



City looks at disaster planning

A consulting company will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of city operations should a disaster strike.

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PROVIDENCE -- What would happen to crucial municipal functions in a disaster, natural or man-made?

Would public safety officials still be able to communicate with one another? Would the city still be able to collect taxes in order to pay its bills? Would city employees even be able to get to work?

"Cities are now waking up, post-9/11," with prodding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, said Scott Corzine, senior vice president of a New York City company called Risk Solutions International. "They're looking for all municipalities to really think this through."

The city has hired Risk Solutions International on a contract that is expected to cost about \$80,000 to analyze city government capabilities and weaknesses.

For a long time Providence has had an emergency plan that covers contingencies such as what buildings will be used for public shelters.

Risk Solutions International will produce a report that will take the plan a step further and identify how city government itself would keep operating and providing services after a terrorist attack or other calamity, said Leo D. Messier, director of the Providence Emergency Management Agency and Office of Homeland Security.

For example, if City Hall is evacuated and stays closed for days because of a chemical spill, the city must have a properly equipped building where it can send employees to keep working, Messier said.

If the disaster is prolonged, perhaps arrangements can be made to have some employees work from home, Corzine suggested.

A key worry is the city's information-technology systems. There are regional "hot sites" with computer capacity outside the Providence metropolitan electricity grid where the city could move some of its essential operations, Corzine said.

The city is limited in how much money it would be able to spend on backup information archives and redundant equipment, but, ideally, employees would at least be able to set up at another location and have access to the current information they need to continue their functions, Messier said.

"We could do some drills once we get the plans in place," he said.

Asked if employees might have to be trained to do certain functions outside their normal duties, Messier said yes.

"Business has been doing this for years, [providing for] continuity of operations," he said. "Government agencies now are beginning to realize the importance of it."

One task for Risk Solutions International is to help the city prioritize its functions and to decide what functions must be restored within, say, 24 hours after a disaster, then seven days after, and then two weeks after.

Officials need to be able to credibly assure the public that city government can get back on its feet in a reasonable amount of time despite a disaster, Corzine said.

Experts in the continuity of operations point out that even as government copes with a disaster, it needs to be able to help its citizens and the private sector cope, too.

The city took one step to protect itself when it located the Emergency Management Agency in a building on Charles Street, well away from the city center. That lesson was learned on 9/11 when the City of New York emergency command center was destroyed in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

Money to hire Risk Solutions International is coming from an \$800,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.