

## Emergency Management: Is your Organization Prepared?

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What would you do if a disaster struck your organization today? The first thing to decide is what defines a disaster. A weather catastrophe such as Hurricane Katrina, the fires in California, and winter storms are recent examples of disasters that stress our society from a social and economic standpoint. Disasters can range from the impact on a single family suffering a home fire to the stunning impact of terrorism within the United States. Authorities estimate that at least 25% of businesses impacted by a disaster never open their doors again to conduct business.

Today there is tremendous focus placed on responding to terrorism and other large scale disasters, but it is more likely that your organization may be tested during a smaller crisis. Consider how your organization is prepared at this moment to manage through a power outage, a small fire, flood, or a severe storm. Many public entities have implemented emergency plans to effectively maintain operations through such events. These organizations have established good communication systems with their employees as well as emergency responders and the local community.

In some cases, public entities have arranged a list of contractors who are on call to promptly respond and make repairs or re-establish services and avoid down time and business interruption. This level of emergency preparedness is a leading way to control losses and sustain operations.

Potential crises are becoming more complicated and have caught the media's attention. The Center for Disease Control has information about new concerns on the horizon. One scenario describes how Avian flu presents the possibility of a wide scale pandemic impacting the United States. This is information open to the public and places emergency preparedness front and center in the national agenda. Being prepared for these situations will ensure that you can continue to communicate with your community, and assure them of your ability to face adversity and come out on top.

While most people understand the devastating effects of fires and floods, the impact of a flu pandemic is still hard to comprehend. Imagine your organization with 75% of the workforce ill and unable to work. Once a few people are sick, will the remaining staff be willing to come to work? You may need to develop a plan to allow your staff to work from home. Can you identify the key issues you need to keep going in order for your organization to survive. Health officials envision a flu pandemic lasting for a period of several months, with the illness coming in several waves, each lasting for a period of a few weeks. Will you be ready?

Emergency planning is a fairly simple process, but one that will require ongoing review and planning in order to succeed. The four phases of emergency management will guide you through the process of protecting your future. The four phases are Planning, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery. Emergency planning is a worthwhile investment of time and resources. A public entity needs to understand that the cost to be prepared, together with the on-going review and management demands, can produce a return on the investment when a disaster occurs. Consider the case of one meat processing company that needs to manage recalls. In a simulated crisis involving meat contamination, this company was able to track down all products across the eastern United States within a period of a few hours. This leaves

the company with a sense of confidence that they can manage through a real crisis. The cost associated with confidence is worth every penny they spend.

Planning for your disasters will ensure that your staff will have guidance in how to react to the multitude of problems that may present themselves. The planning process begins with a review of your operation to identify any activities that are vulnerable to interruption by both internal and external conditions. These vulnerable activities are then evaluated to identify ways that they may be able to continue to take place, despite the impact of the ongoing crisis.

#### **Plans for your organization would include:**

- Identifying key staff that must be available and accessible when needed
- Specifications for computer systems needed for your staff
- Identifying how you will communicate with your employees and the public
- Identifying alternate locations from which you can operate

Mitigation is the process of minimizing the potential effects on your operations from any situation.

Computer system data backup is the most common form of mitigation practiced by today's businesses. The backup of data ensures that work will not be lost in the event of a failure of a computer, or even the loss of a facility.

Other mitigation efforts include:

- Operating from more than one office to provide alternate facilities
- Emergency generators to provide emergency power to your facility
- Agreements with other public entities to assist one another in times of need

Response to emergencies gets your organization moving to overcome the hurdles created by a crisis, and to implement the plans as developed. Deploying key staff to your alternate location, setting up computers and recovering your backup data will all be elements of your response plan. These elements are in addition to the resources available from your local Office of Emergency Management, whose focus will be on the community at large. You should consult with your local emergency managers to ensure that your plans will work effectively with the community at large.

Communicating your plan to all of your staff members is critical to ensure that everyone understands his/her role during a crisis. Testing the plan through exercises to simulate an emergency will identify any areas where adjustments are needed. The response and implementation of your plans will assist you in maintaining your critical operations, and serving your customers as you move on to the recovery phase.

Recovery is the period of time in which you will be repairing damage to your facilities or equipment, and returning to the normal business functions. The recovery phase is expedited and easier when the other elements of your emergency management program have functioned as designed. Operating from alternate locations or using others to fulfill some of your orders will allow your staff to continue to serve your customers, while your operations are restored to normal.

An effective emergency operations plan will ensure that your public entity can survive the most difficult challenges encountered. Your ability to continue operating will demonstrate that yours is a first class operation that will always be there to meet the needs of your municipality and the taxpayers.

Additional information regarding this topic can be found on the PMA Group website at [http://www.pmagroup.com/risk\\_emergencypreparedness.htm](http://www.pmagroup.com/risk_emergencypreparedness.htm).

### **Additional Sources of Information include:**

- **Institute for Business and Home Safety** (PMA's Partner in Emergency Preparedness)  
<http://www.IBHS.org>
- **The American Red Cross**  
<http://www.redcross.org>
- **Centers For Disease Control & Prevention**  
<http://www.cdc.gov>
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation**  
<http://www.fbi.gov>
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency**  
<http://www.fema.gov>
- **National Safety Council**  
<http://www.nsc.org>
- **Occupational Safety & Health Administration**  
<http://www.osha.gov>
- **US Department of Transportation**  
<http://www.dot.gov>
- **US Environmental Protection Agency**  
<http://www.epa.gov>
- **US Postal Service**  
<http://www.usps.gov>

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