

# Best Practices in Accounting for People during Crisis Events

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What would you do if disaster struck your organization, suddenly and without warning? How would you manage the potential disappearance of family, friends, or co-workers? Would you have a plan in place that would help you minimize the negative impact?

The devastation that occurred as a result of the tornados in Oklahoma in May once again demonstrates that a crisis can happen at any time. Within the stressful and chaotic environment of a disaster, it is essential that an organization accounts for their most valuable asset: their people. Unfortunately, providing information and assistance to people affected by a crisis can cause an enormous drain on an organization's resources, and this task becomes even more challenging if the company also has visitors and contractors on site during an incident.

In the event of a crisis, security personnel must work with stakeholders in areas such as human resources, employee relations, legal, and facilities maintenance in order to ensure business continuity and maintain operations. Without the implementation of a formalized corporate-wide crisis response plan these individuals are unable to effectively do so.

Having a comprehensive Accounting for People plan allows security personnel to focus solely on incident management and business recovery efforts. When an Accounting for People plan has been proactively put into place an organization is properly positioned to respond to information inquiries while also ensuring that other response and recovery operations can proceed. In effect, having an Accounting for People plan can assist with the successful resolution of a crisis and also boost an organization's public image.

### *Preparing an Accounting for People Plan*

The best way to prepare for the accounting of people during and after a potential crisis event is to have a clear, easily executable plan already in place. The following is a step-by-step approach that can help ensure the safety and accountability of employees in times of extreme duress:

- **Conduct a risk assessment.** Understand what hazardous situations could place employees in danger. What is the chance of a fire or an explosion on-site? Is an active shooter a potential threat? Most organizations have a greater likelihood of being impacted by a fire or natural disaster, however, a thorough assessment is key to understanding potential risks.

- **Manage the facility and staff.** Break down the facility and staff into more manageable groups. If the facility houses hundreds of employees or if the event is taking place over multiple locations, creating subsets of employees will allow for quicker assessments.
- **Determine coordinators and leaders.** It is important that a point person be charged with coordinating and leading employees in the event of a crisis. This individual should know the plan backwards and forwards, have a list of people to account for, and be easily identifiable. It is also important to have an individual designated to back up the point person in case they are not available at the time of a crisis.
- **Identify locations and evacuation points.** An assembly area and points of evacuation in a building should both be identified. Additionally, alternative assembly areas must be identified as some locations may not be accessible depending on the type of crisis. Employees should always be aware of where they need to go in case of emergency.
- **Supply a checklist to coordinators.** Coordinators and leaders should have a list of the names of employees that they need to account for. If someone on the list is not present, or outside guests were known to have been in the building during the crisis, coordinators can work with supervisors and first responders to quickly determine if the missing were out sick, on maternity leave, on vacation, etc.
- **Make coordinators/leaders easily identifiable.** This, again, cannot be stressed enough. Whether it is with colored vests or the use of noticeable flags, coordinators are responsible for the accountability of everyone else. Quickly identifying who is responsible for documenting those reporting to the assembly area is critical to an organization as it provides important information on the status of its staff and others.

When an Accounting for People plan is firmly established, further steps must be taken to establish feasibility. Response plans should be considered “living” documents that require regular review and are written in a manner easily understood by all staff. With this in mind, individuals should:

- **Review the process on a regular basis.** It is imperative that all vested parties be familiar with the protocol surrounding both the Accounting for People plan and crisis event procedures. Regular meetings should be held with coordinators and leaders to review and discuss safety issues; identify old, new, and reoccurring hazards; select alternative location sites and address other areas of concern. Frequent review will result in a knowledgeable foundation that can save lives.
- **Test the process.** An Accounting for People plan is only as effective as the individuals who carry it out. All staff should participate in regularly scheduled drills of the evacuation and accounting for people procedures so that all employees are familiar with the plan.
- **Retest the process.** If testing of the plan identifies issues or areas in need of definition or additional support, the plan should be retested. Practice and

reevaluation will lead to a stronger, better understood plan. A business should revisit this step on a regular basis.

### *When a Solid Plan is Not Enough*

While the above guidelines address a general understanding of how best to approach a situation when accounting for people, it is rarely so easy. With most organizations, the likelihood is that the company will be dealing with an “open” population. This means that although a company has a certain amount of identified individuals, it might also have another unidentified group of visitors and contractors on site as well. Consequently, the plan becomes more difficult to execute in an open population, such as with the recent Boston Marathon bombings.

When faced with a large, open population, alternative programs and approaches are necessary to ensure that those impacted are accounted for. Two particularly effective methods for the accounting of people include distributing phone numbers that connect with crisis call centers and websites that collect pertinent information. These methods can also be applied to closed populations that host people generally not counted among regular employees. The scope of people affected in an event includes all staff, guests, vendors, contractors, visitors, and any other person that may be on site in the event of the incident.

- **Call Centers.** A call center serves as a centralized hub of communication for people directly impacted by the event to provide and obtain information. In the wake of a crisis, a telephone number is communicated through the media that allows affected individuals to either report on their own status or inquire about the location and status of family members or friends. The focus of the call center is to gather and track the information surrounding those involved in the crisis. Call centers are usually located in the areas impacted by the disaster and will ensure that phone lines are operational at all times.
- **Websites.** An alternative to collecting information via telephone is to gather online data. Individuals directly impacted by a crisis or those who believe they may know of someone impacted can input their information or personal requests into an online form dedicated to the event. As with phone numbers, the website’s address is broadcast via mass media for easy accessibility. The information gathered through the online database is collected and scrutinized for potentially helpful information regarding those impacted by the crisis event.

### *The FEI Difference*

The support FEI Behavioral Health provides to organizations in the aftermath of a crisis is unique in that its focus is on addressing the human aspect of a crisis incident. Identified as a resource by a company’s business continuity efforts and viewed as an extension of its human resource function, FEI can enhance an organization’s ability to

effectively account for and support employees and employee families impacted by a large scale critical event. FEI's Accounting for People services allows for centralization of information associated with:

- Managers providing a list of missing employees after facility evacuation
- Employees and subcontractors reporting their locations and status
- Families and other parties inquiring about the event and specific employees
- Media inquiring about the event and the company's response

At the time of a crisis, FEI's Crisis Management team will seek to identify every person that has been affected by the incident. The organization will receive a status update of each person involved that describes whether they are injured, hospitalized, unaffected, etc. FEI leverages their crisis call center and highly experienced counselors to screen callers to determine the likelihood that their loved one was directly impacted by the event.

Callers that are determined to likely be family or friends of employees will be provided with additional information and updates as they are made available, as well as a personal counselor and telephone contact number. The counselor supports the family by notifying other family members of the incident, providing informational updates, and arranging lodging and travel to a nearby area, if needed. Counselors use FEI's information management software to track victim and caller demographics, which allows both families and the organization to receive frequent status updates.

FEI also has the ability to support mission-critical staff, executives, and their families in the event they are required to be away from home during the crisis. These staff can be provided with concierge services such as daycare, security, pet care, and family transportation. Additionally, FEI's on-site counselors work with employees, victims, and their families to provide emotional support that is crucial following a crisis event.

For nearly 35 years FEI Behavioral Health 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. As 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 partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.*