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The Voice of Construction in Washington, DC

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Members are invited to submit guest articles, press releases, community service project news, and industry news on topics of interest to **Building Washington** readers. Authors are asked to submit materials to jgretsch@abcmetrowashington.org. Photographs are welcome.



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YOU NEED TO HAVE A PLAN:

PREPARING FOR EMERGENCIES CAN KEEP YOU IN BUSINESS

by Mary Lou Jay

The rains that drenched the Washington, DC-area in June caused flooding in many areas and reminded us once again that Mother Nature (and life itself) can be full of unpleasant surprises. How well is your business—at the job site and at your headquarters—prepared to face them?

Are you ready for the power outages and loss of phone communication that would occur if the DC-area suffered a major hit from a hurricane—something that forecasters warn is all but inevitable someday? Could you keep your day-to-day activities going if the avian flu or a similar pandemic hit your workforce? Would you know how to reach the key people in your company if a fire (or a terrorist attack) destroyed your building, or would all of that essential contact information go up in smoke along with your office space?

Disaster planning just makes good business sense. Companies that have prepared themselves ahead of time for the most likely emergency scenarios, and have made the necessary preparations to survive them, are more likely to keep operating during the crisis or at least get back to work quickly after it has passed.

Getting Started

The first step in disaster planning is to put together a team. It should include key managers as well as representatives from all areas of your company.

Have the team identify possible emergency situations that could affect your company. Your list would probably include hurricanes, snow or ice storms, flu and terrorist or bio-terrorist attacks. Remember to include events like fires or burst pipes that could impact just your company. Take your location into consideration: if you're in a flood plain or near a river or creek that overflows, you'll have to include floods in your scenarios. Consider the impact of businesses that are sharing your building or are located close by: could a spill or a fire at a neighboring chemical company affect you?

Plan Your Response

Next, assess the risks involved with each scenario and develop plans to work around them. Your insurance agent and local and state emergency management agencies can provide assistance with this work. Consider which of your company's functions would be most important to get up and running and concentrate your resources there.

Conduct an analysis of your current facilities. Is the air filtration system adequate? (This is especially important if there's widespread flu.) Check to see if you have sufficient (and working) smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and fire extinguishers. Do you have an emergency generator (and sufficient fuel) to provide electricity for the most important company operations during a prolonged power outage? Is there anything you can do to better protect files or equipment?

Develop an emergency response plan that includes:

- Identifying key people and their responsibilities in an emergency and plans for backups in case they are not available:

Who will be in charge of notifying emergency responders? (fire department, police, utility companies, etc.)

Who will notify employees, make sure they are all safe, and set up any necessary emergency communications systems for them?

Who will be responsible for securing data and/or equipment?

Who will be in charge of ensuring that the building itself is physically secure?

- Backup of critical data. Ideally, you should make a backup copy every day of all the information on your company's server and take or send it to an off-site location. There are companies that provide such services. If you can't access your offices or your computers, you'll at least have the data you need to get back into business.
- Stockpiles of emergency supplies. What you need depends on your response plan, but the list should at least include flashlights, battery-powered radios and sufficient supplies of batteries, and don't forget to change these out periodically. You may also want to include some basic stores of drinking water and canned foods.
- Communications information
For employees: This is especially important for construction companies, since most of their employees are working off site. Set up a phone line and/or a website that employees can access to get updates about the situation. You may want to plan for a telephone tree to ensure that every employee receives some kind of personal contact as well.

Consider how you will reach employees—and whom you will contact—if the emergency occurs at a customer's site.

Keep—off site—a list of contact information for your employees (home phone numbers), customers, major suppliers and backup suppliers, and business partners, such as banks and insurance agents

- Alternate facilities. If you can't work out of your offices, is there a supplier or customer or partner that would be willing to provide temporary space for you?

Share Your Plans

After your team has your disaster plans ready, test them. Run mock scenarios to discover any weaknesses or areas that need refining. When you're satisfied with your plans, share them with your employees via company newsletters, special sections on a company Intranet or envelope stuffers. Provide wallet cards with a brief summary of emergency plans and contact numbers they can use. Incorporate disaster response as part of your safety training.

Disaster planning does take time, money and a commitment from company managers and executives. But being prepared as much as possible will pay off for your business in the long run. While your competitors are struggling to get back on their feet, you can be up and running and ready to do business at a time when your services are most likely to be needed. ■

Sidebars:

Free Assistance Online

If emergency preparedness seems like too big a task for your company to handle, take heart! There are several resources available online that will help you through the process.

The Institute for Business and Home Safety offers "**Open for Business: A Disaster Planning Toolkit for the Small to Mid-Sized Business Owner.**" It's available for free download at www.ibhs.org.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has an entire website devoted to business disaster planning. Ready Business, located at www.ready.gov/business, contains plans, brochures, checklists and even posters that you can print out and display. Make sure to check out the **Mentoring Initiatives** section for a list of many free disaster planning publications.

Open for BusinessSM

INSTITUTE FOR Business & Home Safety

PERI PUBLIC ENTITY RISK INSTITUTE

A Disaster Planning Toolkit for the Small to Mid-Sized Business Owner

What to do for Avian Flu

Although most of us think of hurricanes or fires when discussing emergencies, a virulent flu epidemic (like the avian flu pandemic that experts are predicting) could be an economic disaster for your business. Health experts warn that as many as 25 to 50 percent of a company's workforce could be unavailable in these circumstances.

Preparations for health emergencies require a different strategy than other emergencies. Your plans should include:

- Documentation of business practices and cross-training so employees can fill in for each other.
- Review of sick leave policies. You don't want employees coming into work when they are sick because they are afraid of not being paid or losing their jobs. Establish policies regarding when employees can return to work after being sick.
- Emphasis on good sanitary habits. Encourage employees to wash their hands more frequently; provide hand sanitizers and antibacterial soaps.
- Consider daily screenings of employees to check for flu symptoms, i.e., high temperature. Immediately send home anyone who's sick.
- Limit face-to-face meetings; use more e-mail and teleconferencing to communicate.
- Discourage sharing of telephones and computers (keyboards) to prevent the spread of germs.
- If possible, let some employees telecommute during the crisis.
- Provide good medical information about the flu to employees; bring in an expert to alleviate fears; and give them good information on dealing with outbreaks.

How to Handle Demonstrations/ Unauthorized Leaves of Absence

Sometimes it's not a national disaster or an illness that leaves you short of employees. Many employers in the DC-area had workers take off (with notice and without) this past spring to participate in the demonstrations on immigration. In some cases, this left the companies unable to conduct business as usual.

If a company anticipates that such an event may impact its business, it should make sure that employees are aware of its policies on attendance and absences.

"The best approach is to deal with employees as individuals on this issue, in terms of specific requests for time off, and follow your attendance policies as consistently as possible," according to a memo from legal counsel at Associated Builders and Contractors National office. As the best defense against discrimination claims, it's important to treat all employees the same under your attendance policies regardless of the reason for the requested leave.

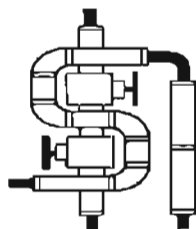
Employees who fail to notify you of the absence can be disciplined, but only if other employees have been disciplined for similar notification failures. And, because this is a gray area that could be impacted by National Labor Relations law, you may want to consult with your legal counsel before taking any disciplinary action.

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