



CM Article

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Creating A Plan For Disaster

As we've seen over and over again during the last decade, disaster can strike anytime and anywhere. Whether an earthquake in Chile, a tsunami in Thailand, or a mud slide in California, facility managers (FMs) need to be ready with guidelines to mitigate losses in the event that disaster strikes.

Geologically, Mother Nature's fury has been experienced by way of fire, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, snowstorms, lightening strikes, floods and other phenomena. In contrast, manmade events, such as terrorism/bio-terrorism, gas leaks, bomb threats, civil disturbances, explosions, power outages, Hazmat incidents, and infectious disease outbreaks can wreak just as much havoc.

How a facility and its people fare in the event of a disaster may be predicated on the status of the organization's preparedness plan and how it is positioned to respond. A well thought out plan and a quick response can save lives, property, and possibly the organization itself.

Planning

The first step in disaster planning is to create an Emergency Planning Team (EPT) to formulate policies and procedures. The team traditionally includes the following personnel or their designated representatives: senior officer of the company, senior officer of the facility management unit, senior officer of the human resources unit, local community government official, communications officer, and specialty consultants (e.g. hazardous waste disposal experts). As part of the health and safety committee, the EPT should meet periodically to review processes and conduct training exercises to ensure all parties understand their role in an actual disaster.

A mission statement that explains the company's role in providing a safe work environment for employees and building occupants free from recognized hazards is essential, as well as a requirement under OSHA's general duty clause.

When planning a disaster response, it is prudent to assume the worst will happen—a total communications failure. The EPT should develop a contingency plan for maintaining communication in light of a failure.

Response

The three main areas of concern when developing a disaster plan are response, recovery, and restoration. The response part of the plan should outline immediate actions in reacting to an emergency. Health and life safety should be the most important concern. Removal of people from the affected area is critical and should be implemented quickly and safely.

In the event that the disaster or emergency situation has caused severe injuries and/or fatalities, it will be necessary to set up a makeshift triage (a French word meaning “to sort by priority”) area to prioritize victims according to the severity of their injuries. For example:

- First aid must be applied to those who have broken bones, avulsions, or missing extremities.
- Efforts should be made to sustain life until medical personnel arrive.
- Victims who have died as a result of their injuries must be covered until medical personnel arrive.

An emergency/disaster action chart can serve as a quick reference and reminder of what actions should be taken when personal injuries and fatalities are involved. This chart should be posted in employee populated areas such as break rooms.

A list of employees certified in CPR and first aid should also be posted. This list should include the telephone extensions of certified employees and can be posted throughout the facility. Additionally, it is important to post instructions directing employees to safety and shelter in the event of severe weather or other emergencies, as designated by the chief or senior emergency coordinator.

Disaster kits (at least one per floor) should be located in places that do not require key access. The location of these kits should be included on the evacuation floor plan.

Employees and building occupants should be trained on emergency response procedures using mock drills for fire, tornadoes, earthquakes, and bomb threats help instill the process. The EPT should mandate biannual safety in-service training and a quiz to be taken by all employees. If warranted, remedial training should be given.

Recovery And Restoration

The EPT should convene to develop plans for recovery and restoration that would minimize downtime. The focus of the EPT here is making provisions to continue business/operations as quickly as possible, evaluate efforts made in response, recovery, and restoration of the affected area, and generate processes for prevention and/or better preparedness for future emergency situations.

The EPT should also ensure there are guidelines for “critical, important, and inconvenient” events. These can range from a fire to an elevator malfunction, or from loss of HVAC operation to major flooding. It is important to keep in mind that anticipated recovery timelines (ARTs) warrant pre-planning and should be assigned to areas needing recovery and restoration (e.g. Plan A = immediate recovery/no downtime; Plan B = up to four hours to recover).

After immediate response actions, the team should have a debriefing meeting with staff members of the affected location in an attempt to relieve panic, emotional disequilibrium, and stress and to institute further recovery and restoration measures. The EPT should share the results of the debriefing with company executives and the health and safety committee.

Key components and objectives of the restoration portion of a disaster plan should include:

- continuation of a healthy and safe work environment;
- minimal interruption to business and service operations;
- resumption of critical operations within a specified time frame;
- minimal financial loss; and
- assurance to all stakeholders that the organization is functional.

Restoration efforts include having contingency plans in place to continue business. Accordingly, the EPT should ask themselves these questions:

- Who should be notified in the event the facility is closed due to an emergency?
- What is the notification process?
- Where can temporary space be established? Is there an alternate site that can be used?
- How will phone service be restored?
- How will furniture and equipment be replaced or repaired?
- How will mail services continue?
- Are there guidelines in place for partial or total loss of the facility?
- Are hotel meeting rooms an option? Can employees work from home?

A Resource Management Annex is an important part of a disaster plan. It serves as a resource for vendor services that may be needed to aid in restorative efforts. Vendors may provide personnel, communication equipment, vehicles, plumbing, electrical services, carpenters, pumps, heavy equipment, first aid supplies, food, generators, realtors, computers, furniture, office equipment, janitorial services, flooring, security services, lock, HVAC services, snow removal, and more. Vendor information should include account numbers and 24 hour emergency numbers. In order to expedite needed services, it is a good idea to let vendors know they are included in the Annex.

Disaster Plan Best Practices

When developing and implementing a disaster recovery plan, it is important to ensure that:

- procedures are documented, distributed, and understood
- personnel know when and how to respond to emergency situations
- personnel are trained and procedures are routinely practiced
- the health and safety of personnel are protected
- property and equipment are preserved
- risk and liability are minimized
- back up systems are in place
- systems are inspected and tested to confirm operational capacity
- damaged systems are evaluated to determine what is required to put them back into service
- appropriate agencies are notified (e.g. emergency response, insurance, regulatory)
- community, government, vendor, and supplier resources are assessed for potential roles in restoration
- provisions are made to prevent further loss due to vandalism, theft, accidents, and exposure to dangerous elements.

Disasters come in many forms and it is virtually impossible to be completely ready for every situation that may arise. However, with comprehensive planning, facility managers and their colleagues can implement systems and guidelines to mitigate the impact of a disaster.

Article By Tony Rankin, CM, as published in the July 2009 issue of Today's Facility Manager; www.todaysfacilitymanager.com/articles. [Rankin](#) is a facility manager with Chicago, IL-based Children's Memorial Research Center (www.childrensmemorial.org).