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Terrorism not on most companies' radar

By ANDREW SCOTT

Most companies are unprepared for emergencies wrought by terrorism, according to a survey, but some Fairfield County businesses seem comfortable with their plans.

Randy Feranec, safety, health and environmental manager at Stratford's ExxonMobil Chemical Co., said the manufacturing site developed an emergency plan long before the recent bombings. As part of the plan, ExxonMobil has put in a secured place on its premises telephone numbers of all 200 employees as well as walkie-talkies, flash lights and a laptop with crucial contacts.

"Our plan clearly states what management and employees are expected to do," Feranec said.

Jason Klein, information technology manager at Nishball, Carp, Niedermeier, Pacowta & Company P.C. in Shelton, said his company is also prepared. The 23-member accounting firm has prepared a disaster recovery blueprint that will enable it to function in another location, if necessary.

"We have a way to get in touch with employees to make sure they are all right and to make sure they can get started on our

recovery plan," Klein said.

But according to a 2004 survey by the American Management Association in New York City, 61 percent of corporate executives nationwide said their companies had a crisis-management plan. Only 43 percent said their plans were geared toward disturbances that may be caused by terrorism. Figures for Connecticut were unavailable.

Seventy-eight percent of those surveyed had up to 1,000 employees in their companies. Yet when asked if key personnel across all business lines and support divisions had been trained in crisis management, 61 percent said no. Only thirty-seven percent said they offer security training, and even then 90 percent said training is performed once a year.

Bo Mitchell, president of 911 Consulting L.L.C. in Wilton, says companies are unprepared. The former Wilton police commissioner said he often read reports that cited company officials as saying, "This was not supposed to happen to us."

"An emergency doesn't have to occur at a worksite to cause employee injuries or bring a company to a standstill" as the London bombings showed, he pointed out.

The U.S. Occupational Safety

and Health Administration (OSHA) mandates businesses to have an emergency plan. It imposes fines on those firms that don't. The plan requires, among other things, having an escape route posted on premises, establishing procedures to account for employees after an evacuation and outlining how employees will be informed of the contents of a plan and trained in their roles and responsibilities.

The Connecticut OSHA office monitors government buildings' compliance with law. Richard Palo, the state director, said, "What do people do? Where are they to go? What are the emergency routes?" are essential questions organizations must ask now, not only when bombings start.

One piece of advice Mitchell offers is to allow employees to check in with their jobs regularly when away from the office. "That way when family members call the office to find out the location of a loved one, you have more to say than, 'We don't know.'"

Keeping an updated list of workers' cell phone numbers and equipping them with communication devices, such as Blackberries, can help. And, backup plans must be created to handle potential disruptions in resources on which the business relies.