

Governments, Companies Planning to Reduce Business Losses During Emergencies

A plan designed to reduce business losses during emergencies is being finalized between Suffolk County and a nonprofit crisis management group.

Under the Corporate Emergency Access System, companies that want to participate would have to decide in advance which key employees should get access cards to cross police lines. If it's safe – say an entire street is blocked off because one building is on fire but the others are not – police would scan the cards and allow only these key workers through to save food, take out temperature-sensitive medicine, shut down power, retrieve paperwork or do other critical tasks.

"It saves time and enhances security," County Executive Steve Levy said. "We're very happy to see this plan come to fruition. This is an example of good, pre-emptive planning that can help avoid chaos in a frantic emergency situation."
The program was developed by Business Network Emergency Resources, a nonprofit headquartered in Manhattan, and was adopted by Nassau in 2006 and New York City in 2004. New York City activated the system last July when a steam pipe exploded in midtown Manhattan.

The cards would be hard to counterfeit and simplify police officers' job during emergencies, said Dr. Robert Leviton, president and a founder of the nonprofit and also director of the emergency department at Our Lady of Mercy Medical Center in the Bronx. "History shows that with the complexities of the various IDs – you have your ID, I have my ID, the guy from ConEd has his ID, the gal from CompUSA has her ID – the police become overwhelmed by determining 'Who should they let in?'" Leviton said. "The system gives a very easy method for the officers at the front gate, so to speak, to say 'Yes, you can come in,' 'No you can't.' What's important about all that is it's described ahead of time so there's no discomfort by people."

At the same time, Leviton said, instituting an emergency access program pushes companies to plan ahead: "We force companies to look at their business to say 'Who do we really have to come in?' so they have their discussions today, on a nice, bright, summery day rather than that moment of disaster."

Each two-year card costs \$50 or more and the number of employees allowed per business depends on the size of the company. Depending on the municipality, there are other conditions also, such as insurance coverage limits required for each business. Informing businesses and emergency response personnel has been one challenge in the city and Nassau, while the other big challenge is getting companies to sign up.

In Nassau, several large firms have joined the program, including Bethpage Federal Credit Union, supermarkets and colleges. But word and details have not spread much beyond businesses and organizations that meet regularly with county emergency planners. The program is part of class for new recruits in the county police department. County officials say they're also trying to ensure that each of the 21 local police departments learn about the program.

James Callahan, commissioner of Nassau's Office of Emergency Management, said sign-up is "moving along" but not fast. "We've gotten some of the big players, but we're not getting the medium players," he said. "It's seven years past September 11, and although Katrina happened in 2005, people are forgetting now. So you get that combination of word not getting out and people getting complacent because, knock on wood, around here we haven't had anything major in a while."

Callahan said Sept. 11 is a prime example of why businesses should sign up: "Basically everything was closed from 14th Street on down. There were buildings that were very safe in that area, but those people were not allowed in ... The insurance companies that were all down below 14th Street couldn't get into their facilities, and they couldn't process the claims or at least get the materials out to process the claims of people who were affected by the disaster."

About 96 percent of Long Island companies have 50 or fewer workers, according to said Matthew Crosson, president of the Long Island Association, and many of them have been thinking about disaster preparedness, especially when accounting, insurance and financial planning firms start to bring up such issues.

"There's a lot of concern in the business community over whether Long Island is adequately prepared for a major disaster," said Crosson, who said he hasn't been told the details of the access plan. "This level of planning would be welcome by most businesses. Most businesses now, even small businesses, understand they need to do disaster planning. The ability to get back into the business is part of that."