

Disaster Response

Key Elements of a Well-Prepared Disaster Response Plan

By Vivian Marinelli, Psy. D.

In any type of facility, a well-prepared disaster plan can help handle crises and unforeseen events.

Whether fire, man-made or weather-related, disasters can strike at any time, and workers as well as the general public rely on safety professionals to provide security and support in times of crisis.

The first step in the development of a plan is to conduct a thorough assessment of all potential risks. The assessment will evaluate and identify the risks and hazards to the property, and take into account factors like industry and geography. Once you've prioritized these risks, it's time to create a plan to respond to them.

The minimum critical elements of a robust and effective disaster program should include: Policies and procedures on how to mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from hazards and risks specific to the facility; crisis communication plan-

ning; an employee-wide training program on the disaster response plan; drills and exercises to test the disaster plan; and regular updates to the disaster plan

When developing a written plan, it's important to consider whether to evacuate or shelter-in-place during the event. The plan needs to address the nuances of each of these situations. If the decision is to shelter-in-place, for example, securing the facility, power supply and staffing capabilities should be included in the plan.

An emergency preparedness checklist was published by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) as a recommended tool for all health care facilities, but it's a good guideline to follow for all facilities¹. In addition to evacuation and shelter-in-place plans, the checklist suggests collaboration with local emergency management agencies, communication contingencies, and family

member notification as some of the critical areas to be included within an emergency response program.

Working with local emergency management agencies is pivotal during drills and exercises too. They are professionals who are well-prepared to deal with these types of events and their input can be extremely helpful in developing an effective evacuation or response plan. It's also helpful because you are building relationships in case of an actual situation.

Most emergency management plans include staff roles and responsibilities that guide actions during a disaster. Also consider including information on:

Transportation resources — No matter the size of your facility, understanding how to evacuate all your employees safely and efficiently is important.

Accounting for People — Identify, recruit and train your Accounting for People




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team members. It should consist of one team leader and as many coordinators as you see fit. The leader will know the plan backwards and forwards, have a list of critical assignments for the team members, and be easily identifiable. They also are the liaison between the Accounting for People team and the incident response commander. Coordinators use predesignated checklists to help account for people, both missing and present. Have predetermined meeting areas where employees can check in with coordinators.

A course of action to resume production output after event — The plan needs to be sensitive to the impact the disaster had on your staff as well as the overall operations. Depending on the crisis, whether it involves a death or damage to your facility, resuming everyday normal operation does not have a predetermined deadline. Take in all the factors before making the decision.

One of the most important aspects of every emergency response plan is communication that speaks with a clear and accurate voice for your facility.

The initial critical communication needs revolve around accounting for the status and location of everyone onsite, and alerting local first responders and emergency personnel. The next step would be the notification of employees' families regarding the event status and health of those onsite. Going forward, the communications will focus on the impact of the crisis on the organization and the sur-

rounding community.

A disaster response plan should be considered a "living" document. It should be under constant review and tested on an annual basis to ensure effectiveness. The plan needs to be clear enough for all staff members to understand their roles should a crisis occur.

Conducting regular mock disaster drills and staff trainings will help. Most facilities plan and practice for a fire. It's smart to adopt a similar approach for emergency response awareness. After completing the drill, update your emergency response plan based on the outcome and what you learned.

Disasters often occur when staff and logistical support is limited. If the plan is operational and provides specific information and guidance to the staff, their ability 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 improve. **FSM**

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1 http://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Provider-Enrollment-and-certification/SurveyCertEmergPrep/Downloads/SandC_EPChecklist_Provider.pdf

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