

Businesses Advised to Plan Now for Disaster

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A prepared business is a resilient business. That was the lesson learned this week at a daylong workshop teaching company owners how to plan for disasters.

“The Verizon Preparedness Planning Summit: A Readiness Workshop for Small Businesses” drew about 100 representatives from small- and medium-sized businesses.

Business owners discovered how susceptible their companies can be when disaster strikes, whether it takes the form of a flood, earthquake, tornado, fire or even terrorist activity.

Verizon Wireless sponsored the event, held at the Holiday Inn University of Memphis, along with the Shelby County Office of Preparedness, the Greater Memphis Chamber and the Memphis Business Journal.

The workshop tackled planning scenarios through three 50-minute rotating sessions during which facilitators presented pre-event contingency planning for business, response during the event and activation of a recovery plan following an event.

The discussion-based environment allowed small businesses to be engaged – both with the speakers and with one another – on issues such as insurance, payroll, compartmentalization and cash reserves funds.

The summit kicked off September’s observance as National Preparedness Month, sponsored by the Ready Campaign and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in partnership with the Citizen Corps and the Ad Council.

This month marks the seventh annual National Preparedness Month, which is held in remembrance of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Bob Nations Jr., director of the Shelby County Office of Preparedness, said recovery depends on how well the pre-disaster environment was planned.

“Planning enhances the will to bounce back – to become resilient,” Nations said. “Planning is a cycle, not an event.”

And the sooner a business is up and running again, the more likely it will remain viable after a disaster, said Shelby L. Slater, emergency preparedness coordinator at the University of Memphis.

[Andy Mitchell](#), assistant administrator for FEMA’s National Training and Education, Protection and National Preparedness Directorate, gave the keynote address.

His speech, “Preparedness through Training and Partnerships,” highlighted the importance of the private sector.

“Effective planning requires all segments of our society to work in partnership,” Mitchell said. “Government has a key role but needs the private sector and citizens to participate in preparedness planning to allow communities impacted by a disaster to recover and get back on their feet quickly and effectively.”

In fact, 85 percent of the infrastructure that we depend on lies in the private sector, Mitchell said.

“Now was the time for everyone – individuals, local jurisdictions, the private sector – to take stock in their preparedness,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell also encouraged business owners to establish family preparedness plans.

“If a business can get its power back on but their employees can’t return to work because they don’t have family plans, the recovery is delayed,” he said.

And a citizens’ response training of basic disaster response skills elaborated on Mitchell’s family-oriented message. An assembly kit tutorial provided an in-depth explanation of lifesaving and life-sustaining needs that businesses could use at home and in the workplace.

The summit closed with a “lessons learned” speech from [Don Lowry](#) of Commodore Villages, an apartment community that went from 85 percent to 38 percent occupancy due to May flooding in Millington.

And when businesses shut down, it ultimately affects the core of our community, added [Joanna Miller](#), director of business in Verizon’s south central region.

“The fires that burned in Downtown Memphis in 2006, the July 2003 storm often referred to as ‘Hurricane Elvis’ or even the 1994 ice storm are all vivid reminders of the sudden and indiscriminate nature disasters and the effects they have on our communities,” Miller said.

The Mid-South’s proximity to the New Madrid fault and the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile also serve as reminders that everyone is vulnerable, Nations said.

“Every one of these is different,” Nations said. “There is no rubber stamp.”

Nations hopes the summit will establish a kickoff for a much-needed dialog. He said partnership is a two-way street but admitted that the current partnership between public and private sectors is practically nonexistent – something that must change.

“I don’t care how ugly the baby is,” Nations said. “When it’s born, it’s ours.”