

Emergencies in the Workplace: Being Prepared

Fire and explosion, large chemical spills or gas leaks, earthquakes, bomb threats or floods could bring your business to a standstill within minutes without proper emergency preparedness. Now is the time to establish a plan that will effectively deal with these emergencies.

Here are some basic steps to help you prepare for emergencies in your workplace.

PLANNING

Whether it be an earthquake or the threat of explosion, the effectiveness of your response during an emergency depends on the amount of planning and training. It is management's responsibility to see that a program is instituted, and frequently reviewed and updated. Your emergency response plan should be comprehensive enough to deal with all the types of emergencies that can be expected in your workplace. Your planning will require you to perform a hazard audit to determine potentially unsafe conditions, which may include toxic or hazardous materials. You should also list, in detail, the procedures to be taken by employees who must remain to care for essential operations until their evacuation becomes absolutely necessary. Their duties might include monitoring power, water supplies and other essential services.

For emergency evaluation, the use of floor plans or workplace maps, which clearly show the emergency escape routes and refuge areas, should be included in the plan. All employees must be told what actions they are to take in specific emergency situations. This plan should also be reviewed with employees initially when the plan is developed, whenever the employee's responsibilities under the plan change, and whenever the plan itself is changed.

ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITY

A chain of command should be established to minimize confusion. Employees must clearly understand who has authority for making decisions. Responsible

individuals should be selected to coordinate the work of the emergency response team.

Arrange for adequate backup so that trained personnel are always available. The duties of the emergency response team coordinator should include:

- Assessing the situation and determining whether an emergency exists
- Directing efforts in evacuating personnel
- Minimizing property loss
- Ensuring the aid of outside emergency services, such as medical aid and local fire departments
- Directing the shut down of your operations, as necessary

COMMUNICATIONS

During a major emergency, such as a fire, explosion or earthquake, it may be necessary to evacuate all areas of your facilities. Also, normal services, such as electricity, water and telephones, may be non-existent. Under these conditions, an alternate area may be necessary where employees can report or which can act as a focal point for incoming and outgoing calls. The designated person in charge should make this the alternate headquarters so that he or she can be easily reached.

Emergency communication equipment, such as amateur radio systems, public address systems, bullhorns or portable radio units, should be present for notifying employees of the emergency and for contacting local services, including police, Red Cross, medical aid and fire department.

A good alarm system should be established that is both audible and visible, and should have an auxiliary power

supply in the event electricity is lost. The alarm should be distinctive and recognizable as a signal to evacuate the area or perform actions as designated in your emergency plan. Employees should also be trained to use and understand other emergency reporting systems, including manual pull box alarms, public address systems or telephones. Emergency phone numbers should be posted on or near telephones, on bulletin boards and in other conspicuous locations.

Home phone numbers of key employees, listed in order of priority, should be circulated to those employees who will direct the disaster recovery. These numbers, as well as a copy of your recovery plan, should be kept offsite.

Remember that during region-wide emergencies, such as earthquakes, the phone systems may be unusable. Therefore, only essential telephone calls should be attempted.

ACCOUNTING FOR PERSONNEL

Of importance to everyone, including families, is the need to know that all personnel have been accounted for. This can be difficult when employees are offsite, or if contractors are on-site. A responsible person should be appointed to account for personnel and to inform police or emergency response team members of those persons believed missing.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM

Emergency response teams are the first line of defense in emergencies. Before assigning personnel to these teams, make sure that your employees are physically capable of performing the duties which may be assigned to them. Depending on the size of your business, you may want to train one or more teams in the following areas:

- Use of various types of fire extinguishers
- First aid and CPR
- Shut down procedures
- Evacuation procedures
- Use of special breathing apparatus
- Search and emergency rescue procedures

Your emergency response team(s) should be trained in the types of emergencies your business may possibly encounter. They should be well informed about special hazards. It is important to know when not to intervene. For example, team members must be able to determine if a fire is too large for them to handle, or whether search and emergency rescue procedures should be performed. It may be better to wait for professional firefighters and outside emergency response groups.

TRAINING

Training is very important to the effectiveness of your emergency plan. Training for each type of disaster response is necessary. Employees must know what actions are required of them to avoid panic. In addition to the specialized training for emergency response team members, all employees should be trained in evacuation plans, alarm systems, reporting procedures for personnel, shut down procedures and the types of potential emergencies. A drill should be held for all personnel at random intervals at least annually, and an evaluation of performance made immediately by management and employees. If possible, drills should include groups supplying outside services, such as fire and police departments.

Finally, the emergency plan should be viewed periodically and updated to maintain adequate response personnel and program efficiency.

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

In the event of a disaster, having people trained in first aid and CPR may be invaluable. It would be wise to sponsor periodic training of employees in these areas. The American Red Cross, local safety councils, fire departments and others may be contacted for this training. First aid supplies should be provided for emergency use and be ordered through consultation with a physician. It is also a good idea to post emergency phone numbers and to contact your ambulance service in advance of an emergency to ensure that they become familiar with your facilities, access routes and hospital locations.

SECURITY

During an emergency, it is often necessary to secure an area to prevent unauthorized access and to protect vital records and equipment. Ropes and signs can be used to establish off-limit areas. It may be necessary to notify local law enforcement personnel for assistance. Certain records also may be in need of protection, including essential accounting files, legal documents and lists of employee relatives to be notified in the event of an emergency. Such records may be stored in duplicate outside the business or in protected secure locations within the building. You also will want to establish a system for protecting and maintaining the use of your computer system and records, as this is a major and critical operation of many businesses today.

BUILDING SAFETY

Another major step in emergency preparedness is to establish and maintain a facility that is not going to contribute to injury or death during a disaster. This is particularly true during a major earthquake, where it is usually the failure of the building or structure, or the movement of equipment and supplies that creates the injuries and deaths. A thorough and comprehensive review of your physical facilities is important so that corrections can be made before a disaster occurs.

Establishing an effective safety program will go a long way to protect employees against many hazards. This may involve:

- In the event of a disaster, having people trained in first aid
- Making sure guardrails are in place
- Exits are properly identified
- Aisles are not obstructed
- Equipment is secured to prevent tipping
- Automatic fire extinguishing systems are energized
- Fire and emergency alarm systems are properly working
- Fire doors are not blocked open

- Emergency power systems are operable
- Fire extinguishers are functional
- All the latest gas leak prevention methods are used

If you own your building, you may want to consult with a qualified, licensed engineer to determine if your building needs strengthening. Some types of construction are more prone to damage from an earthquake than others, but can be reinforced to some degree. For example, many concrete tilt-up buildings were built prior to the adoption of earthquake standards in 1976. These buildings can be strengthened by the installation of roof ties between the walls and roof, and between major elements of the roof system.

In summary, many emergencies or disasters are difficult, if not impossible, to prevent. The preparation and plans you implement today will go a long way in preventing injuries and death in your workplace, as well as enhancing your ability to recover from a disaster. Planning and training is important as is the need to combine your efforts with outside disaster relief services. Once you have established your plan, review it with outside agencies and services, including your local fire department, law enforcement agency, medical providers and the American Red Cross. Try to determine if anything was overlooked. Take advantage of any emergency preparedness programs that are presented in your community. Earthquake preparedness presentations sponsored by the American Red Cross are offered frequently in most California metropolitan areas. Working together, we can successfully prepare for emergencies, and feel assured that we have done everything possible to protect our businesses, lives and families.

For further information or assistance, contact your Zenith Safety & Health Consultant.