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Small-business owners hear how to handle storm-related issues

By [Megan Workman](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Small-business owners don't have to pay employees if their companies closed after Friday's storms, but lawyer Eric Kinder said they should.

Kinder spoke Tuesday at a meeting for small-business owners.

"This is not a moment to be a stickler about how the [labor law] is written. If you have individuals who need time off, give them time off," said Kinder, a member of Spilman Thomas & Battle. "With absences and tardiness ... be smart and conscientious to employees. It will repay you."

Nearly half of Appalachian Power customers in West Virginia remained without power Tuesday. In Kanawha County, nearly 50,000 customers didn't have power.

Employees are taking care of children and elderly relatives and neighbors in high temperatures and lack of air conditioning.

Kinder said if an owner has to resort to computing math problems by hand because computers are down, it is the owner's responsibility to get the employee the money they did work for.

For salary-paid employees, owners are allowed to dock pay but Kinder wouldn't, he said.

"If your business is closed because of this, find a way [to pay]. They need that money right now. Get money into the hands of employees on a regular schedule ... even if you have to hand-do math," Kinder said.

Kinder said that in a small community like Charleston, "word gets out who treats their employees well."

Word of mouth is the best form of communication in times like this, said Matt Sutton, vice president at Charles Ryan Associates, a Charleston-based communications firm.

Owners should make sure employees know what is going on within the business so they can articulate it to others, Sutton said.

Most importantly, owners should be honest, he said.

"Don't forget about your public image. Right now is the most important time to be friendly and let employees know that right now will impact how people will remember us," Sutton said.

He said people are choosing to use businesses based on how they acted during Hurricane Katrina.

David Moore, engineering branch manager at CTL Engineering, said he stopped by the meeting so that he could learn how to respond to a disaster.

Although the engineering company in South Charleston didn't lose power, employees have been able to work only on a limited basis, he said, since they do not have power at home.

"It's important to have those emergency contact numbers to know who to call and what agencies are available because so many neighboring businesses and employees don't have power or water," Moore said. "I learned how the electricity is distributed, which is very important in understanding the logistics [of how Appalachian Power works]."

Appalachian Power External Affairs Manager Tania Hotmer explained to business owners how electricity is delivered so that they could better understand the restoration process.

The two-step process includes a global estimated restoration time, then sending crews to get an

up-close view of the damage.

Friday's 75-mile-per-hour windstorm "was not a small event. This is a devastating event and the extent of damage is beyond than initially anticipated," Hotmer said.

Another question she answered, which she said she gets a lot: 'Do you prioritize?' The answer is yes, she said.

"We look at circuits that have hospitals, grocery stores and gas stations," Hotmer said. "People say, 'Well, why is Kroger's power on but I'm not?' You're on a different circuit than Kroger and it's more important to get Kroger and gas stations' power on ... It's not about flipping on a switch."

Hotmer said there are 2,000 Appalachian Power crew members working to restore power in the state. The hurricane-line storm was "above and beyond the winter 2009 storms," she said.

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It's too bad this story focused on whether or not to pay employees -- which perpetuates a tired stereotype of business owners. Most of the owners who attended were far more interested in how to manage the business interruption. What kind of insurance do you or should you have? What kind of claim can you file? What resources are available? Every business person who attended or who has been impacted by this storm will be re-evaluating their insurance coverage.

And like the thousands of West Virginia residents who have been helping one another, one of the business owners in attendance offered to help my business. After mentioning that my firm had been down for two days without power, he offered to let us use his space and his computers in order to take care of our clients.

I appreciate the Charleston Area Alliance pulling together that timely briefing.

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