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Many of you know Mike Soukup as an active participant and supporter of Greater St. Paul BOMA for numerous years. You'll often catch him at one of our many events throughout the year, such as our membership meetings, annual golf tournament, tradeshow, Market Report presentation, and more. Many of you are also familiar with his professional life, which centers around his work with ServiceMaster Recovery Management (ServiceMaster or SMR for short), a company that responds to a variety of disasters such as hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and non-storm related incidents (think any type of fiasco that results from human error like industrial explosions, oil spills, nuclear catastrophes, etc.) His team works directly with the individuals and companies who have been impacted by these types of disasters.

I had a chance to catch up with Mr. Soukup and gain deeper insight into his line of work. For starters, his title with the company is Vice President of Sales and SMR National Accounts, which might lead you to think that he spends his days in an office making phone calls, sending emails, and sitting in meetings. While that may account for a portion of his schedule, his day-to-day looks very different. Mike Soukup is a man on the move, constantly traveling and working on the frontlines of tough situations. So, with all of that in mind, how exactly does ServiceMaster mitigate disasters and what is Soukup's role in all of it? Let's get into it.



The wreck seen above is the typical kind of scene Soukup and his team are faced with when they're working to restore businesses

ServiceMaster Recovery Management is a national and international group that works in two main areas. One is servicing clients nationally and internationally by taking care of their facilities after any kind of disaster has occurred. These companies are the contracted clients who call on ServiceMaster when they are dealing with anything from a broken pipe, a fire, or an explosion to a hurricane, flood, or typhoon. ServiceMaster enters the scenario with the main goal of restoring the company to what Soukup referred to as a "pre-loss condition", which in essence means that after ServiceMaster has done its job, no one would ever be

able to tell a disaster occurred. The company's premises would look no different after the incident, then it did beforehand. Even just through this scope of analysis, it is evident how critical ServiceMaster's services are to these companies. If a company is in a state of disrepair, they are losing profits. And as Soukup emphasized, a company cannot afford to be out of production. Especially in today's market where competition is fierce, and there is always another company that can step in to seize the business opportunity. ServiceMaster helps these companies recover and emerge stronger after disasters.



Damage after Hurricane Ida. This is often the state of disrepair that Soukup and his team encounter on assignments.

The second component of ServiceMaster's work is Soukup's favorite part: the chase teams. He works out of the office here in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area as part of a core team of 6 and works with the national chase teams that travel to the site of natural disasters around the country. Soukup heads out with a team before a storm to complete pre-work, hunkers down during the storm, and emerges afterward to continue supporting ServiceMaster's clients as well as providing the expertise and resources to support the commercial companies that need assistance. The chase team component of

ServiceMaster is the more sporadic and unpredictable aspect of the work because ServiceMaster doesn't know when a major storm is going to hit, but they have to pivot swiftly in the direction of the companies that are calling for help once a storm has either occurred or entered the radar.

So how did Mike Soukup get into this profession? Well, he didn't plan for it. He came out of school with a degree in teaching and coaching. He's coached football at the high school, college, and professional ranks. He got into the business of storm chasing about 12 years ago through a gentleman named Randy Hedden, who owned a large ServiceMaster franchise in the Twin Cities metro area. Hedden brought on Soukup as a means of getting more into the corporate side of things. About a year and half later, ServiceMaster Recovery Management was founded out of Hedden's realization of the need for franchise groups to band together and help each other during national events. The first big assignment was repairing damage at the Pentagon after the September 11th terrorist attacks. Though Soukup wasn't associated with the franchise at the time, he is intimately familiar with how ServiceMaster became involved in responding to one of the nation's most devastating events.



Soukup in action

“The company didn’t get that job through some great sales pitch or anything, someone from the Department of Defense just picked up the phone book and called ServiceMaster,” Soukup mentioned. This tremendous occurrence made the ServiceMaster team realize they should ramp up marketing and sales efforts, so as not to rely on acquiring business through a phone book. From there, ServiceMaster evolved into 23 divisions across the country, storing an arsenal of equipment and carrying out the disaster mitigation they are known for today.

Soukup’s first adventure with ServiceMaster was spending 9 weeks in Minot, North Dakota in 2011, where severe flooding had taken place. Given that he was born and raised in North Dakota with a family farm about 70 miles northeast of Minot, he knew the area and a lot of the people well, which made him an integral part of restoring that community.

Later that year in November, one of ServiceMaster’s St. Cloud customers, Vision Ease, called about a huge typhoon in Thailand, where they had a facility that creates high-powered telescope lenses used by major operations such as the military. They needed ServiceMaster to travel to Thailand and restore their facility. From that call began a 12-week process of navigating the rules and regulations of foreign governments to restore the situation.

The assignments escalated from there and Soukup found himself working on more intense projects over the years, such as Hurricane Irene back in August of 2011. He was situated on the coast of New Jersey and recalled his hotel windows getting blown out during the storm. While Soukup is well aware that frightening occurrences like that are part of the job, it’s still cause for some deep reflection on the nature of his work. “That [windows blowing out] makes you think a little bit. That’s something you don’t tell your mom when she calls and asks how things are going. Or your wife!”, Soukup mentioned. “There are thrills and risks, especially when you’re talking about traveling somewhere and hunkering down during a disaster such as a hurricane. But I enjoy the thrill of the chase and more importantly, helping companies and communities recover after a traumatic event has taken place,” he added.

One of his most recent adventures was responding to Hurricane Ida in August of this year. The storm wreaked havoc on the state of Louisiana and significantly impacted other states in that region, much like Katrina in August 2005. Soukup recounted the large scale of damage due to the torrential winds and flooding from Ida. Many of you reading this were probably keeping up with the news reports on Ida, so I’m sure you can imagine the level of devastation that Soukup witnessed! While there are many similarities between Ida and Katrina related to the severity of the storm, one of the most positive differences Soukup noticed was the community response. New Orleans and its surrounding communities were better prepared



Damaged trees, such as the ones above in the wake of Hurricane Ida, create a hazardous environment for storm chasers

for Ida than for Katrina back in 2005. Soukup noticed a higher level of forward-thinking and pre-planning. For example, most of the parishes already had agreements in place with disaster repair companies such as ServiceMaster, which prevented them from being left waiting around for repairs to begin after the storm subsided. As a result, places like the Superdome (known now also as the Caesars Superdome), fared much better after Hurricane Katrina.

A downside is that when a disaster such as Hurricane Ida strikes, Soukup and his team still see many of the reckless behaviors that occur among residents such as hurricane parties or hanging out on the beach. But fortunately, much of that behavior has been curbed due to municipalities cracking down on safety measures. Soukup pointed out that after a certain point, a storm becomes so violent that even emergency operations are shut down after conditions become dangerous enough. Too many first responders have lost their lives trying to save people who put themselves in danger because of less-than-stellar decision-making. City leaders have grown weary of seeing needless deaths, so they've established curfews which is paramount in minimizing the number of citizens and first responders killed in dangerous conditions.



Extensive flooding from Hurricane Ida quickly created a life-threatening situation for countless people

During my conversation with Soukup, he focused on some of the challenges that come with working in the disaster mitigation industry. "The chase part of it is by far the higher-profile and glamorous side of it. I'm blessed with a phenomenal team that I work with on a national level," he stated. But just as with any industry, there are caveats. Working on the frontlines of a company like ServiceMaster is not just about the fun and excitement of traveling. It's not the type of profession where you're home by 6 every evening for dinner and enjoying time with your family on the weekends. It's sometimes working ridiculous hours and getting down to the nitty-gritty with the people in a ravaged community. Soukup expressed his admiration for the people on the ground who drive the relief work. He mentioned that it's 18-25 year-olds who really go in and get the job done, sometimes pulling 80-hour weeks. And there's nothing glamorous about that. 80-hour work week, anyone? Many of us would say no thanks.



Destroyed powerlines are the norm, which removes many of life's conveniences when Soukup is on assignment

Furthermore, disaster mitigation is a profession where you have to be okay with unpredictability and anticipate danger at any time. For example, Soukup said he's been asked numerous times why he always stays on the first floor of the hotel when he's on assignment. "When your hotel loses power, you have to walk up and down stairs, which is really not that fun," Soukup said. That's exactly what happened to him early in his career when he was on an assignment in New Orleans. His hotel lost power and he had to walk up 15 flights of stairs to get to his room. The thing to keep in mind is that since Soukup and his team are setting up

shop in communities impacted by a natural disaster, just about every creature comfort goes out the window. Exquisite meals? Not a chance when food is limited and has to be rationed out. A nice, steamy shower at end of a long day? Definitely not, as hot water is not available after a major storm. Mike also noted, "After 5 or 6 days, you're wearing the same clothes for the second time around." And without access to a functioning washing machine, we're probably not talking about clean clothes here.

Aside from the glaring inconveniences, Soukup has also been in dangerous situations. The blown-out hotel windows mentioned earlier is one such instance. When Soukup was getting his start 12 years ago, he used to wade through water to scope out buildings. "You know down in Louisiana they have things in the swamps called crocodiles and snakes and they were always a concern when we were wading through water," Soukup said. Thankfully, drones are now sent out instead of humans being in danger of becoming a meal while navigating the water. The drones pick up information that can be sent in real time over to insurance companies and customers, which has created a much safer situation. Even so, Soukup and his team sometimes have to enter buildings where dangerous critters can pop up.



Blown out windows after Hurricane Ida

Another dangerous situation Soukup found himself was with a counterpart, Greg Elmer, out in the hills of North Carolina. There's a thing called "The Zone" that Soukup referred to which is defined as areas that all chasers, responders, and personnel need to stay away from after dark. Soukup and his partner stayed out just a little bit too long one night. They came around a corner while they were driving, and the headlights shone just enough to reveal a road that was completely flooded. With no way of moving forward, they turned around, only to find their secondary route was blocked as well. "We actually spent the night in a parking lot,

watching movies on our computers,” Soukup recalled. And while a night spent in a parking lot watching movies may not sound like a such a bad way to kill time, you can imagine the uneasiness those two must have felt being trapped out there alone. The danger factor is the fast-changing conditions of a storm. At any point, they could have been faced with winds kicking up, trees falling, more flooding, etc. Soukup mentioned an instance where a few first responders from a competitor company were out riding in “The Zone” and lost their lives when a tree fell on their car. For Soukup, reflecting on that tragedy and his own circumstance became a profound lesson in heeding warnings.

All-in-all, working with ServiceMaster is a tough job for Soukup. But one thing that’s clear from my conversation with him is how much he enjoys his work and how rewarding it is for him. “I like to meet people,” Soukup said. “I have a knack and a level of comfort meeting and working with people in unfamiliar situations, which is what this job entails,” he added.

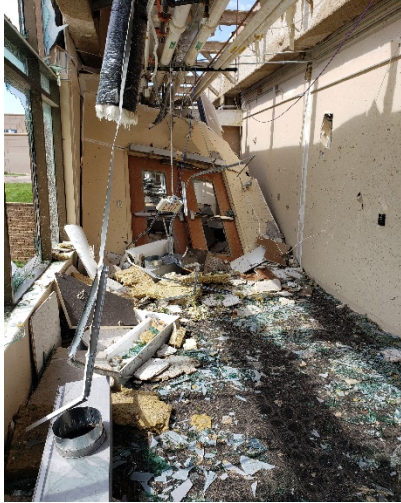
Soukup emphasized that his job is exciting because nothing is the same in his day-to-day. Hurricanes are obviously some of the more hazardous scenarios, but even the less precarious situations become intense. The day I interviewed Soukup, Thursday October 21st, was the first day of freezing temperatures of the season, so he and his team were anticipating pipe freezes and preparing for how to deal with that.

And although there is a level of peril with the job, Soukup’s risk is significantly reduced through several measures such as frequent contact with ServiceMaster’s command and control center out of Memphis, Tennessee, carrying GPS tracking equipment, having access to specialized weather apps that allow for determining accurate proximity to a major storm system, and working closely with the National Weather Service.

Before closing out our discussion, I wanted to tap into another aspect of Soukup’s work: the highlights of his travels and the pathos of his adventures that speaks to the human experience. I asked him about some of the people he’s encountered and one of the groups he recalled is the Cajun Navy. “They’re like those swamp people you see in all the reality TV shows,” Soukup joked. He went on to describe how they bring in their airboats and spend their time saving people and transporting storm chasers and responders. These are people who do not get paid a dime. They simply have a strong commitment to helping their communities. They’re the type of people who know the lay of the land and know how to navigate the wilderness. “They’ll give you the shirt off their back,” said Soukup. On an assignment in Baton Rouge where Soukup and his team were fixing up a Target store, the Cajun Navy showed up with 11 alligators that had been taken in the interest of public safety to protect citizens and workers.



In addition to the sophisticated equipment, Soukup and his team have to keep basic necessities, such as water and gas, stockpiled at all times



This is the type of wreckage (Ida) that people in storm-ravaged communities are faced with

I also asked Soukup about some of his favorite destinations. An interesting fact is that he travels about 18-20 weeks out of the year and sees areas of the country that he otherwise wouldn't if not for his career. When he's on assignment, he doesn't have much leisure time for sight-seeing and interacting with the residents of a community. So, what he'll sometimes do is travel back to a community after his company has completed its work, which gives him the opportunity to talk with the locals and get to know them a little better. "These people have experienced a traumatic event and sometimes I'm able to take their mind off of it with friendly conversation over coffee or lunch," Soukup said. He mentioned Thailand as one of his favorite places. He loved the beauty of the landscape and the good people he met. "I worked with a young lady out there who was my interpreter

while I was on assignment. This was years ago but we still frequently communicate. She actually called me on my wedding day to congratulate me," he said. As Soukup told me that story, it was apparent how much he relishes his connections with the people he works with. I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing him and came away from that conversation with a much deeper understanding of who he is as a person. The next time you run into him, I would highly recommend getting to know him and learning more about his work with ServiceMaster!