continuity of operations after the initial emergency.

Although World Trade Center (WTC) officials had taken "many steps" to improve evacuation procedures after the 1993 WTC terrorist bombing, the complex had never conducted a full evacuation exercise, the report found. Individual companies had practiced drills isolated to their floors, but "in no case, to our knowledge, did any tenant in the WTC practice a drill where the employees walked down the stairs and exited the building," the report said.

Tenants were unaware that there was no plan for rooftop evacuation and that doors leading to the roof were locked, according to the report. As a result, people climbed the stairs to reach the roof instead of trying to find a clear downward path.

Practice Drills 'Extremely Useful'

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey had conducted fire drills that were cited by some WTC survivors as "extremely useful" in their evacuation, citing measures such as glow strips on the stairs, emergency lighting in the stairwells, and Port Authority-provided flashlights as "significantly assisting their progress." A former fire warden claimed, however, that many office workers were "very uncooperative" during drills, claiming to be too busy to participate. Those who did "did not pay attention," he told the 9-11 staff.

Just as with evacuation efforts, "the tenants of the WTC varied widely in their success" in maintaining effective communications on 9/11, according to the report adding that "few companies had a

crisis communications plan in place." Firms lacked records of who was in the office that day and had not given employees a place to congregate after evacuation or a central phone number to call.

As far as business continuity, firms with backup facilities outside of Lower Manhattan fared best in the wake of 9/11, but even then, they often lacked plans for personnel, equipment, and training to use redundant facilities. The report found, however, that the spirit of cooperation among businesses was "enormous." The Mayor's Office of Emergency Management "did a superb job" of coordinating companies' donations of supplies and expertise to those in need.

The 9-11 staff report concluded that "lack of a widely embraced private sector preparedness standard" is a major reason that companies are unprepared for an emergency. As a result, the commission enlisted the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) to convene industry security experts as well as local, state, and federal government to offer input on standards for private sector preparedness. ANSI developed a voluntary National Preparedness Standard based on prior work by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), and the commission is apparently poised to endorse it.

The new standard "is written in such a way as to include all major elements" of preparedness that a company should consider, according to Donald Schmidt, emergency response planning practice leader at consulting firm Marsh Inc., and a member of the NFPA technical committee that developed the original standard. The framework will help jumpstart "companies that have not thought through all the threats" they face or formalized an incident management system to address them.

"The document is not going to mandate major investments," Schmidt told *EPN*, and all elements will be scalable for use by small companies. "Small businesses need to go through the same thought processes," he added, by asking "what could we be hit with" from a building fire to a hazardous materials accident on nearby railroad tracks. The standard will help businesses decide "what elements need to be in place."

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Editor: Deborah Eby • Reprinted with permission from *Emergency Preparedness News*, June 1, 2004, p.83.

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