

Effective Planning Key To Disaster Recovery

The tornadoes that ripped through Oklahoma earlier this spring, as well as the Boston Marathon Bombing, brought to light, once again, that disasters can occur on any given day, in any given location. College and hospital campuses are no exception. Hurricane Sandy last October put New York hospitals on alert. Having an emergency plan in place—one your staff is familiar with—will not stop a disaster from happening, but will provide you with the necessary strategy to initiate a response to the crisis.

Environment America Research and Policy Center titled, "In the Path of the Storm," approximately 77 million Americans live in counties that experienced federally declared weather-related disasters in 2012 alone. Whether it is the result of severe storms, flooding, mudslides or wildfires, people have had to evacuate their homes and sometimes their communities for their own safety. Many individuals and families have personal emergency response plans that they have developed to use as a resource during these difficult times. However, do you know



Having a disaster plan in place and ready to activate can make a world of difference when it comes to recovery efforts.

Parents put their children on the school bus or drop their young adult off at college and depend on others to provide safety and support for them while they are away from home. Same is true when a loved one is in the hospital. There is an expectation that if we assign responsibility to safeguard our family members outside of our watch, that it will happen—but does it?

In 2012, there were forty-seven federal major disaster declarations. In the first half of 2013, there have already been thirty federal declarations. According to a recent report from the

plans that are in place when family members are under the watch of others, such as during the school day, away at college, in a hospital, nursing home or assisted living facility?

Key Disaster Plan Elements

Most schools and hospitals benefit from a disaster plan specific to their industry. Whether it is a campus lecture hall or a hospital waiting room, the planning steps are generally the same. The first step to take prior to developing a plan is to make a

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thorough risk assessment of all potential risks and hazards to the school or campus property and the location. Best practices have demonstrated that the minimum critical elements of an effective disaster program should include:

- Identifying hazards specific to the facility or campus
- Risk assessments specific to the facility or campus
- Developing a robust emergency/disaster plan that addresses how to mitigate, prepare for, respond and recover from hazards and risks specific to the facility
- Crisis communication planning
- An employee-wide training program on the disaster response plan
- Drills and exercises to test the disaster plan
- Schedule of regular updates to the disaster plan

Emergency Response Preparedness for Health Care Facilities

Prompted by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) published an emergency preparedness checklist as a "recommended tool" for health care facilities. The checklist suggests that the following critical areas should be included

within emergency response programs:

- An Emergency Response Plan, developed with an all-hazards approach
- Evacuation and Shelter-in-Place plans
- Collaboration with local emergency management agencies
- Collaboration with suppliers and vendors that have been identified as part of a community emergency response plan
- Communication contingencies
- Transportation resources
- Patient identification
- Family member notification
- Necessary provisions
- Tracking of patients
- Relocation assistance
- Medical concerns (physical and psychological)
- Specific needs (i.e., feeding tubes, oxygen, wheelchair)
- Prescriptions
- Medical records
- Impact of event on patients' physical and mental well-being

When developing your disaster response plan, keep in mind that one of the first decisions to be made at the time of the event will be whether to evacuate

the facility or shelter-in-place. Your plan will need to address the special needs for each of these situations. If the decision is to shelter-in-place, some additional needs will include:

- Securing the facility
- Power supply
- Sufficient food/water supplies for 3-10 days
- Prescription supplies
- Medical supplies and equipment
- Staffing capabilities
- Communication with families
- Medical emergencies

Unique Guidelines for an Educational Campus Setting

While not required under federal law, most states and school districts do have requirements for crisis planning and have taken it upon themselves to create an emergency management plan. Most of these plans also include staff roles and responsibilities. Even though the above-recommended practices for health care facilities can also be applied to a school setting, here are a few additional elements to incorporate into a school district plan:

- Lock-down procedures
- Special needs students' safety and evacuation
- Limited-English Proficient communication (students and families)
- Family member notification
- Tracking of students
- Continuing student education in the event of an extended school closure
- Updates to plan

Communicating in a Crisis

During a crisis, accounting for people will be your main focus. How you communicate during this time is crucial. Notifying family as the crisis unfolds is not an easy task, but advances in mass emergency notification have come a long way since the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007.

Having a well-developed communication plan helps disperse information swiftly and accurately. In the aftermath of a crisis, cellular service spikes with friends and family frantically trying to get in touch. As a result, it is important to utilize multiple options to send and receive

communication—broadcast phone messages, texting, Twitter, Facebook, TV news and their mobile alert apps, and radio. Using social media resources allows the speed of communication to greatly accelerate. Social media helps identify urgent needs, can provide accurate and updated information, helps quickly connect family members and provides additional resources that may not be available at the source of the disaster. A new phenomenon came out of the Boston Marathon bombing—citizen videographers. Law enforcement asked people to come forward with their videos and photos taken with their smart phones to help find any clues.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Disaster plans are fluid documents. Just as technology and social media constantly change, your disaster plan should be reviewed and updated on an as-needed, or at least an annual, basis. It should be put into practice regularly with all employees. One positive element to come out of the recent tornadoes, bombings and shootings is an awareness to prepare for the next event. The tragic events of the Sandy Hook shooting and the Moore, OK, tornado demonstrated how well trained the staff were in following emergency protocols.

Although it may appear to be a monumental task, there are a few things you can do immediately to increase your level of preparedness and reduce the likelihood of your disaster program failing when disaster strikes:

Begin With a Mock Disaster Drill

Most facilities will plan and practice for a fire since it has the greatest likelihood to occur. By exercising the plan for something other than a fire, you may gain a greater understanding of the current state of emergency response awareness—and how well you would be prepared.

Review Your Current Employee & Student Directory

Call every one of the emergency contact numbers listed to ensure they are still correct. Many people have dropped their landline coverage in favor of their cell phone; have your employees updated their contact information with the HR

department?

Meet With Agencies in Your Community to Discuss Available Support

Develop a community resource directory with locations, hours of operation, and contact information for the following resources:

- Shelter/emergency housing
- Animal shelters
- Food and water sources (grocery stores/community food pantries)
- Clothing and household items
- Transportation services
- Local pharmacies and healthcare product suppliers

Having a disaster plan in place and ready to activate can make a world of difference when it comes to recovery efforts. The better prepared your facility is, the more resilient you will be, allowing for a smoother recovery process. ♦

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For more than 30 years, FEI Behavioral Health (FEI) has responded to hundreds of customer's critical incidents and has provided crisis support following work-place violence, natural disasters, aviation accidents, and acts of terrorism. A leader in preparedness, response, and recovery associated with the human dimensions of disaster, FEI integrates behavioral health expertise, crisis management experience, and technology to offer specialized crisis management services to address the human aspects of crisis management. FEI Behavioral Health is part of Families International, Inc., a nonprofit membership organization of four closely-aligned, yet separate entities. Visit www.feinet.com to learn more.

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