BUSINESS

Minnesota woman says she's built a better way to deliver emergency power and water to disaster areas.

INVENTING RELIEF

BY LESLIE BROOKS SUZUKAMO
Pioneer Press

Drinkable water. Communications. Electricity. Air conditioning. Hurricane Katrina swept them all away, forcing emergency workers to cart in equipment to provide these necessities piecemeal to the ravaged Gulf Coast.

Now a local inventor says she's built a better way to bring these essentials of emergency aid to a disaster-stricken area, and she showed if off to a blue-ribbon panel judging new inventions at the University of Minnesota on Thursday.

Deborah Yungner said her invention, the Emergency Response Backup Utility System or ERBUS, takes state-of-the-art disaster aid components and puts them into one package small enough to be trucked or even helicoptered into a disaster zone.

No other system exists that puts all four elements— potable water, communications, power and purified air for heating and cooling — into one mobile unit, she said.

ERBUS would enable emergency managers to respond more nimbly to natural or manmade disasters, allowing them to erect command posts and field hospitals in minutes.

Yungner's invention was one of five finalists at the first-ever Minnesota Cup, a statewide contest for entrepreneurs that was held at the U this week.

Yungner, who grew up on St. Paul's Selby Avenue and graduated from Central High, has former St. Paul Police Chief Bill Finney

NEW INVENTION, 6C

COURTESY PHOTO

Deborah Yungner's Emergency Response Backup Utility System puts state-of-the-art disaster aid components into one package.

Inventing relief

(continued)

in her corner.

Finney said he is using his law enforcement contacts to see if there are any Minnesota relief worker teams that ERBUS can accompany in the hurricane ravaged area.

Finney, an old friend of Yungner's sister, explained the invention's benefits. "You can hook it to a tent and have a command post that can run a week without refueling. You drop a few of these things around and you're providing emergency help for an entire area."

The unit can purify 5,000 gallons of river water a day and maybe half that amount of heavily contaminated water, Yungner said. It also comes with satellite communications, as well as Internet, purified air and an electrical generator.

Yungner, 46, now lives in the west metro suburbs. A former chemical technician and technical writer at 3M and Control Data, she was most recently a manager with Xerox. She quit to form her own company to produce ERBUS in Edina.

She got the idea for her invention after she went on a mission to help with a cholera outbreak in Panama in the early 1990s.

Developing nations like Panama did not have the money or time to build the infrastructure of water systems and power lines necessary to beat back the disease. Bringing the four elements of emergency response together into one package seemed like a natural solution, but most other devices put them together in only pairs, Yungner said.

She's built a prototype and is looking for about $1.2 million for a testing and assembly facility and five more ERBUS test units in Minnesota, and she is working with state development officials. Customers could include emergency response agencies in the United States and abroad.

Development officers from Iowa and North and South Dakota are also courting her, she said.

"Our allegiance is to Minnesota but we have to do what we need to do to bring this to the people who need it," she said.

The units would cost between $180,000 to $250,000 each, depending upon the size. That's about one-third the cost of an average fire truck, Yungner said.

The invention won a prestigious inventors award in June in Pittsburgh at INPEX, the country's largest invention trade show.

Though she did not win the $25,000 top prize in the Minnesota Cup Thursday, Yungner was one of five finalists out of more than 600 entries.

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