

Controlling Costs

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

Recovery is cheaper and easier for communities that pre-arrange for services from restoration contractor firms.

BY PAUL R. BERGERON III

There was a picture-perfect fall day in the northeast. But instead of enjoying the weather, dozens of Scully Company's management teams sat indoors discussing the worst weather conditions imaginable. The classroom training was designed to give property managers and maintenance personnel the appropriate steps to take when facing any such disasters: from tornadoes to terrorists.

This peaceful time is the ideal opportunity to set strategy and train on implementation for when chaos puts residents and property at risk.

This meeting at the company's Philadelphia headquarters focused on reviewing detailed plans for each of its 26 properties that were created through the efforts of Scully Company's third-party restoration contracting firm.

President Jessica Scully, CPM, says taking this proactive approach is one of the smartest decisions a property management firm can make, regardless of where in the country it operates.

"We also manage several communities in Florida," Scully says, "so given the frequency of hurricanes there, everyone knows you have to have plans in place—and

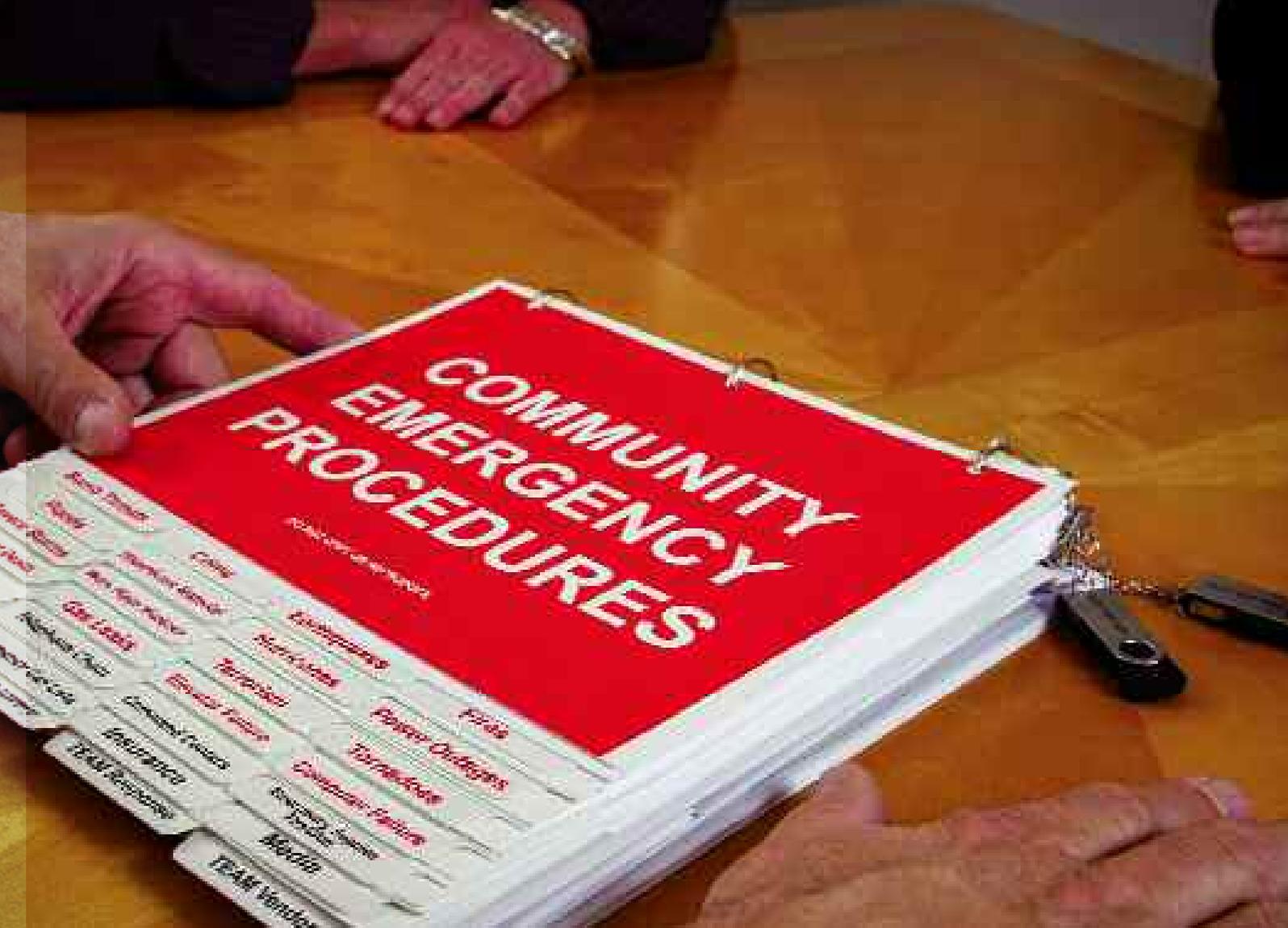
they do. But with all the natural disasters we've seen in the northeast over the past two years, having a detailed plan in place where all personnel are operating from the same book has proven so beneficial for us."

Scully says having a priority response agreement with her restoration company in place ensures that her communities are serviced first versus the first-come, first-served philosophy most operate under during a crisis. Given situations like the recent Superstorm Sandy that walloped great portions of the northeast, Scully feels the priority response agreement played a critical role in controlling costs.

"Now I'm able to sleep better at night knowing that if some kind of disaster strikes, it will be handled the right way, right away," Scully says. "And that our costs will be under control because we are controlling the response time."

With flooding, for example, water is soaked into the dry-wall and the longer it sits, the farther the water line works its way up the wall, making it a more expensive repair. "Every minute that residents wait for instruction, that staff waits to hear from upper management, or that we wait for contractors is costing us money."

Scully says it took approximately three months for the



Scully Company's staff members review their emergency response manual. Michael Scott King Photography

restoration company (RestoreCore) to perform a detailed intake and analysis of each property's physical systems and company policies and deliver the disaster plans. "The classroom training that followed ensured we delivered the content clearly and consistently across our portfolio."

The property analysis includes documenting the location of fuse boxes, and documenting electrical and plumbing lines and then determines the best place to hook up generators, have evacuated residents congregate, and more. Obtaining accurate contact information for all the proper municipal authorities and utility companies is another key piece of the plan, Scully says.

Scully says that rates for disaster plans and service agreements can vary by provider. "But we never imagined our disaster response to improve to the degree that it has and we've seen a three-fold return via cost savings," she says.

Plan in place, Scully says her onsite management team is required to keep the manual in the office, but should it not be accessible during a disaster, its resources are available through other means. The book is backed up on a jump drive that is kept offsite, but it also is available online. "And, should it be a worst-case scenario where no technology is available, there is a call center that can talk each site through their specific plan."

Preventive Maintenance as the Priority

Jim Dormady, CAMT, Maintenance Director, The Dolben Company, relies on scheduled preventive maintenance, ongoing discussions among onsite staff and lessons learned from dealing with each unique natural disaster to help effectively preserve and restore Dolben's 48 communities.

The common sense first step, Dormady says, is to email all onsite staff ahead of extreme weather events to alert them to secure pool furniture and anything that might become airborne and ask them to request that residents clear their balconies. Also remind maintenance staff to check that drains aren't clogged, which should be on any extensive, year-round preventive maintenance program's checklist.

For blizzards, Dormady "stakes" the curbs, sidewalks and transformers with markers that alert any snow plows of things that might be in their paths. Ask landscapers to do the same with any fragile trees or shrubs.

He also has identified the most effective placement of generators—either portable or larger-sized. "If the power goes out, we make providing energy for lighting and our phone systems the priorities," he says. Dormady's staff tests its generators regularly, especially during non-threatening situations. Making sure master

keys are made and available for contractors to use is another necessary step.

Dormady says that during non-emergency times, his onsite staff calls to confirm contact information with its plumbers, electricians, drain repairmen

“We call them our ‘What If’ meetings and bring donuts and coffee and discuss for an hour a bunch of scenarios and think, ‘What If?’”

—*Jim Dormady, CAMT
Maintenance Director
The Dolben Company*

and other key responders. “You just never know when their numbers might change or they might go out of business,” he says.

Dormady agrees that having a pre-arranged contract with proper emergency response/restoration firm is ideal. Dolben uses ARS and Purofirst. “Their response time is amazing,” he says. “It’s immediate. Restoring any weather-related damage issues takes weeks, not months.”

Equally important, he says, is holding one or two staff meetings per year. “We call them our ‘What If’ meetings and bring donuts and coffee and discuss for an hour a bunch of scenarios and think, ‘What If?’ and define what

each staff members’ responsibilities are in any given emergency.

“We’ve had communities burn down, flood or lose power. Every situation is different, depending on if they are high-rise or garden-style, age, location and other characteristics,” he says. “But generally, who does what doesn’t really differ.”

Dormady says communities’ staff members can learn from each disaster. “We had one high-rise community

that was built in 1988 that endured an earthquake a few years ago. We checked it out afterward and felt like everything was fine and the units were leak-free. A few weeks later, Hurricane Irene came through and about 50 of our units suffered severe flooding. To fix this, we had to go through some heavy engineering. We spent \$50,000 on one property to waterproof it.

“This year, a year later, after Sandy hit, any damage to those units could be measured in trickles, not in the number of carpets we had to replace. We learned.” ■■

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