

Under the Watch of Others: Disaster Response Preparedness

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On any given day, families depend on others to provide safety and support for their family members whether it is at home, school or work. For most days, this will follow the plans that are in place to handle the emergencies that might typically occur such as accidents that may result in minor injuries. However, are there plans in place to handle events that happen less frequently or, those of a disaster magnitude?

In 2012, there were forty-seven federal major disaster declarations. Since January of 2013, there have already been twelve federal declarations for major disasters. According to a recent report from the 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 the plans that are in place when family members are under the watch of others?

There is an expectation that if we assign responsibility to safeguard our family members outside of our watch, that this will happen...but does it? This paper will focus on locations where we assign the responsibility to safeguard our family members to others: school, hospitals and nursing homes, and their disaster response preparedness.

Disaster Response Program Development

When developing an effective disaster response program, most organizations will benefit from specialized guidance for their specific industry. Prior to the development of the plan, a thorough risk assessment of all potential risks and hazards to the property and the location is critical. Best practices have demonstrated that the minimum critical elements of an effective disaster program should include:

- Identifying hazards specific to the facility
- Risk assessment specific to the facility
- Developing a robust emergency/disaster plan that addresses how to mitigate, prepare, 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

In 2007, 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:

- Emergency Response Plan should be 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

For health care facilities, it is important to keep in mind that there are additional care factors for the patients/residents that need to be included in the planning:

- Medical concerns (physical and psychological)
- Specific needs (i.e., feeding tubes, oxygen, wheelchair)
- Prescriptions
- Medical records
- Impact of event on patients

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 to either 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

Emergency Response Preparedness for Schools

Although there are no federal laws requiring all school districts to have crisis response plans, most states and school districts do have requirements for such planning. In 2007, the Government Accountability Office, GAO, reported that an estimated 95 percent of all school districts have written emergency management plans. Most of these plans also include staff roles and responsibilities. However, although most school districts have taken the federally recommended steps to plan and prepare for emergencies, most of the plans do not include recommended practices such as:

- Emergency Response Plan should be developed with an all-hazards approach
- Evacuation and Shelter-in-Place plans
- Collaboration with local emergency management agencies
- Including first responders and community partners in drills/exercises
- Communication contingencies
- Transportation resources
- 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

Crisis Communication

You may have noticed that communication was listed in the emergency response preparedness planning for both health care facilities and schools. The initial critical communication needs during a crisis revolve around accounting for everyone with regards to status and location and notifying family. Additional communication needs will focus on the impact of the disaster on the organization and the community.

Recent crises have demonstrated that the speed of communication has greatly accelerated with the development of social media resources. Social media has helped to:

- Identify urgent needs
- Provide accurate and updated information
- Connect family members
- Provide resources

Where to start...

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:

- Identify the types of hazards/disasters for probability and impact on your community
- Conduct a risk assessment of your facility if one has not been done recently
- Call every one of the community emergency contact numbers to ensure the numbers are correct
- Review your current emergency response plan and identify areas in need of additional detail
- Meet with agencies in your community to discuss available support
- Develop a community resource directory
- Conduct a mock disaster drill other than a fire 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 for other crises
- Schedule a training for your staff on the emergency response plan
- Update the emergency response plan

A disaster response plan should be a “living” document. It needs to be updated on a regular basis and put to the test at least annually. The plan should also be developed and written in a manner that is easy to use for any level of staff.

Disasters do not always happen during full staff hours. Many disasters will occur when staff and logistical support is limited. If the plan is operational and provides specific information and guidance to the staff, the event will still be a challenge. However, the ability for the staff to protect the health, safety and welfare of others (along with their

own) will be enhanced. As a result, the resiliency of everyone and the organization will also be improved.

The FEI Difference

FEI's Crisis Management experts have developed specialized services to address the human side of emergency response through the integration of its mental health expertise, critical incident experience, and state-of-the-art call center and information technology. FEI assists organizations with the human side of business recovery, helps manage the crisis effectively to assure business continuity, and provides meaningful support to victims, victim families and the organization's employees.

FEI's crisis management experts augment an organization's ability to:

- Develop "best practice" plans for responding to the needs of employees and their families.
- Track employee location, status, and contact details.
- Communicate continuity plans, operational information, and organizational needs.
- Immediately respond to employee and family inquiries.
- Compassionately reach out to employees and families and track needs and services.
- Collect, sort and maintain information through use of our exclusive web-based information system.
- Effectively manage employee and family assistance response efforts.
- Mitigate the effects of trauma.

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. 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.