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## **Firms gear up for new fed initiative**

*By Scott Taylor, Ottawa Business Journal Staff  
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With news that the federal government is ready to open the purse strings to the tune of \$300 million to counter nuclear, chemical or biological attacks at home and abroad, local defense and emergency preparedness firms are gearing up for corporate battle.

Companies in the business of keeping soldiers and civilians alive are mobilizing even though the government procurement process itself is a complex, slow moving beast.

While the latest technology is a crucial part of combating terrorism, the knowledge of what to do should a threat pose a clear and present danger is of equal or greater importance. That's where companies like Bluedrop Performance Learning come into play. Its mission is to ready emergency preparedness teams for the worst in terrorism attacks as well as natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

"It's the intersection of high tech, creativity, and learning. Those three elements come into play together," said Bluedrop president and CEO Emad Rizkalla.

"It's one thing to learn, but another to be able to apply that knowledge. When will they need it? How will they do it? We have worked with public safety organizations, emergency preparedness, and we have created terrorism – chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) – courses."

Bluedrop is already working with a number of organizations and key departments such as Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC), which has created Introductory and Basic CBRN terrorism courses to train first responders how to recognize, survive, and respond to such attacks. The company has also been contracted by PSEPC to promote the awareness of the CBRN initiative to the public.

In addition, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) Centre for Emergency Preparedness (CEPR) has developed a bioterrorism recognition course to educate Tier 1 labs how to recognize agents such as anthrax.

"Classroom instruction is always a challenge," Mr. Rizkalla added. "You have hundreds of thousands of people involved so it can become a logistical nightmare. How can you do this across the country in a timely and affordable way? E-learning is such a natural fit. In some cases the outcome of e-learning is better than the classroom setting. For one thing, you're not learning at the speed of the slowest student in the class."

While Canada's spending in this regard is unprecedented, the true market value of this field is far higher.

"This field of emergency preparedness is huge. I would say it will be worth US\$3.6 billion over the next three years. It's unfortunate that this is the world we live in, but no place is safe anymore and people have to be trained all over the world. Katrina shocked everyone because the United States wasn't prepared. A big part of that is training."

When threats – or the possibility of threats – appear, companies like Bluedrop have to react quickly, even if the government itself does not.

"We're asked to respond rather quickly sometimes," Mr. Rizkalla said. "The federal government has a lengthy list of procurements, which is unfortunate. Sometimes it takes longer than anyone wants, but they still have to get the training done. We almost have a SWAT team here ... We spin on a dime here."

Now with the promise of more federal spending, Bluedrop is readying itself for when the long procurement process is done.

Local defense contractor Allen-Vanguard is also chomping at the bit to supply needed technology to the government. It develops and markets products and training for countering the effects of hazardous devices and materials, including chemical and biological weapons and nuclear explosives.

For example, it recently won a US\$1.2-million contract to supply the U. S. military with sophisticated rigging equipment designed to assist bomb technicians remotely dispose of explosive devices.

"It's a very positive announcement," said director of marketing Al Parisien. "We have such a wide array of products that competition comes from everywhere, but we'll be involved in the procurement process."

He said such items as bomb disposal robots and electronic counter measures make his company a leading contender to reap the benefits of the government's announcement.

Med-Eng marketing and communications manager John Carson said that while his company's revenue is earned mostly through exporting, he sees the extra spending as a positive move both for the military and firms like his that manufacture equipment such as bomb suits and helmets.

"The impact will be small for us, but if the government is increasing spending that's a good thing for everyone involved."

One person who isn't delighted with more spending is Celeris Aerospace Canada president and CEO Steve Hall. He said the much-lauded revamp of the procurement process has only backfired and served to chase smaller companies like his away from the table.

"In my opinion, it excludes small businesses like this one," he said. "It gives large businesses like Bombardier large contracts, which are supposed to then trickle down to smaller companies, but it hasn't happened. They bleed you for what you know then let you go. The flow-through doesn't work. It sounds good in theory. But we found it doesn't work so we have shied away from the table."

He said his company is noted in the Unites States for its innovative work, but in Canada is largely forgotten. Celeris specialize in developing practical solutions to scientific/engineering problems particularly where large quantities of data are involved

I'd love to do more military work, but they'd give us six months lead-time for a very small contract, whereas in the States we could do the same thing in weeks. It's because of the long procurement process," he says.

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