

Caring in a Crisis: Nursing Home Emergency Preparedness

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The vulnerability of nursing home residents became a national issue when thirty-five individuals at one facility perished during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Since the beginning of 2012, there have been nineteen Federal Major Disaster declarations alone. Whether it is the result of severe storms and flooding as we witnessed most recently in Minnesota and Florida or the wildfires in Colorado, people have had to evacuate their homes and sometimes their communities for their own safety. Many individuals and families have emergency response plans that they have developed to use as a resource during these difficult times. However, who plans for the family members living in assisted living facilities or nursing homes?

The expectation is that each facility has an emergency response plan, and they do. Federal regulations require that Medicare and Medicaid-certified nursing homes have written emergency plans and provide their employees with emergency preparedness training. However, in a recent report issued by the Department of Health and Human Services (*Gaps Continue to Exist in Nursing Home Preparedness; 2012*), many of the nursing homes surveyed met the Federal regulations for planning but were found to be deficient for inadequately training of their staff to respond to disasters.

Emergency Response Program Development

When developing an effective emergency 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
- 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

In 2007, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) published an emergency preparedness checklist as a “recommended tool” for health care facilities. In addition to the Federal regulatory requirements for nursing home emergency response plans, the checklist suggests that the following critical areas should also 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
- Resident identification
- Family member notification
- Necessary provisions
- Tracking of residents
- Relocation assistance

For nursing homes, it is important to keep in mind that there are additional care factors for the residents that need to be included in the planning:

- Resident medical concerns (physical and psychological)
- Resident-specific needs (i.e., feeding tubes, oxygen, wheelchair)
- Prescriptions
- Medical records
- Impact of event on residents

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

Getting Started

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

- Call every one of the emergency contact numbers for residents to ensure the numbers are correct
- Have staff update all of their contact and emergency contact information
- Review your current emergency response plan and identify areas in need of additional detail
- Examine your agreements for transporting and housing residents if you do need to evacuate your facility
- Meet with agencies in your community to discuss available support
- Develop a community resource directory
- Conduct a mock fire drill. While this does not compensate for a complete disaster exercise, at least you will have an idea of the current state of emergency response awareness of the staff
- 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 residents’ health, safety and welfare (along with their own) will be enhanced. As a result, the resiliency of the residents, staff and the organization will also be improved.

The FEI Difference

FEI Behavioral Health’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 over 30 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.