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Ex-Contractor Seeks Corporate Cash To Continue Disaster Aid Firm

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(This article was originally published Friday.)

By Bob Tita Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES Tad Agolia started First Response Team of America to answer the question that all victims ask immediately after a tornado, hurricane and other disaster: What now?

Lately, Agolia has been asking the same question about his three-year-old nonprofit rescue and recovery firm. Despite being showered with equipment from U.S. machinery manufacturers, Agolia is desperately short of money to keep his equipment and employees working at disaster sites, which lately have included the earthquake in Haiti and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Agolia estimates he needs a minimum \$850,000 a year to sustain the operation. So far for this year, he's collected less than \$150,000. With the U.S. hurricane season under way, Agolia predicts he'll have to curtail his operations within three months without an infusion of cash.

He's looking for a business manager and hoping companies will be as generous with their cash as they have been with donating equipment.

"Right now, we have more than enough equipment support," said Agolia, 34, who gave up his own contracting business to launch First Response in 2007. "The need really is for cash. I'm spending every waking moment on the road looking for people who'll support the continuation of our work."

Agolia said he was a millionaire by the age of 30 and that he has spent nearly all his money on First Response's expenses, which include salaries for staff of seven, as well as fuel, food and lodging for his team when it's deployed at a disaster scene, often for weeks. The team has responded to more than 30 disasters.

First Response has received more than \$1 million of construction and rescue equipment from companies, including construction equipment manufacturers Caterpillar Inc. (CAT) and Terex Corp. (TEX), and truck maker Paccar Inc. (PCAR). With a caravan of trucks and trailers for canes, tracked loaders, generators and mobile lighting, the team moves from one disaster to another, clearing roads, removing debris and rescuing people trapped in demolished buildings or stranded by flood waters. (It even has a Hovercraft for water rescues.)

Agolia's intent is to shore up the efforts of local emergency responders immediately after a catastrophe. He notes that a full complement of aid from state and federal agencies can take days or weeks to assemble. His inspiration came from his initial incursion into a Kansas community leveled by a tornado in 2007.

"There were no lights, no power for a nursing home. There were no search and rescue tools because the fire department had been destroyed. They needed big cranes and big trucks to haul away debris," said the Long Island, N.Y., native, who hasn't drawn a salary from First Response.

For the equipment industry, he has become a trusted conduit for getting machinery to chaotic disaster sites.

"We've been in situations where we've been willing to donate equipment, but not knowing whether there are operators on the other end" to use it, said Mike Bazinet, a spokesman for Terex. "He's proven that that he can be a force multiplier and deserving of support from our industry."

The Caterpillar Foundation has been First Response's largest cash donor, with \$125,000 grants in 2009 and 2010.

"Given Agolia's background and the fact that his values mirror those of Caterpillar's, this was a natural fit for Caterpillar and the foundation," said company spokeswoman Bridget Young.

Agolia is aiming to leverage such endorsements into cash contributions from other companies and philanthropists. "We've made such strides as a new nonprofit in a recession that if we can get our story out to the right people, success will come," he said.

But even some of Agolia's supporters expect him to have a tougher time attracting cash than equipment. In the wake of falling profits and lower returns on investments, companies and foundations have become increasingly selective about their donations.

"Most of these foundations are connected to a family or a company that is not making as much money as it used to," said John Arscott, the president of a five-state Peterbilt truck dealership in the Southeast.

Arscott, who has given Agolia four trucks and the use of a building in Knoxville, Tenn., as a headquarters, is urging him to hire a business manager who could build a permanent fund-raising program. Agolia has interviewed candidates for the job, but said he hasn't found anybody yet willing to work at a salary he could afford.

In the meantime, Arscott said he will continue to support of First Response's operations.

"Tad is helping people who, through no fault of their own, were at the wrong place at the wrong time," he said. "He's an incredibly dedicated, selfless individual."

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