

Nonprofit Group Puts Web to Work For Emergencies

Stargazer Provides Tools To Communicate, Organize

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In a quiet brick building 17 miles west of the White House, Arthur Bushkin has prepared for disaster.

Now the former telecom executive and Carter administration official is asking: Will you join him?

Bushkin has tapped technology, much of it developed by his nonprofit Stargazer Foundation over the past eight years in Fairfax County, to help families and organizations plan for catastrophe, and communicate when one hits.



His Web site, www.stargazer.org, aspires to be part personal command center, part meeting place. It uses Web- and cellphone-based tools to connect users of handheld devices with colleagues and relatives. It also seeks to give people an efficient way to tell loved ones or co-workers how they are, or what they need, even when cellphone networks fail under an onslaught of calls or people are away from their desktop computers.

"Everybody's plan is: When something happens, I'm going to call everybody," Bushkin said. "The whole point of Katrina, 9/11, of snowstorms, of fires, is that things don't work the way you planned them. . . . The technology exists to make people safer today. How many more people have to die or be dislocated for this to spread?"

One service lets people with Web-enabled cellphones that are equipped with a keyboard, such as a Treo or iPhone, create or respond to surveys. The results can be sent to a Stargazer Web page or to the cellphones of the people in a network you set up. "One form would be an 'I have' form, one would be an 'I need' form," Bushkin said, as in: have blankets, need food.

In another service, provided through a partnership with the British company 2sms.com, users in the United States can text a message to 80911 describing their status, such as whether they are safe. Anyone with a computer can then type in the cellphone number to see the message. That is useful because cellular data networks sometimes stay up even after cellphone voice networks fail.

"It's such an easy concept," he said. "It's the exact same way kids vote for 'American Idol.' "

Stargazer also allows users to set up distribution lists to send messages to cellphones and e-mail accounts; provides a repository for key documents and details, such as prescription numbers; and offers a place to collaborate on emergency plans, similar to what can be done on other social networking sites.

"It doesn't have to be a disaster," Bushkin said. "It can be, 'Soccer practice has been called off,' or 'I'm going to be late, tell the babysitter.' " The technologies are also used for education projects and international organizing, reflecting the broader mission he continues to push for the foundation, whose slogan is: "An Online Service for Social Good."

The Stargazer tools were used by officials across the region as part of a preparedness exercise by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. They were also part of a pandemic drill in San Diego last year. "In most disasters, you send the relief to the site," Bushkin said. "In a pandemic, you can't go to the location of the disaster. As a result, you have to be able to reach people wherever they are."

The Virginia Department of Emergency Management promotes Stargazer through its preparation Web site, www.vaemergency.com. The department offers other tips at www.readyvirginia.gov.

"It is something we encourage families and friends to use for their personal disaster planning," said Marc LaFountain, a department spokesman, speaking of Stargazer. "We really just thought, 'Hey, here's a group of passionate people who are offering a nonprofit solution for helping people prepare for and deal with disasters.' "