

TOGETHER. HELPING IOWANS.

Are You Prepared – To Communicate?

By Allan Urlis, Director of Communications, Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives



When a massive mid-winter ice storm knocked out power, water and phone service in late January to Pella Corporation's Murray, Ky., fiberglass and vinyl window and door manufacturing plant, the company's Jim Nieboer needed up-to-date information on disaster conditions and recovery efforts, and it was difficult to find.

"Local entities in Kentucky were working together, and we didn't always know that," said Nieboer, corporate manager & environmental, safety and facilities engineering, Pella Corporation.

He ultimately found the specific information Pella's corporate business resiliency team needed – extent of damage, resources deployed and estimated time for restoration of electric, water and phone service. Nieboer said some of the frustration he experienced in tracking down the needed answers was probably because he just expected that all states are as well prepared as Iowa is to quickly respond to crisis and disaster.

"Information flow is the key," Nieboer said.

Last summer in Iowa when an F-5 tornado decimated Parkersburg and record flooding crippled Cedar Rapids and other communities in the Cedar River basin, Nieboer said information flow from public agencies was authoritative and timely, particularly in the first 24 hours. While Pella Corporation, a Safeguard Iowa Partnership partner, didn't sustain flood or tornado damage to any of its Iowa operations last year, Nieboer said coordination of information flow by Safeguard Iowa enabled Pella Corporation and its team members to lend a helping hand.

"Pella Corporation felt we had good, timely information, so we could send people where they could really help, and we could funnel relief aid through reputable charitable organizations," Nieboer said.

Safeguard Iowa Partnership, created in 2007 by the Iowa Business Council and representatives from key state agencies, is a coalition of the state's business and government leaders, who share a commitment to working together to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from catastrophic events in Iowa. Bottom line, Safeguard Iowa – which consists of more than 160 private businesses, associations, nonprofit organizations and

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public agencies – helps individual Iowans by ensuring timely and accurate information sharing as well as the sharing of resources between business and government before, during and after crises or disasters strike.

“The Safeguard Iowa Partnership proved itself in the flood and tornados of 2008,” Nieboer said. “They proved their value.”

That proof came in the coordination of key resources like 12,000 bottles of water, plastic sheeting and bags for sandbagging and the transportation to get those items where they were needed. During record flooding in several areas of the state, Safeguard Iowa Partnership Executive Director Jami Haberl had a seat at the table in Iowa’s Emergency Operations Center with Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

In 2008, Safeguard Iowa Partnership conducted business continuity workshops in Altoona, Cedar Rapids and Denison attracting 400 public and private entities, and distributed more than 20,000 Protect Iowa Health guides.

More proof of the benefits to Safeguard Iowa partners and Iowa include a comprehensive inventory of business resources, equipment and expertise to enhance preparedness in advance of a crisis, the development and implementation of procedures for requesting and coordinating resources, and support for recruiting businesses to register emergency response resources.

“Being prepared requires a well-established public-private partnership so resources can be identified quickly and brought out to wherever that disaster may be,” Haberl said. “We’re helping improve Iowa’s business climate by building safer and more resilient communities, and we’re doing it by continuing to enhance relationships, and build and reinforce trust between the public and private sectors.”

When crisis strikes, that means having tools ready to go and people who know how to use them. Being prepared also requires good communication. How much help are fire extinguishers in your home if everyone in the home hasn’t been told where they are or have been instructed on how to use them? Same thing in the workplace. Escape plans and routes that haven’t been formally shared with employees may result in someone being left behind.

While it goes without saying that fatalities aren’t reversible, well-planned and executed communications can help prevent them or help avoid serious injury. And, after the flash point is over when it’s time to pick up the pieces and many resources are available, that same well-planned and executed communication will make a difference to the folks who desperately need your help.

Like Pella Corporation’s Nieboer said, “Information flow is the key.”



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