

Planning for disaster A year after crippling ice storm, area businesses urged to prepare

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It was nothing compared with last week's catastrophic earthquake in Haiti.

But last winter's disastrous ice storm here still provided a profound wake-up call for businesses to plan for disasters.

"The ice storm affected everybody," both businesses and individuals, Henderson County Emergency Management Director Larry Koerber noted at a Northwest Kentucky Forward disaster training workshop here last week.

To appreciate the need for disaster planning, one should first take an overview of what happened last winter.

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"On Jan. 27, 2009," Koerber said, "we were not as prepared as we would like to have been because the magnitude" — thousands of utility poles snapped in two across western Kentucky, tens of thousands of homes and businesses were without power for as long as three weeks, many thousands of people were without landline or cell phone service — "was greater than we anticipated."

"We can be without power for 48 hours or 72 hours," he said. "We were not prepared to have that many people out of power for that amount of time."

At the peak of the damage, "approximately 60 percent of the city was without power," Koerber said. "Approximately 90 percent of the county was without power for an extended period of time." Some counties to the south were hit even worse.

In such emergencies, people and companies look to power companies and emergency responders to help. The problem is, they were affected just like everyone else.

"Utility and emergency services were overwhelmed: Utilities, police, fire departments — especially volunteer fire departments — EMS (emergency medical services), EMA (emergency management agencies), public works and road departments," Koerber said.

Communication systems were shattered. Many landline phones — including modern electronic phones that require electric service — were out of service.

So everyone turned to their reliable backup: Their cell phones. Trouble is, AT&T — the region's dominant wireless provider — hadn't installed permanent emergency backup generators at its cell towers. When the towers lost power, users lost service. It took days for AT&T to deploy portable generators to the numerous cell towers across western Kentucky.

Because of landline and wireless phone outages, businesses such as the Kenergy Corp. rural electric co-op couldn't communicate between its offices in Henderson, Owensboro and Marion to coordinate the response.

Gradually, people realized that Verizon wireless service was largely intact; the company already had permanent generators at virtually all of its towers.

Existing users, including Union County's emergency management service, had wireless communication service. Others, including Kenergy and Methodist Hospital, scrambled to acquire Verizon phones. But by then, we were dozens of hours into the frozen disaster.

Even some with satellite phones found that they failed when too much ice accumulated on their outside antennas, Koerber said.

The loss of electric service extended far beyond the obvious issues, such as the loss of lights and the inability of computers and business equipment to operate. The electric-powered fuel pumps at countless gasoline stations were useless, so transportation was compromised.

Even if you had a full tank, driving was treacherous on the ice-slicked roadways. And numerous streets and roads were blocked by trees and large limbs that collapsed under the weight of tons of ice,

brought about by nearly 3 inches of moisture that fell relentless as rain, freezing rain, sleet and ice over more than two days.

Kentucky State Police Trooper Corey King recalled being on a road in McLean County, running low on fuel, when he came upon a fallen tree blocking the road. By the time he got turned around, another tree had fallen behind him, leaving him trapped.

The blocked roadways forced utility crews to literally cut their way across the landscape and compelled the Henderson Ambulance Service to equip its ambulances with chainsaws.

Meanwhile, many households without electricity either evacuated to move in with friends or family elsewhere or set up portable generators to power at least a portion of their home — an electric space heater or perhaps the furnace — although that posed risks of carbon monoxide poisoning and electrical hazards.

And on it went. Many individuals and businesses were simply paralyzed for days or weeks.

“How were you affected?” Koerber asked an audience of nearly 60 business executives and emergency personnel at the workshop. “And did you write it down so you can prepare for the next time? It’s important to do that.”

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Pittsburg Tank and Tower — a tower fabrication and construction company that has a headquarters and two fabricating plants in Henderson along with some associated companies — decided to answer the wake-up call.

“After the ice storm, the management of Pittsburg Tank and Tower decided we needed to do something to protect our business from harm, whether it’s a man-made or natural disaster,” said Donald McConnell, the company’s vice president of loss prevention.

He cited statistics that indicated that one-third of small- or medium-sized businesses “that suffer a catastrophic loss never recover.”

Managers met with Koerber, then ultimately hired a St. Louis-based consulting company and spent months assembling a business-interruption contingency plan. Managers were careful to inform employees of the purpose of the meetings so as not to alarm them or spark rumors.

“We gathered a list of ‘what-ifs,’” McConnell said. For instance, “What if a tornado tore up the company’s manufacturing plant and disrupted communication and our customers couldn’t get hold of us and didn’t know why?”

“We identified communications as a big issue,” he said. “What if management couldn’t communicate with one another when they’re away from the office?” So Pittsburg installed a two-way radio system with a repeater antenna that extends the signal north of Evansville Regional Airport, then equipped key managers with their own radios.

The company installed a generator and automatic switching gear to power the headquarters building “for as long as we can get diesel.”

Pittsburg partnered with suppliers concerning emergency scenarios — Koerber recommended not being dependent on a single supplier which itself could be knocked out of business by a disaster — and even made contact with competitors in case it needed to subcontract fabrication work to keep its crews in the field supplied with materials.

The company assembled a paper list of not just company suppliers, but exact addresses and driving directions in case phone and Internet systems weren’t available and employees needed to drive to pick up supplies directly.

During the 2009 ice storm, the company’s headquarters usually had power, so it allowed employees and families to sleep at the office. Later, it instructed employees to listen to particular TV or radio stations for news about whether to come to work during a disaster. It also assembled a phone list, including primary and secondary numbers, for contacting employees.

Finally, it conducted meetings with employees, including both a tabletop training session and then an evacuation exercise at all of its facilities.

“We revamped and revised and fixed it,” McConnell said of the company’s plan.

Finally, it has met with neighboring industries at Henderson Corporate Park. “We offered to partner with them so we could all help each other if something were to happen to some of our facilities or all of our facilities.”

“It’s a living document,” McConnell said of the emergency plan. “We have quarterly meetings to keep it alive and keep it updated.”

But, he added, “We hope we never have to use it.”

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Business disaster planning extends beyond the company itself. Business owners and employees need to be able to care for their homes and families before they can turn their full attention to caring for the jobs.

“Food, water, shelter and communications” are the keys, according to Koerber.

For Trooper King, the wake-up call came in September 2008, when powerful winds from what had been Hurricane Ike stunned Kentuckians with powerful sustained winds that knocked out power to thousands.

“I went three days without power” at home, he said.

So after Hurricane Ike, he equipped his home with an emergency generator. His wife scoffed.

But because of that preparation, and the fact that he uses a propane tank for his heating fuel, “In January (2009), we had heat, we had power and” — for the benefit of his 2-year-old — “we had Dora the Explorer” on TV.

That gave King the peace of mind to turn fully to his duties as a road trooper.

“If you can’t take care of your families,” King said, “you can’t take care of your business.”

Being prepared for power outages means more than having a generator on premises. Generators require fuel, and fuel can deteriorate.

“I think adding a fuel stabilizer to gasoline and diesel (as soon as the can or tank is filled) and an anti-gel to diesel fuel certainly needs to be done,” said Jim Crafton, president of Home Oil and Gas.

“And the fuel needs to be rotated and refreshed periodically,” he said. “Every six months, even with a fuel stabilizer, you ought to put the gasoline in a vehicle and refill with gasoline and stabilizer” while running diesel generators periodically, which will use some of the aging fuel.

Generators and their engines need to be run regularly — many say monthly — to keep them operating properly and their batteries charged.

Methodist Hospital has an especially vigilant regimen, according to Jack Hogan, its director of facilities management. Generators are run for 30 minutes each week and two hours a month with a partial electrical load on them, and parts such as belts and filters are replaced before they wear out.

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Koerber said it's vital to have three-day emergency supply kits at both work and home.

The Green River District Health Department suggests assembling one "grab-n-go" backpack or wheeled suitcase for every member of the family.

They should contain survival basics such as water, flashlights with batteries, a battery or hand-cranked radio, first aid kit, canned food with hand-operated can opener, a blanket, one week of medications, extra car and house keys, some money, change of clothes, toiletries and so forth. It should be customized for toddlers, seniors or anyone with special needs — even pets.

"Grab-N-Go" and "Home Preparedness" brochures with numerous tips can be downloaded at www.healthdepartment.org/emergencypreparedness.htm.

The home-preparedness brochure includes monthly tips for gradually accumulating canned food and supplies as well as monthly tips such as checking expiration dates, rotating fresh supplies in and practicing simple disaster-planning steps.

"The fact is, you are your own first responder, whether it be a small emergency or a large-scale disaster," the brochure admonishes.

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The ice storm revealed huge communication weaknesses, emergency managers noted.

Some organizations are making a point to get cell phones from multiple wireless companies, in case one network fails.

The Henderson County Emergency Management Agency has developed relationships with local amateur ham radio operators and installed a ham radio at its emergency center.

Webster County is looking to greater use of ham and CB radios in the emergency dispatch center "so citizens will have an alternative way of communicating with us" if other systems are unavailable, Director Jeremy Moore said.

Being able to receive general communications is important, too. Koerber recommended having NOAA weather radios at home and work to receive warnings as well as a battery-powered or hand-cranked radio, many of which are capable of receiving both NOAA broadcasts and AM and FM radio signals.

Numerous other measures can be taken, such as equipping the workplace with an automated external defibrillator, or AED, and have some employees receive AED, first aid and CPR training from the American Red Cross.

Vehicles should be winterized, including equipping them with emergency kits, jumper cables and proper vehicle servicing — and filling up before weather turns bad.

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Emergency management managers and responders say they are taking many of these steps themselves as well as other measures, such as improving the procedures for identifying, equipping and opening emergency shelters, including those for people with special medical needs.

Today, more fixed and portable generators are in place to help emergency personnel maintain power in their critical facilities.

And the Red Cross Cardinal Chapter has launched “Project Red” to train employees from the city, county and certain local businesses to help man emergency shelters.

“We’re going to be more ready next time,” Red Cross Executive Director Susan Sauls declared.

Emergency directors also learned lessons, such as having multiple options for securing emergency supplies. “Prepare now,” Union County emergency director Vernon Martin said. “If you wait too long, you’ll be at the bottom of the list.”

Nearly a year after the storm, officials can still identify failures of their own or by others.

“If you say you’re prepared, you’ll stub your toe,” Martin said ruefully.

“It wasn’t a good experience,” Sauls said. “But it was a learning experience. We know we’re more prepared now, regardless of what happens: A fuel spill, flooding, an ice storm” or whatever else should occur.



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