

## Business Emergency Network (BEN)



### Purpose:

To build a communication system between the public and private sectors to assist 1) businesses in their response to and recovery from a crisis or disaster, and 2) inform government of the information needs in order to address economic recovery issues. This public-private partnership will also connect to existing programs which provide pre-disaster resources assisting businesses in becoming more disaster resistant.

### Structure

Business Emergency Network (BEN) is a mechanism whereby information and resources can be shared, as well as cooperative relationships and partnerships can be formed that would assist economic recovery following a disaster. BEN will enable a centralized link so businesses can be kept apprised of the current actions and conditions surrounding the event. Currently, this information can only be accessed on the City of Seattle web site but by using BEN, information which is prepared by the city's emergency public information team, will be made readily available directly to the private sector.

### Objectives/Benefits:

1. Enable the business community to access current, accurate information about a disaster and government response;
2. Reduce the prospect of multiple inquiries tying up government resources;
3. Enable companies to disseminate the latest credible information to their employees;
4. Enable the business community to share information;
5. Provide resources to companies in their pre-disaster contingency planning efforts;
6. Build on BEN's success in Seattle by assisting the expansion of the regional network.

### Benefits:

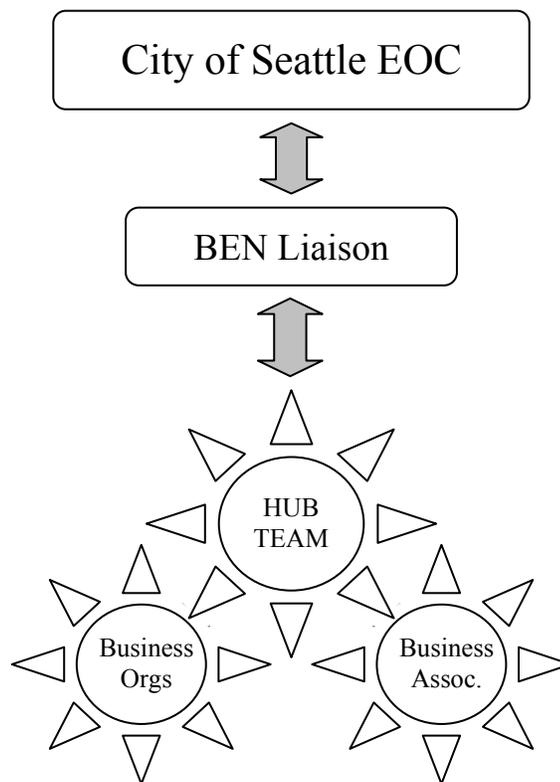
1. Rumor Control & Better Decision Making
  - Armed with information from BEN, businesses can:
    - Safeguard against rumors
    - Determine what appropriate steps should be taken to secure their businesses and their personnel
2. Information Exchange
  - Develop the capacity to exchange information between the city and businesses. While the city has its message to get out, businesses may have specific questions or concerns. BEN uses an orderly system for filtering these questions into the EOC. The PIO team then prepares a coherent response that includes the most updated information for delivery to businesses. This benefits both city government and the private businesses. For example:
    - If the city's public information effort is not sufficiently addressing a developing concern in a crisis, or is not focused on the specific needs of some businesses, this will become apparent to the city as questions are filtered into the EOC. The

city already adjusts the presentation of its message when it encounters new conditions or it becomes clear that misinformation is being communicated by others.

### 3. Public-Private Resource Sharing

- As more experience with the process occurs and a strong commitment emerges, it is possible that other public and private support services will be established. In a catastrophic disaster, the best “mutual aid” resources may be drawn from private, local interests, rather than from other nearby public resources. BEN’s two-way communications link can facilitate these types of interactions as the concept evolves.
- Additionally, a long-term strategy is to utilize the capability of BEN to include mutual aid resources between businesses, enhancing the disaster resistant community effort and personal responsibility.

#### **BEN Information Flow:**



#### **How was the Business Emergency Network initiated?**

The TOPOFF exercise in May 2003 was an opportunity to take the first step in this process of connecting government and private interests. Using email, two links were tested during the exercise then reviewed for needed modifications post-exercise:

1. The government can broadcast information to a centrally established Hub made up of pre-designated organizations with multiple and extensive communications links (BOMA, The Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Seattle Association, The Boeing Company, University of Washington, etc.) which in turn will disseminate the information to their respective contact lists.
2. The 2-way exchange was established for the exercise, and businesses were able to send questions into the City’s EOC in real-time. The basic scenario was sent via BEN to the Hub



with the request that businesses in turn submit questions or concerns they might immediately have. The Hub sent these comments into the BEN liaison in the EOC who worked with the other city PIOs to prepare responses. During the exercise, the BEN Liaison replied to the Hub with the city's responses, which in turn were forwarded out to the Hub's business contacts. Following the exercise, a debrief session occurred in which additional questions, suitability of the response information, and other issues were discussed as a prelude to developing next steps for further implementation of this model. The BEN group is meeting monthly to discuss planning, create templates, and will exercise once mechanisms are in place.

### **Who are players in the initial development of this concept?**

BOMA (Building Owners & Managers Association), The Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce, The Boeing Company, CREW (Cascadia Region Earthquake Workgroup), Downtown Seattle Association, and many organizations with which they are affiliated would be involved by extension. The Seattle Project Impact program (under Emergency Management), in conjunction with the Office of Economic Development, coordinate the city's involvement.

### **What technology is BEN using?**

As this is a communication system amidst a wide variety of companies and organizations, it was decided to have BEN messages be email based initially.

1. Email is simplest form of communication and messages are not limited to one service provider. This would allow small and large businesses alike to receive and send BEN messages without the need of buying proprietary software. Any cost to the business community would preclude, in particular, small business participation. That was not an acceptable option for the city. BEN had to be all-inclusive.
2. In the planning leading up to and following TOPOFF, the BEN group decided that while messages would be email based in the beginning, expandability would be designed to allow for communication with pagers, PDA's, cell phones, and other high-tech communication. During TOPOFF, BEN messages were tested to Hub member cell phones.

### **Finally:**

BEN will assist with the city's economic recovery, as well as pre-disaster preparations, minimizing the loss to life and property thereby protecting the environmental and economic vitality of the Region from future crisis.

This strategy was intended to extend beyond the demands of the TOPOFF exercise. The purpose of any exercise is to identify areas of improvement, and also to test systems that are deemed promising. The implications for this strategy of organizing an economic EOC can pave the way for expanded business mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery programs. The TOPOFF exercise was a springboard for addressing the long noted but never consummated need for the city and its business partners to share information and resources during an emergency. To meet the objective of being the most prepared city in the US, all elements of the community must continue to find ways to work together.