Private-sector EOCs

Some corporations have their own EOCs, some participate in their jurisdiction's EOC, and some, unfortunately, still need to get into the game.

By Randall D. Larson

This EOC is permanently set up in the headquarters of an international financial-services company. Maintaining such a dedicated space (this one is about 50 by 75 feet) is a rarity in the corporate world, where most EOCs (as on the public safety side) do double duty as conference rooms or offices until activated as needed.

Regina Phelps

In the August issue, we took a look at health department and hospital emergency operations centers and at how public safety/emergency management EOCs might interface with them during joint activations. There's another entity that may be overlooked but will play a valuable part in emergency management, and that's the corporate community.

Though not actively engaged in emergency response or public safety, the business sector has a valuable support role in a community's infrastructure and public stability. Any disaster, whether it's caused by a natural disaster, pandemic or terrorist action, will not only affect the corporate world, but will depend on support from it in the recovery process. It therefore behooves any emergency management team to maintain close ties with their partners on the business side.

Because corporate partners have much to bring to the table in an emergency management role, from logistical support during response or recovery operations to infrastructure repair that keeps the government's own EOC operating, it's important to include the business world in any jurisdiction's emergency plan and keep close interaction with them during activation of your EOC.

"The business world must not be overlooked," says Aaron Kenneston, emergency manager for Washoe County, Nev. "They have emergency management needs that can be addressed through joint training, and they have resources for the local jurisdiction as well. Many businesses have their own first responders, shelter facilities, operation centers and supplies that can be very valuable to the community, *if* agreements and relationships have been established.

"If a jurisdiction is not incorporating these elements into their daily plans, then they are not leveraging all resources available to them. In this age of shrinking emergency management budgets, that is a big mistake."

The corporate EOC

Along with those other resources, many large businesses have fairly sophisticated EOCs that can be activated after a disaster or other regional emergency as part of their business continuity plan.

Like many major international corporations, Intel has established Corporate Emergency Operations Centers at its major branches throughout the world. Each CEOC is locally managed, with cross-functional participation from local business groups, corporate security, employee health services, public affairs and site services.

The EOC is established on site, with equipment and contingency plans for self-sufficiency during all manner of disaster and business-interruption scenarios. Multiple computer connections and redundant communications (including PBX and satellite phones and ham radio) ensure both the ability to receive inbound situation information and outbound connectivity with other corporate branches and government.

By having established and equipped CEOCs at multiple locations, the corporation maintains redundancy and efficiency; locations not affected by a disaster can support or assume command until the location in the midst of the event can resume control of its own operations. A controlled document, with scheduled revisions, provides operational CEOC instructions, while regular business unit drills, up to a dozen per quarter, are held to ensure readiness and familiarization with emergency procedures, disaster recovery and business continuity.

These drills involve accelerated timelines, role-playing and simulated supplier engagement to ensure continuity of Intel's business operations. The company's key suppliers have been engaged to cooperate in these business continuity plans, and the supplier network is tested regularly to ensure that production lines aren't stalled.

Many corporations like Intel also develop plans on how to assist the community that has been affected by the disaster, as well as maintaining the company's own viability.

The tech support EOC

In addition to many companies maintaining their own EOCs, which should have a mechanism to interface with public safety EOCs, there are companies that provide direct support to public safety agencies and/or their EOCs: radio system providers, telephony carriers, dispatch and mobile data hardware and software vendors, and the like.

During the response to Hurricane Katrina, for example, dozens of companies flocked into Louisiana and Mississippi to restore critical emergency communications infrastructure that was lost to the floodwaters. These companies maintain their own EOCs to manage their corporate response to the disaster much the same way the local government EOC manages the public safety response.

For example, M/A-COM Inc., a manufacturer of critical communications systems, recently upgraded its EOC to ensure support for customers during a crisis. The EOC, in Lynchburg, Va., contains a variety of critical features, including satellite feeds to track weather reports and local news updates in real time, and dedicated backups for all communications systems including satellites, cellular phones, analog phones and Internet connections.

This EOC provides functionality and operational redundancy to ensure that public safety organizations are supported throughout major incidents. "M/A-COM has always maintained an emergency center," says Steve McElroy, director of production operations. "We decided to expand on the foundation of our emergency operations center by adding several advanced capabilities, based on our recent experiences," including the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons.

M/A-COM has two facilities in Lynchburg; one houses the Customer Resource Center, which is used for day-to-day customer order transactions and technical assistance; the other, called the Customer Integration Center, is where the EOC is sited. The reason, McElroy explains, is that if a local natural disaster were to hit, there would be "another layer of redundancy" for maintaining customer contact.

An EOC advisory group

The City of Hamilton, Ontario, recognizes the need to coordinate with its

Members of communications company M/A-Com operate in their corporate EOC to facilitate and manage the company's response to restoring communications to the Gulf region after hurricanes devastated local emergency communication systems.

business community and include them in emergency plans and EOC activation guidelines.

"We don't interface directly with any private-sector/corporate EOCs," says Richard Kinchlea, acting emergency management coordinator for Hamilton Emergency Services. "Out of necessity, we deal almost exclusively with the 'apex' of a given industry, that is, those who represent an industry as a whole, rather than its individual components.

"For example, we'll work with a representative for the area hospitals rather than a single hospital. Having said that, we do have some singular entities we will work with, such as the Hamilton Port Authority and Hamilton International Airport."

Hamilton's EOC works with these entities and representatives through the city's regular planning group, the Emergency Preparedness Advisory Committee, which meets monthly, and also includes them as an advisory group to the EOC.

"To address the business sector specifically, we do not currently have an industry representative that you could call 'corporate' or 'business,'" says Kinchlea. "Our current relationship hinges on our CAER [Community Awareness and Emergency Response] representatives. This group comprises most of our large heavy-industry companies."

Eight of Hamilton's top 10 business employers have either direct or indirect input to this process, with three being private companies represented through the local CAER organization. (CAER groups exist in various cities in Canada and the U.S. to facilitate emergency planning and coordination between industry and communities.)

"We meet monthly with our EPAC group to go over emergency planning issues within the city," says Kinchlea.

"Often this involves informing city partners about the business activities of the emergency management program and working to create greater cohesiveness among our respective plans."

Currently, EPAC membership includes the CAER representative and representatives from the airport, harbor commission, hospitals, rail, police, fire, EMS, risk management, transit, school boards, McMaster University and Mohawk College.

Any of the members of EPAC that are not part of the municipal corporation may find themselves called to Hamilton's EOC as part of a special Advisory Group. For example, the airport may be requested to send a representative if there is an air accident.

"Our CAER representative, who represents the majority of our heavy industry, is actually part of our Emergency Support Group in the EOC," says Kinchlea. "The CAER rep will be called into the EOC almost 90% of the time for two main reasons: The majority of our risk involves heavy industry/hazmat-type events, and, due to the nature and size of this industry in Hamilton, they have many hazmat-related response resources we may be able to take advantage of during an emergency."

"There is always more that we, as emergency managers, can do," Kinchlea notes. "This summer we will be redeveloping the terms of reference for our EPAC group and likely adjusting the
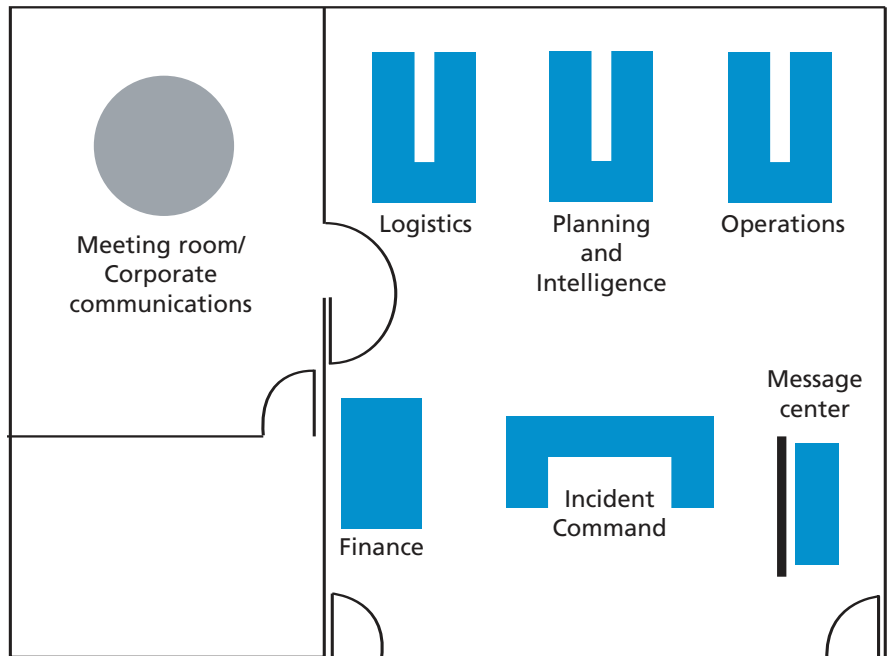
A sample layout for a corporate EOC, based on one belonging to a large global insurance company. The space is dedicated, and, like many public safety EOCs, it's set up on an ICS model. The main room is about 20 by 30 feet, with noise-dampening dividers, both wired and wireless communications, and the message center placed off to the side and behind a divider to minimize noise from inbound calls.

membership. In light of recent events and developing risks, some greater connection with 'business' is sure to arise during this process."

Corporate unified command

The challenge in terms of communications, says Regina Phelps, founder of San Francisco-based Emergency Management & Safety Solutions <www.ems-solutionsinc.com>, is to find a way that business can both get information from the public safety community and have a voice to let their needs be known.

Phelps is an expert in emergency management, EOC design and continuity planning who has coached both business continuity planners and emergency managers on how to work, plan and practice together for mutual preparation, especially in California's earthquake country.

Having a position for business in your EOC may not be the simple answer, however. It's difficult to determine who to invite into your EOC from the business community. It's not like having a single rep from public health and a rep from the Red Cross and a rep from public works.

"Who is going to be able to speak for all of business?" asks Phelps. "They can't."

She recommends a virtual solution that can act as an interface between a jurisdiction's EOC and the business side. "There needs to be a very clear strategy for virtual communication," says Phelps, "that will be able to keep people from the business world in the loop about what's happening in a pandemic or disaster.

"They need to think about not just

putting stuff on radios and television and newspapers. There needs to be a notification system, a Web site with a bulletin board or something like that, where business can get up-to-date information. That makes more sense than having a real person assigned to sit in the EOC."

Reaching out to business

So how should an emergency manager begin to develop a working relationship with his or her local business community?

"What they really need to do is to identify the top five or 10 companies in their area, and have the OES director reach out to them," recommends Phelps. "If they are big enough, they will have a pretty sophisticated business continuity planning department, some times much more sophisticated than the county, from a planning perspective."

Noticing a dearth of information being relayed between the city's OES and its business community, Phelps joined several other women in San Francisco to create a group called SFREADY <www.sfready.org>, which meets every other month to develop a consistent conduit of communications and emergency planning between the city and local businesses.

"We assign professional planners who will talk on all types of issues related to planning, and then we do mailings to the business community," says Phelps. "We've gotten a partnership with the Mayor's Office of Emergency Services to provide letterhead to show the city presence on our mailings."

Tabletop exercises are held, and regular mailings of information are sent out through the city's Chamber of Commerce mailing list; a mailing last August discussed details of how business can interface with the city EOC using the National Incident Management System.

"We've been able to find another way to try and backfill what we feel is a void of information for a lot of businesses who don't have the resources to do any planning," says Phelps. "I think that's part of the bigger issue. The big guys are going to find a way to get what they need. It's the small and mid-size companies that are really going to suffer and likely go out of business after a major disaster."

Public-private compatibility

Most large corporations have the wherewithal to maintain a degree of self-sufficiency through their own business continuity planning, and most are also willing to be involved in supporting their communities in times of disaster recovery.

Nonetheless, public safety needs to recognize the essential difference between public and private entities — one is rooted in public service, the other in the provision of products or services for profit — and emergency managers need to remain cognizant of the latter's essential need for the sustainability of its profit margin. The drivers are different, even if the motivations in the aftermath of disaster are shared.

"These large corporate facilities really want to be reaching out to the public sector," Phelps notes, "and they want to find a way to do that. But, honestly, they're also a little concerned that some cities and counties may call for eminent domain and actually take some of the things the companies have.

"There is a certain concern that the better prepared a company is, while that's good, might also result in having the city come along and say, 'Gee, that's great, I'd like that 10,000 gallons of fuel you have!' Business can be a little nervous about that, so it can be a double-edged sword."

Understanding the necessity of business continuity as the first, but not the only, priority of the corporate world will give emergency management the proper perspective when partnering with big business, and help the public and private sector work together for mutual benefit in these times of natural disaster and domestic preparedness. HPP

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