Collaborating against chaos
Public-private coalition prepares to cope with Ohio emergencies

This much is certain: Disaster will strike. Rivers will flood. Tornadoes will flatten buildings and knock out power. Dams will break. Hazardous materials will spill.

Time to call out the troops from scores of Ohio businesses that have a stake in a safe and functioning state.

A new network of corporate, private and public partners — nearly 90 in all, including grocers, restaurants, retailers and health-care groups — is pooling its expertise and capabilities to better equip businesses and the state to respond to calamity.

The Ohio Public Private Partnership, or OP3 for short, got its start in January — a response, in part, to the summer 2012 derecho that left two-thirds of the state and more than 1 million Ohioans without power during a blistering heat wave. The state figured there had to be a better way to handle the challenges of natural and manmade calamities.

Government, of course, has long had disaster-preparedness plans, from tornado drills in school hallways to advice for building a bomb shelter. But Ohio's cutting-edge effort reflects a shift from a government-centered approach toward one of community teamwork.

"We need to learn the assets each of us can bring to overcoming or responding to a disaster," John Born, director of the Ohio Department of Public Safety, told company representatives at a January kickoff meeting.

Government can't do it alone; neither can companies. But it's crucial that the state get its major employers back online quickly after a disaster, to keep the economy humming and to provide goods and services the public needs to get their lives back on track.

This means getting information out quickly and accurately during a disaster. Businesses early on told OP3 that they need to know about such things as road closures, utility-restoration timelines, contact information for team members and threat warnings.

Group members aren't paid, but being a member of this network pays off.

"It's about breaking down the walls and working together," said Dustyn Fox, a Public Safety Department spokesman. "It's about helping out Ohioans ... and getting back to normal."

Many large companies already have extensive disaster contingency plans and experience handling disasters. They operate in cities struck by floods, forest fires, earthquakes, tornadoes and terrorism. They know how it is to have displaced employees and stores without power. Government can tap this expertise.

OP3 has been busy. Corporate partners, including Anheuser Busch, Kroger, CVS, Walgreens and Walmart, helped get more than 31,000 gallons of bottled water to the Toledo area in August after algae bloomed in Lake Erie, producing toxins that fouled the tap water of 500,000 people.

Those signed on to OP3 include Ohio's largest electricity providers, retailers, hospitals, insurers, banks, manufacturers, grocers, restaurants and health-care companies, including Cardinal Health and Nationwide Children's Hospital. (For information and to see a list of partners, go to http://www.ema.ohio.gov/PublicPrivatePartnership.aspx)

At a fall conference this month, Todd Biebel of Verizon Wireless gave the group high marks and told the Associated Press it's one of the biggest public-private partnerships he has seen.

This is an important collaboration, one that can lessen misery, save lives and help communities bounce back.