



THE PLAIN DEALER

Hospitals, water, sewer departments have improved disaster plans

Hospitals, water, sewer officials beef up disaster plans

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The city's hospitals ran into two major problems during the 2003 blackout: The power loss knocked out air conditioning on a stifling-hot Thursday in August, and some hospitals also lost water.

At University Hospitals, the lack of water hit harder than the power loss, because even when water became available, it wasn't drinkable until Sunday, said Ron Dziedzicki, senior vice president and general manager of operations at UH. The hospital called in its bottled-water vendor to supply the facility until then, but distribution within the hospital came up as a problem area during UH's post-disaster review.

In addition to improving water distribution and expanding its contract with the bottled-water vendor, University Hospitals has arranged to have refrigerated trailers available to store food and sensitive research material in case of another power failure. The trailers can park on campus and run on generators.

University Hospitals has spent \$354,000 on disaster preparedness since the blackout, spokeswoman Alicia Reale said. The money came from grants.

Hospital officials believe they had a "robust" plan in place at the time of the blackout, and the money spent since then was part of their commitment to disaster preparedness, Reale said.

At MetroHealth Medical Center, some computer equipment overheated without air conditioning. The hospital has improved its disaster preparedness plan, continually testing and upgrading generators and making common-sense changes like having more flashlights on hand.

Unlike Metro and University hospitals, the Cleveland Clinic did not lose water during the power failure. (Officials still don't know why the hospital was spared. The city water system did not have backup power to keep pumping, so customers quickly drained the supply.) The biggest discomfort there was the heat because the cooling systems had no generator backup power, said Roland Newman, administrative director for facilities operations.

Over the past five years, the Clinic has spent about \$7.5 million to ensure that the entire hospital can run independently if there is another blackout. Not only will all the equipment, data and research areas be safe, but patient care also will be maintained as if nothing had happened, air conditioning and all, Newman said.

Other Cleveland institutions have made changes as well.

Down Euclid Avenue, the blackout prompted Case Western Reserve University to create a comprehensive emergency response plan to also cover other kinds of disasters, said Richard Jamieson, vice president of campus services. The university now has a centralized operations post and has added 15 outdoor speaker sirens as well as a text-message alert system.

To prepare for another blackout, the campus has backup generators for research buildings and access to portable emergency generators, as well as a stockpile of water, flashlights and glowsticks. After an investment of more than \$2 million over the last five years, 60 percent of campus buildings and half the dorms have backup power.

In the wake of the blackout, the city's Water Department spent about \$25 million on 22 diesel-powered

generators, said former department Director Julius Ciaccia, who is now director of the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District.

The generators are capable of producing enough electricity to pump 250 million gallons of water per day to meet the needs of its 1.5 million customers throughout the region.

"As long as they've got the fuel, they can run the generators for an indefinite period of time," Ciaccia said.

During the blackout, about half the department's customers were without water for up to 16 hours. When water was restored, customers were advised to boil the water or wait 48 hours before drinking it.

The blackout also shut down the sewer district's three treatment plants, and 65 million gallons of raw or partially treated sewage was dumped into Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River.

Today, the sewer district has 16 main generators and three portable units capable of powering the treatment plants. The price tag was \$16 million.

"We have to run them periodically to make sure they're working," said Ciaccia.

On the day of the blackout, what little emergency power the sewer district had was used to move gates to divert wastewater and avoid flooding and equipment damage.

"We decided after the blackout that the probability of this happening again and the critical nature of it merited the investment," said David McNeeley, director of operations and maintenance.

The district has a contract with a diesel firm and can continue to provide service as long as fuel is available.

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