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There's safety in small numbers

Sunday, September 10, 2006

You'd like to think the worst of times would bring out the best in people -- and for most of the population it probably does. More about one of them in a minute.

But the worst of times also can bring out the worst in people. And though their numbers may be small, their potential for doing damage is not.

A case in point would be our federal Homeland Security funds. The amount of money being devoted to this critical enterprise is enormous -- well into the multi-billions of dollars -- as it should be.

Dismayingly, so is the waste, fraud and abuse by companies that see a crisis situation as a chance to fatten their bottom line.

A study conducted by members of the House Committee on Government Relations from both political parties recently found that huge amounts of Homeland Security money have been awarded to contractors without competitive bids. Rep. Tom Davis (R-VA.), chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform, and Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-CA.), the committee's ranking minority member, found in a report issued at the end of July that noncompetitive contracts have increased more than 700 percent in the past three years. The total amount of "wasteful contracts" let out by the Department of Homeland Security, they concluded, "exceeds $34 billion."

Okay, one man's tragedy is often another's opportunity. But these profiteers couldn't do it alone. They must be abetted by government officials, people whose job is to ensure our tax dollars are spent carefully and efficiently but who often dispense critical funds with a closed system of winks, nods and insider networking.

Happily, there are also stories like the one from JP Laboratories, Inc. in Middlesex -- a company you read about in this column three and a half years ago, when it was developing a plastic card that would change color when exposed to radiation, an instant warning to anyone potentially exposed to dangerous conditions.

That card came to market. Now, thanks in part to a Homeland Security grant, the company is producing an even more sophisticated version, replacing a single sensor tracking 0-200 rads of radiation with two sensors respectively tracking 0-50 and 0-1000 rads.

The SIRAD (Self-Indicating Instant Radiation Alert Dosimeter), as it is formally known, was in the works long before 9/11, says its inventor, Gordhan N. Patel. Funding in the initial stages, 1995-1997, came from the U.S. Navy.

Concerns about safety in the wake of 9/11 made its development even more urgent, so between 2003 and 2005, the family-owned business was awarded $1 million from Technical Support Working Groups, with funding coming from the federal departments of Homeland Security, Defense, Justice and State.

JP Laboratories did not depend solely on government funding to create and produce the card. "We have spent over a million dollars of our own," Patel says. "However, we are grateful for the federal funding, without which it would have been very difficult for us to bring these products to market."

Patel, an Indian immigrant, was uniquely qualified to develop this product, having developed and patented over the past 23 years more than 20 monitoring devices measuring time, temperature, shelf life, sterilization, toxic chemicals and radiation, many of them for America's military. A winner of several prestigious technological awards, he has testified before the Congressional Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations.

SIRAD, a RADTriage device, is especially useful to police, firefighters and EMTs, says Patel's daughter Jessica, who this summer has constituted the company's one- woman marketing department between her first and second years at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. The plastic card, which costs $20, instantly measures the amount of harmful radiation in the air, enabling a user to know when he or she is in danger, and aiding rescue personnel in determining who most urgently needs treatment.

Even if casualties were minimal following a nuclear accident or "dirty bomb" attack, explains Jessica Patel, "the panic could be immense. Everyone in the affected area will speculate about their radiation exposure. Is it life-threatening? RADTriage answers those questions instantly, allowing first responders to treat the most critical cases first."

Sales of the card have been brisk. "We manufacture 1,000 a day now," reports Jessica, "and will soon double that capacity."

Measured against total Homeland Security spending, the grant to Patel is pocket change. But measured as results for our dollars, that House report suggests we may well be doing better with a company like Patel's four-person operation than we are with a lot of the well-connected corporate giants.

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