

Plan for Emergencies Before Disasters Strike

By Patrick V. Fiel, Sr.

When we hear about natural disasters, we too often heave a sigh of relief that it didn't directly impact us. And often we continue with daily tasks, never stopping to plan for the day an emergency hits home.

An event resulting in loss of lives, injuries, enormous property damage, business closures, and evacuations—like those that accompanied the recent Japanese earthquake and tsunami—could happen in this country too. Scientists believe a major earthquake will strike California at anytime within the next 30 years. Major hurricanes often strike the East and Gulf coasts, and the nation's mid section is regularly hit with tornadoes and floods.

The main ingredients to an emergency plan are prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Minimizing injury and property damage in an emergency situation is all about careful, meticulous planning—and a lot of practice.

Preparing for an emergency should find roles in the plan for as many people in the facility as possible. They should also keep in close contact with first responders and take advantage of available technology. No plan can guarantee the perfect results, but, having no plan at all increases the chances of a disastrous outcome.

It is important to begin planning with thorough security and safety risk assessments provided by qualified, security consultant. This assessment should identify the strengths of a facility as well as point out any weaknesses to be addressed.

Once the initial assessment is complete, you should draft an emergency plan and then involve all employees or building occupants in practicing it under several different scenarios. Only then can you evaluate the plan and make adjustments, if necessary. Regular practices must continue even after the plan has been finalized.

Saving lives is at the top of any priority list. During an emergency, employees or building occupants need to know whether they should shelter in place or evacuate the facility. If the decision is made to have people stay on site, where should they go? In the event of an evacuation, what are the best routes to safety? Following the disaster, when is it safe to leave the shelter or return to work? Timely information that reaches people with clear, concise instructions is key.

Fortunately, there are emergency mass notification systems that can fulfill this need.

It is important for you to designate who has the authority to issue emergency messages. There should also be a multi-level command, so if the top person is unavailable, the responsibility is passed without delay.

Following an emergency evacuation, an access control system can help assure that opportunistic looters or other criminals will have trouble gaining access to a facility. You should have backup batteries on site to continue to power the system in the likely event of a blackout.

Video surveillance cameras can provide views of what is happening in and around a facility during an emergency. This can make it easier for you to make decisions that are more likely to save lives and reduce injuries. And if the video is run over a network, it may be possible to share it with first responders so they can weigh in with advice.

Protecting lives and minimizing injuries in an emergency situation is all about advanced planning. You should have a regularly updated and practiced plan that will help save lives and protect property.

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