

# BEFORE DURING AFTER:

## Surviving a Disaster with Effective Planning

By Vivian Marinelli, Psy.D.,  
FEI Behavioral Health

In 2019, we have already experienced numerous natural and man-made disasters. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declared the first disaster in January with Tropical Storm Michael and the earthquake that impacted Alaska. Since the start of 2019, natural disasters have included severe storms and flooding throughout the Midwest and the South, wildfires in Alaska, Montana and Oregon, earthquakes in Southern California, and most recently Hurricane Dorian, which impacted the Bahamas and the entire Atlantic coast of the United States and Canada. *(As of press time.)*



There are no cookie-cutter templates!

**M**an-made disasters have taken a heavy toll on businesses and communities this year. In a thirteen-hour timeframe in August, 32 employee and patron lives were lost, 51 people were directly injured and many more were traumatized as a result of violence in the workplace. These tragedies took place at only two businesses; the reality is that during that same time period, more violent acts occurred at other business locations within the United States.

Whether it's a natural disaster or a societal crisis, disaster situations can be impossible to predict. It's important for companies to transition from "we never saw it coming" to "we knew what to do when the time came." Benjamin Franklin was once quoted as saying, "by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

Although you may be unable to predict when a disaster will occur, you can protect your employees and assets with proper planning, training and communication tactics. Consider taking an "all hazards" approach to your planning. This will ensure that your employees and business are best prepared to respond to the crisis and recover as quickly and effectively as possible.

equipping the facility; ensuring a backup power supply is available; storing enough food and water to last three to ten days; stocking medical supplies; and preparing a communication plan with emergency contacts.

It's important for companies to transition from "we never saw it coming" to "we knew what to do when the time came."

Shelter-in-place needs focus on the ability to keep your staff safe from external, potentially life-threatening situations. You need to do a risk assessment for each location to identify both natural and man-made threats that could occur. Then, your plan should identify multiple safe areas that can be secured from the inside. These areas should be able to accommodate the number of staff and visitors that could be on-site at any given time. The cell service reception in these areas should be tested as it will be critical to receive and provide information on the situation.

Disasters are not convenient, and don't necessarily happen during business hours. If a disaster strikes after hours, or when there is limited staff, your plan needs to be written so that the initial critical tasks can be completed by the first person available. This is important to consider when drafting your plan, and you should make sure staff at all levels understand and are familiar with the plan.

There is a difference between a Business Continuity/Disaster Recovery (BC/DR) Plan and an Emergency Response Plan. The first one is focused on business continuity and disaster recovery. Disaster recovery in a BC/DR plan typically is focused on the IT recovery for the business. An emergency response plan focuses on the immediate response to a disaster that has impacted people. Although it will include technology in the response, it is typically using the technology to support the response.

When drafting the plan, you will need to take into consideration the various business units within your company. Some of these units also may be included in drafting the plan due to their specific involvement in a response. Areas such as security, IT and communications will be critical. Large companies may be interested in assigning a team to facilitate drafting the plan. Creating a disaster response team comprised of multiple



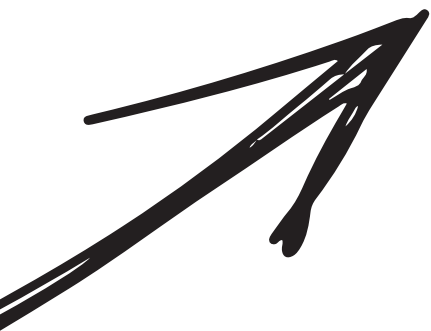
## BEFORE

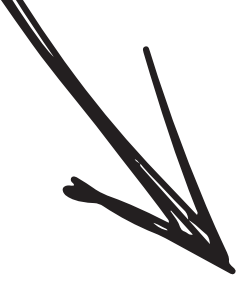
### Putting Together Your Plan

A comprehensive plan can help your organization minimize damage before, during and after a disaster. No two businesses are the same—location, employees, office layout and other factors will require individualized planning. There are no cookie-cutter templates for the perfect disaster response plan; however, there are common elements that all plans should include.

A disaster response plan should extend beyond the event itself—it's important to guide your business through a disaster as well as recovery and mitigation after the event. It will be critical to conduct a thorough risk assessment of all potential dangers *before* you develop your plan which should include addressing how you will mitigate, prepare, respond and recover from specific hazards and risks.

To best prepare you to handle any situation, your disaster plan should include details specific to evacuation as well as sheltering-in-place. For example, evacuation plans need to identify the notification or alarm process, emergency exits, safety systems, meeting areas and communication plans. However, if the situation requires you to shelter-in-place, additional needs may include





departments helps ensure the entire business is invested during the process.

The first draft of the disaster plan is just that, a first draft. Your plan is always a “work in progress.” It will need to be tested, reviewed and updated as your company and processes change.

Communicating effectively on social media during a crisis will keep internal and external audiences informed and assuage any fears.

### Preparing for Anything

Once a plan has been developed, it's important for everyone to know how to access the plan and put it into practice in case of a disaster. Ahead of any emergency, all staff need to know what their roles and responsibilities are and where they will report at the time of an emergency. An effective disaster response plan should include an org chart detailing the various teams and the integration of these teams into an organized response. It should also identify who should oversee the entire operations and lines of communication. Orientation for new employees should include an overview of the evacuation and shelter-in-place protocols. Review training for all employees should be done annually and address:

- Evacuation and shelter-in-place procedures
- Emergency response procedures
- Protective action against threats and hazards
- Location and use of emergency equipment
- Internal and external communications
- Emergency contact information review and updates

An annual emergency response exercise is a great way to review the plan for any necessary updates and to provide an overview to the teams that would be tasked with taking on the various roles. Since it has the greatest likelihood to occur, most facilities plan and practice for a fire. More recently, companies have been incorporating an active threat or active shooter exercise into their annual exercises to prepare their staff to respond. The goal of an emergency response exercise is to identify if there are any gaps in the planning. Very few exercises ever run 100 percent smoothly. Changes in the company, staffing and processes are always occurring and these may impact the plan.

# DURING

## Communicating During a Crisis




During a disaster, both internal and external communications will be critical to inform your staff, various stakeholders and the community about the ongoing response and the impact of the disaster. In our world of technology, everyone is used to having the news at their fingertips every second of every day. During the immediate hours of a disaster response, the teams are so focused on assessing and responding to the situation that they often fail to effectively communicate with their stakeholders, which includes their staff and the community.

Your emergency response plan also should include a crisis communications plan. Because the need for information is immediate during a disaster, your crisis communications plan should include templates for initial company statements for your website, social media and traditional media outlets.

Internal communication should notify your staff of the situation and there should be a process for you to account for their location and status. Family members will be anxious to hear if their loved ones have been impacted.

Secondary communication will focus on the impact of the disaster on the organization and the community. Social media greatly accelerates the speed of communication and can instantly identify urgent needs, provide updates (including pictures and videos from the scene) and reconnect family members. A word of caution, though—inaccurate news spreads just as fast on social media as accurate news. Make sure to confirm information before sending it out and caution community members to only trust news coming from an official source.

Social media platforms provide a broad audience with instantaneous updates, which makes monitoring social media during a disaster vital in order to keep audiences accurately informed. Communicating effectively on social media during a crisis will keep internal and external audiences informed and assuage any fears. It also allows organizations to monitor the public opinion and prevent the spread of rumors, misinformation and false narratives.



Your plan is always a “work in progress.”

# AFTER!

## Picking up the Pieces

Getting your organization up and running again after a disaster is critical, but this may be difficult if your physical location has been damaged or compromised. During the response, part of the planning should include identifying what might be necessary for critical operations to resume, but also to be fully operational again. Resources should be vetted and listed in your BC/DR Plan. Also, many companies are providing the means for employees to work remotely. If that is a possibility for your company, testing this throughout the year is a good practice. For many organizations, this will not be a possibility, and for those, identifying an alternate work site or relocating your staff will be necessary.

In addition to keeping the business resilient, employees may also need help recovering. The effects of disasters often impact both work and home life, taking a devastating toll on one's physical and mental health. Flexibility with work schedules, allowing time off and providing an employee assistance program (EAP) will help staff adjust to the changes in their lives. Hiring a third-party EAP service that provides access to counseling, management consultation and local disaster resources will ensure support for employees before, during and after a disaster. Hiring an outside third-party that will work with your HR and management will optimize the level of support for your staff.

Disasters, both natural and man-made, are unavoidable forces: businesses must prepare themselves to safeguard their employees, and the best defense is a good offense. Organizations with a strong disaster response plan are best-suited to respond to a disaster and recover as efficiently and effectively as possible. ♣

FEI has a 40-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, from EAP and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. One of the most successful social enterprises in America, FEI is wholly owned by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, a national network of social sector organizations working to achieve its vision of a healthy and equitable society.



Vivian Marinelli is the Senior Director of Crisis Management Services for FEI Behavioral Health. Vivian holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and is a Licensed Psychologist in Wisconsin. She brings over 20 years of work in direct clinical services specializing in trauma and grief counseling to her position which focuses on assisting individuals involved in critical incidents. As the Senior Director of Crisis Management Services, she is responsible for leading and directing a full complement of emergency support services for corporate customers. Vivian has been the principal architect in designing, developing and continuing to oversee a highly successful team of specialists focused on supporting the critical needs of individuals, families and communities during disasters. She is recognized as a subject matter expert in community and organizational emergency response.



**VPP**  
is much more than a statement of principles and standards,  
**it's the way we do business.**



[www.MarathonPetroleum.com](http://www.MarathonPetroleum.com)