

Engaging Employees & Companies in Disaster Preparedness

From natural disasters to terrorist attacks, the U.S. has learned—or rather has known for hundreds of years—that it is not immune to catastrophes. In fact, it is quite susceptible to them. What the U.S. has also learned from experience is that the country’s greatest capital when disaster strikes is its people and its products. Because of this, the American Red Cross developed two programs that enable individuals to better prepare their companies and their communities, all the while better preparing themselves, in the event of a catastrophe.

PrePareDNeSS on a Local & National Level

Disasters are no glass of spilled milk. They require multiple experts, multiple hands and multiple supplies. Speediness and efficiency are keys to cleaning up and rebuilding the mess. In 2000, Chicago’s local Red Cross chapter started a corporate volunteer program, Ready When the Time Comes (RWTC), which trains employees before the mess is made. A year after its launch, W.W. Grainger Inc. stepped up as the founding sponsor of the program. Once a local aid, it now expands across the country reaching more than 460 organizations and companies in 52 markets, totaling more than 13,000 Red Cross volunteers.

National RWTC Manager Martha Patterson says that it use to take five phone calls to get one volunteer that was available. “RWTC allows us to make one phone call and to get as many people as we need,” she states.

When the program began in 2000, Patterson was hired by the Chicago chapter to develop it from scratch. She says that at the time, the chapter was led by two dynamic and forward-thinking men who, after realizing how far and few relief volunteers there were, had a vision for a system in which chapters were ready and able to respond to disasters quickly and competently. Six years after RWTC’s inception, Hurricane Katrina stormed into New Orleans, LA, causing an unforeseen amount of devastation on the Gulf Coast. This tragic incident pushed Grainger and the Red Cross to expand the program nationally. With Grainger’s monetary contributions, RWTC piloted 16 chapters across the country in July 2006 to make certain the program worked in markets larger and smaller than Chicago. “The results were absolutely magnificent,” Patterson says. “We discovered that it works in any market and any location.”

Through the program, certified Red Cross trainers with a wealth of experience teach volunteers skills like how to run shelters and mass feeding, how to assist with call center support and the proper way to assess a disaster.

“We teach them how we set up cots, tear down cots, where food is and the rules of the shelter,” Patterson says. “The testing comes during the simulation, and then when they leave training, they have a pretty good visual of what it is they need to do when they are called.”

Each RWTC chapter has a program manager. When a disaster occurs and there is a need to activate volunteers, the program manager will call a partner company’s corporate point of contact to let him or her know that help is needed. “They will give detailed information about the location of the disaster, how many volunteers are needed, to whom they should report when they arrive at the disaster site and how long they will be needed,” Patterson says. “The corporate point of contact will do an internal call-down or will send an e-mail to all trained employee volunteers to see who is available.”

Through this system, RWTC contacted John McDermott, Grainger’s senior director of brand strategy, for aid when a fire broke out in an apartment complex, displacing many residents to a nearby shelter. “You sort of show up and get your tasks assigned at that point,” he says. “It can be a variety of things. People need blankets, they need cots set up, help with unloading trucks, loading trucks and so on. You just go with the flow.”

In the days, weeks and months following 9/11, a total of 57,434 Red Cross employees and volunteers were assigned from all 50 states to help with shelter, meals, emotional support and other needs to the more than 59,000 people affected by the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania. Then in 2006, Hurricane Katrina brought out a whopping 245,000 trained volunteers, seven times more than the number of workers who responded to the 2004 hurricanes and 16 times more than the number of workers involved with Hurricane Andrew in 1992.
“I think when disasters strike, people definitely want to help, but you need to be trained to respond, and that is the big key here,” McDermott says. “We recognize that nobody is immune, but if you can take a little time beforehand, you can really save somebody’s life.”

Since its launch, RWTC volunteers have been deployed more than 50 times following hurricanes, floods, wildfires, heat waves and ice storms. A national model for corporate volunteerism, Red Cross’s and Grainger’s partnership have made them finalists in the U.S. Chamber Business Civic Leadership Center’s 2011 Best Partnership Award.

“An economy can rattle a business, and nowadays businesses are trying to do more with less, and they become focused on taking care of customers first,” McDermott says. “What we are trying to be able to do through the products, services, solutions and partnerships is help businesses take time to understand that one of the best ways for people to serve customers is to actually be prepared themselves.”

Through this program, businesses can offer an outlet for their employees to make a difference in both their communities and the country, all the while meeting the needs of local Red Cross chapters.

PREPAREDNESS ON A CORPORATE LEVEL
While it is important for management and SH&E to prepare employees to help when disaster strikes their communities, it is equally important for employees to know how to respond to a disaster that directly affects their business. Some companies never reopen after a catastrophe, and of those that remain open, most need to shut down operations for days and sometimes weeks.

A Red Cross survey shows that more Americans than not are wholly unprepared for a disaster of any kind. The same survey taken in 2009 shows that only two in 10 Americans feel prepared for a catastrophic event and that 82% of Americans agree that if preparedness were made easy, they would partake in it. A business cannot handle a disaster if its employees are not prepared for one. This is why Red Cross developed its Ready Rating program, which, through a self-paced and web-based hazard vulnerability assessment, measures how prepared businesses, organizations and schools are in the event of an emergency and provides customized feedback on how to improve those efforts. At no cost, members complete a 123-point self-assessment of their level of preparedness, gain access to tips and best practices and commit to improving their score each year.

Red Cross’s St. Louis chapter created Ready Rating in 2008. At the time, Jonathan L. Epstein, MEMS, NREMT-P, Interim Chair for Disaster Health Sub-Council, was brought on as the vice chair of what is now Red Cross’s Scientific Advisory Council (SAC), a board that makes sure courses, training materials and products use the latest scientific, educational and technical information available. Epstein, along with other SAC members, worked with the St. Louis chapter to recraft the program using scientific methods for evaluating the most effective aspects of it. Thanks to financial support from the program’s founding sponsor, Anheuser Busch, eight other cities were able to sign on for a 2-year pilot in 2009. Red Cross deemed the program effective after
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results showed a 14% average increase in members’ Ready Rating assessment scores the first year and a dramatic 50% increase the second year.

In 2010, management of the Ready Rating program was transitioned to Red Cross national headquarters. With the addition of Sam’s Club as a national sponsor, several enhancements were added, including a streamlined process for new members to sign up and begin using the program, an update of the assessment to better align with the Department of Homeland Security Private Sector Preparedness Guidance and increased capacity to make the program available nationwide. Ready Rating now has five cornerstone preparedness actions.

1) Commit to preparedness. This step indicates your commitment to increasing your business’s or organization’s level of emergency preparedness during the course of the calendar year. You will work to make your business or organization more prepared and to enhance overall community preparedness.

2) Conduct a hazard vulnerability assessment. This step involves gathering information about possible emergencies that could impact your business and your facility’s capabilities to respond to and recover from a disaster or other emergency.

3) Develop an emergency response plan. An emergency response plan describes the steps your business or organization will take to protect your business and employees before, during and after an emergency.

4) Implement your emergency response plan. This step involves continuing to work with the planning committee to implement the emergency response plan with employees. The key to implementing the plan is to make preparedness a part of the corporate culture. Conduct and assess regular drills and exercises to determine the readiness of your employees and facilities.

5) Help your community get prepared. Now that your company and employees are prepared, make at least one additional commitment to ensure that the overall community is prepared for a disaster or other emergency.

The self-assessment should not take more than an hour or two, Epstein says, and should be completed by a committee or a team of interested parties, especially for larger companies. Although it differs for every organization, the committee should have a wide-based representation of employer groups, he adds. From senior management to frontline workers, a larger company should gather about eight to 10 people, covering each facet of the business. SH&E managers should always be a part of the process, and Epstein even suggests inviting the fire or police chief to participate. A company’s commitment to the program means it will need to improve its score by at least one point each year.

“The crux of the program is an annual reassessment,” Epstein says. “The premise is that every organization improves each year. If your score goes up, then you have improved.”

In addition to the feedback the program’s now 1,350 members receive after completing the assessment, Ready Rating provides links to additional resources like www.fema.gov. Although the program is mostly a tool that helps members plug holes in their emergency preparedness plans, other resources like CPR training are available through Red Cross. Red Cross is also in the midst of developing tools that will allow companies to create effective emergency response plans and to conduct proper drills, Epstein says.

“Businesses will fail if they are not prepared,” he says. “We do not want it to be a scare tactic, but that is one of the facts that we learned.” Epstein adds that many insurance providers are starting to look at the program as something that can eventually reduce users’ insurance premiums based on participation. He says this is how SH&E experts can gain buy-in from upper management.

The program also comes with a detailed guide of the five cornerstone preparedness actions. Both the guide and the assessment are the result of a comprehensive review of preparedness recommendations conducted by the American Red Cross National Office of Preparedness and Health and Safety Services, the national Ready Rating team and the SAC.

**PrePareDNeSS oN a PerSoNal level**

The takeaway from programs like RWTC and Ready Rating is more than just emergency preparedness with a business or a community. RWTC volunteers and Ready Rating members can take the skills that they have learned through the Red Cross and can apply them at home.

One thing that Epstein says users learn through Ready Rating’s assessment is the need for protecting important documents. “It makes you think about how to maintain the integrity of your documents,” he says. “Do you store the information two states away so you always have some ability to validate? That is something to seriously think about.”

McDermott says he did RWTC training to not only make a difference in his community, but to make a difference within himself: “It was part of the leadership that I wanted to provide within my own family, and it is what my company is about.”

From CPR training to how to create an emergency preparedness kit, those who seek out emergency readiness through these types of programs find it. Disasters are inevitable; being prepared is a choice. For more information, visit www.redcross.org/RWTC or www.readyrating.org.

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