



Code RED



MARINELLI

Key elements of a well prepared retail disaster plan.

BY VIVIAN MARINELLI

Keeping employees safe from workplace injuries related to heavy lifting, repetitive motion, or slips and falls is a concern for all retailers. As a facility manager or store owner, you've also considered and trained for the what-ifs in the event of a shoplifting situation, but are you and your employees prepared for a mall crisis involving an active shooter, armed robbery or a natural disaster?

DEVELOPING A DISASTER PLAN

The first step toward preparing to deal with a crisis is developing an effective disaster response program. Most organizations will benefit from specialized guidance for their specific industry or work environment, so working with an organization familiar with retail emergencies is helpful to ensure your plan is the best it can be. Begin with a thorough risk assessment of all potential risks and hazards to the store, the mall and surrounding area.

Remember that different regions of the country are faced with different threats and hazards. California, for example, prepares for earthquakes. Oklahoma braces for tornadoes, and the East Coast takes heed at the mention of a hurricane. Conducting a risk assessment helps to identify the potential threats for the organization and determine the support that would be necessary during a disaster. All areas of the country are subject to the threat of retail disasters.

Best practices have demonstrated that the minimum critical elements of an effective disaster program should be to:

- Identify hazards and conduct a risk assessment specific to the retail mall or store.
- Develop a robust emergency plan that addresses how to mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from hazards and risks specific to the retail space.
- Include crisis communication planning.
- Provide training, drills and updates to the plan.
- Practice, practice, practice — running through your crisis plan creates muscle memory so in the event of a real emergency, everyone will know what to do.

An effective emergency response program includes plans to evacuate the building but should also include a lock-down plan and a plan to shelter-in-place when the situation warrants it. 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 building.
- Maintaining sufficient food/water supplies.
- Accounting for staff.
- Communicating to families.

PUTTING THE PLAN INTO PRACTICE

As a retail business owner, you're busy. You have new hires to train, merchandise to mark down and floor displays that need changing. A disaster response plan should be a "living" document. Along with your day-to-day tasks, schedule time to update your plan on a regular basis and test the plan at least annually. The plan also should be developed and written in a manner that is easy to use for any level of staff, from your newly hired high school aged clerk to your most seasoned sales associate.

Conducting periodic drills is a crucial, often overlooked, part of emergency planning. You are familiar with and practice fire drills on occasion. Have you considered conducting regular lock-down drills? A lock-down drill would consist of alerting shoppers that this is a drill and letting them know they are not required to participate, but it's likely most will. In a lock-down drill, the store gates or door will close, lights go off and staff and customers gather in a safe spot, usually somewhere in the back of the store. On the day you conduct a lock-down drill, it's best to do one in the morning and one in the evening. That way, all shifts are covered and all employees share in the same experience and knowledge.

BE AWARE OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS

One area that may change after your disaster plan is created is the retail center layout, both inside and out. Retail space is constantly changing to stay fresh to the consumer. As you change your store layout, keep in mind your disaster plan. Is there anything that needs to be changed in it to match the changing store environment? Same with personnel. Part of your new-hire checklist should include adding a review (or at least a discussion) of the disaster plan with the new employee.

It is important to maintain current, accurate blueprints and store layout of the building and grounds, including information about main leads for water, gas, electricity, cable, telephone, alarm and sprinkler systems, hazardous materials location, elevators and entrances. This information is extremely helpful, especially during a "shelter-in-place" situation when employees are safely locked in a designated area.

Information should be available on the layout of the mall, including store numbers and whether they are equipped with access to a phone, cable television, e-mail or computer. On the building and grounds layout diagram, it also is helpful show the location of the fire alarm turn-off, sprinkler system turn-off, utility shut-off valves, cable television shut-off and first aid supply

PUTTING SOCIAL MEDIA TO GOOD USE

In times of crisis, social media takes on a life of its own. Because cell towers can be overwhelmed with traffic during emergencies, it's important to utilize multiple options to send and receive communication — broadcast phone messages, texting, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TV news and their mobile alert apps, and radio.

Once news of a disaster at a retail center or mall hits the media — and with social media that means almost instantly — employees, friends and family members of those employed at the disaster site will want an immediate update. A call center is one way to disseminate information and provide a sympathetic ear to those seeking information. Managing social media also is crucial. Having a dedicated communication officer to handle the chatter on social media helps clear up rumors and gets out the correct messages.

Using social media resources allows the speed of communication to greatly accelerate. Social media has helped identify urgent needs, provide accurate and updated information, quickly connect family members and provide additional resources that may not be available at the source of the disaster. It also is used to monitor for emerging threats.

With the prevalence of smartphones, more and more people have the ability to snap a photo or record a video and broadcast it instantaneously on social media channels. After the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, law enforcement officials called on the help of citizen videographers, asking for their video and photos taken with their smartphones to help find any clues.

As part of your disaster plan, determine in advance who on your staff will be best at delivering messages and what channel(s) you will use. It might be the store owner or manager, the youngest employee most familiar with using social media, or someone from the mall management group. These people will be in the best position to communicate directly with the media, families, community members and other internal or external stakeholders.

Establish a communication tree: a top-down listing of employees with your key communicator listed first. In the event the first person is unable to communicate, the tree will still function starting with the second employee listed. Work through the tree until the last person is notified, who then contacts the first person to complete the chain.

The crisis team members are better suited to communicate with the employees and families directly involved in the disaster and crisis response counselors are trained to compassionately deliver bad news to families and how to deal with the reaction.

— Vivian Marinelli



boxes. These items can be color-coded on the facility layout. These higher level layouts are most beneficial to the retail center management, but also helpful for your own employees.

KNOW YOUR STAFF

Photos can help in the essential task of identifying employees injured, missing or killed. In addition, in those instances where the perpetrators' identities are known while the crisis is still in progress, photos can be of great assistance to law enforcement and SWAT teams who must enter the building and make split-second decisions amidst a sea of faces. If you provide photo ID badges, you might want to consider storing the photos on a CD, which you can then use in case of emergency.

COMMUNICATING TO KEY STAKEHOLDERS

In the scenario of the shooter, calls are coming in from staff on the next shift wondering if they should come to work. How will updates be provided to people who are not onsite? What support services will need to be offered to employees and their families?

Once you have determined your company spokesperson, consider how you will communicate to key constituents such as off-duty employees, employees' families and state and local authorities.

PREPARE FOR THE AFTERMATH

In the unfortunate event that disaster does strike, you can rely on your disaster plan to ensure resiliency and recovery. A key component to the plan includes addressing the human side of disaster recovery. Include plans to bring in crisis counselors after a disaster to talk with employees and family members. These counselors have mental health expertise and critical incident experience to assist with the human side of recovery by providing meaningful support to those affected.

If a gunman walks into a mall with the intent to kill, little can be done to stop him, but having a well-prepared disaster plan can help save lives.

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Vivian Marinelli is the senior director of crisis management services for FEI Behavioral Health. FEI Behavioral Health offers flexible solutions for the full spectrum of workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. Partnering with a wide range of corporations, government entities and non-profits, FEI is a social enterprise wholly owned by the Alliance for Children and Families, a national network of nearly 500 human-serving organizations.

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