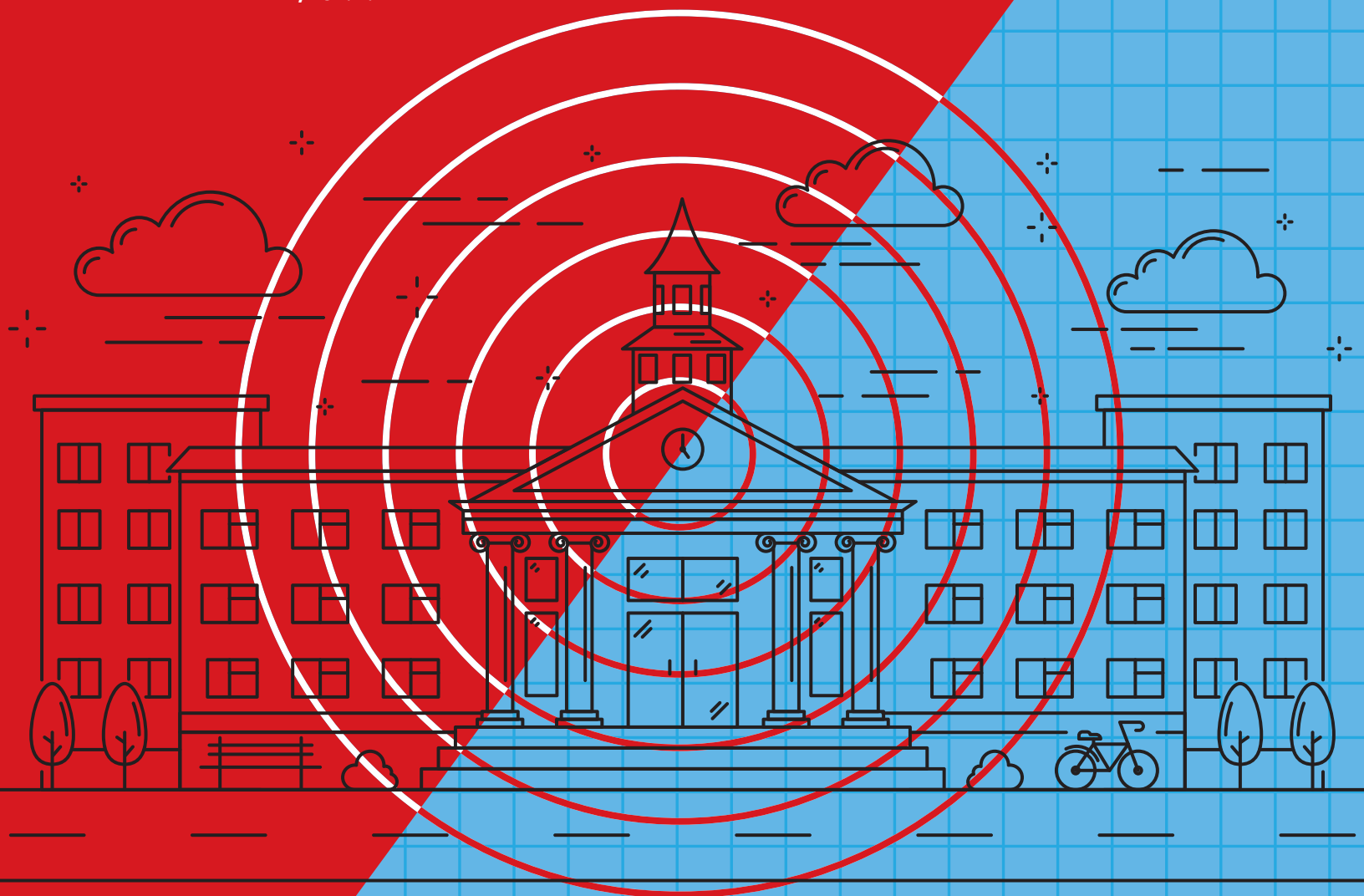


Protect Your Campus and
Community with Effective

DISASTER PLANNING

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BY THEIR VERY NATURE, CRISIS SITUATIONS ARE DISRUPTIVE, striking when you least expect them. How many times have you heard “we never saw it coming” uttered on the news?

From earthquakes and tornadoes to active shootings or civil unrest, it’s important to keep your campus ready for any number of crisis situations. Whether a disaster is natural or man-made, having an emergency response plan in place will help your school prepare for any eventuality.

DEVELOPING A DISASTER PLAN

When developing an effective disaster response program, it’s important to have specialized guidance for your industry. Working with an organization familiar with school emergencies helps ensure your plan is specific to the needs of faculty, staff, and students. Before you begin working on the plan, conduct a thorough assessment of all potential risks and hazards to the building and campus.

Different regions of the country face different threats and hazards. Already this year, flooding, wildfires, earthquakes, and other severe weather events have impacted the country. You’ll need to make different considerations depending on your campus location. Conducting a risk assessment helps tailor the plan to your specific campus, community, and environment, making it much more effective during a crisis.

Best practices have demonstrated that the *minimum* critical elements of an effective school disaster program should include the following:

- Identify hazards and conduct a risk assessment specific to the building and campus.
- Develop a robust emergency plan that addresses how to mitigate, prepare, respond, and recover from hazards and risks specific to the school community.
- Include crisis communication planning.
- Provide training, drills and updates to the plan.
- Practice, practice, practice! Your staff and students will learn to rely on muscle memory with routine practice of the crisis plan, ensuring a faster, more effective response in the case of an actual disaster situation.

Keep in mind that when creating your plan, a single response likely won’t be enough. You should prepare for various situations. An

effective emergency response program should include not only plans to evacuate the building, but also a plan to shelter in place. Each decision requires special considerations and thinking about them in advance will help your team remain calm during an emergency. If the decision is to shelter in place, some additional considerations include:

- Securing the building.
- Maintaining adequate food and water supplies.
- Accounting for students and staff.
- Communicating to families.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS FOR SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

Most states and school districts have requirements for disaster planning, and it’s clear to see why: effective disaster planning means less chaos during the moment. If you don’t keep a level head, your students and staff may become panicked or distraught and the situation could devolve in potentially dangerous ways.

Most crisis plans identify staff roles and responsibilities. Keeping your staff informed of their role during a disaster means less thinking on their feet and more decisive action in the heat of the moment. You won’t be able to stop and organize during a disaster situation, so make sure your staff is prepared to work as a team before disaster strikes to increase safety in a worst-case scenario.

Although most school districts have taken the federally recommended steps to plan and prepare for emergencies, here are a few additional considerations to incorporate into your disaster plan:

- Lock-down procedures.
- Accommodations for students with special needs.
- Accommodations for students and families who speak limited English.
- Family member notification.
- Tracking students.
- Continued education in the event of an extended school closure.
- Incorporating updates to plan.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

During a disaster, the top priorities are to account for everyone’s status and location and to notify their families. You don’t want to leave anyone guessing about the safety of their loved ones. After you’ve taken care of that, additional communication should focus on the disaster’s impact on the school and community.

When planning, select a staff member for their authority and availability to deliver vital messages. It might be the school principal or president, a member of the school board or district, or the communications office.

Choose people who are in the best position to communicate directly with the media, students, school families, and other stakeholders. Crisis team members are better suited to communicate directly with the employees and families involved.

It’s also important that your staff is prepared to share difficult news. You may choose to work with crisis response counselors who are trained to deliver bad news to families and manage their reactions.

In times of crisis, social media can take on a life of its own. Rumors and misinformation quickly spread across dozens of platforms. With so many people seeking information, the spread of information can dramatically slow down service. To control the narrative, utilize multiple outlets to send and receive communication—broadcast phone messages, texting, Twitter, Facebook, TV and radio news and their mobile alert apps.

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 is also used to monitor for emerging threats. Sharing messages

and updates through your official social media channels allows you to control the narrative of the disaster and ensure your community is getting accurate information from a trusted source.

PUTTING THE PLAN INTO PRACTICE

A disaster response plan should be a “living” document, meaning it requires regular updates and annual testing at the very least. Avoid being too specific. Your plan should be applicable and accessible to all staff members of the organization. Just as you practice monthly fire drills with staff and students, disaster drills should also include the entire school and be conducted regularly. Involving local first responders is also helpful.

Dealing with a disaster isn’t easy, but well-trained staff with experience in a variety of crisis situations will increase safety and ensure a more capable response to any event. You’ll never be able to predict a disaster, but an effective disaster response will shift the narrative from “we never saw this coming” to “we knew what to do to keep things from getting worse.”

PREPARE FOR THE AFTERMATH

In the unfortunate event a disaster strikes, you can rely on your disaster plan to ensure resiliency and recovery. But your job isn’t done after the emergency is over. Staff and students may be traumatized or deeply affected by the event. Bringing in trained counselors can

support your school community and ensure that your campus is resilient after the disaster.

Keep communicating, even after the disaster. Consider it a learning opportunity and review what went well and what didn’t. What lessons will help refine your disaster plan and affect how you deal with future events? Open, transparent communication and an effective plan will ensure your school emerges strong and resilient after a disaster. ■

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