

Facility Agility: Planning for Facility Emergencies



By

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What is facility agility? Facilities might be static assets that can't be considered *agile*, but nonprofit leaders must remain agile in order to resume or maintain operations in the wake of a crisis or emergency. The NRMC team has heard more than a handful of horror stories about nonprofit leaders who believed their buildings were bulletproof, and who later experienced unexpected facility failures, leading to loss of assets and the need for temporary workspace.

Nonprofit leaders can approach facility emergency preparedness in different ways. For example, facility-based emergency preparedness programs are specific to an individual facility owned or operated by a nonprofit. Other approaches to facility emergency preparedness might be more broad or comprehensive, intending to address many types of hazards, disasters, or crises that could occur at any facility operated by the nonprofit. No matter the approach you take to safeguard your nonprofit's property, consider implementing these essential emergency preparedness tips that address the *who*, *what* and *how* of facility agility.

WHO: Facility Guardians

Your ability to bounce back from facility fiascos will largely be determined by the decisions that your team makes during an emergency. You can't predict how your team members will act in these moments of extreme stress, but you can empower them to do their best by following these tips:

- **Clarify roles.** Offer clear roles and responsibilities to all your staff members regarding facility emergency preparedness and response. Even if most team members will simply be expected to follow instruction or retreat to safety during an emergency, tell them that ahead of time! If you have identified a facility manager or other facility leader, reiterate to your staff that they can all support the manager's efforts regarding facility emergency preparedness; for example, if anyone notices a facility hazard or a potential weakness in your organization's ability to respond to a facility emergency, then it is critical to report concerns immediately to the facility manager.
- **Follow the leader.** If your facilities warrant it and personnel constraints allow, empower a facility manager or other facility leader(s) to fortify your properties and implement emergency preparedness and response plans. Commit to give ample consideration to any recommendations made by your facility leaders as priorities for emergency preparedness. Especially in nonprofit organizations, it is often challenging to invest internally in infrastructure and training, because team members understandably prefer to prioritize directly mission-advancing activities, such as programs. Don't let this bias blind you to the important recommendations your facility leaders might make. Though a facility-related emergency might be highly unlikely, your facility staff probably know the vulnerabilities of your properties better than anyone.
- **Craft a chain of command.** In advance of an emergency (now, if you haven't already!), establish a

chain of command and a specific team to lead emergency response across your facilities. The emergency response team should include your facility leader(s), who can help lead evacuations or protect critical property and equipment during an emergency. Also consider expanding the chain of command and emergency response team to every facility you operate. The various facility-based teams can be ready to act independently when crisis strikes at their respective properties, or the teams can collectively report to the lead emergency response team in an incident that threatens multiple facilities operated by your nonprofit.

- **Heed the call.** When alarms begin blaring in an office building, a common sight is people pausing to decide whether to react or continue working. Any facility alarm could be the real deal, so urge your staff members to heed every alarm as if it were a chance to save lives. Ensure that all personnel at your nonprofit—especially senior leaders—heed emergency response leaders, facility alarms and other authority figures and warnings. Allowing even one team member to skip an emergency drill could dramatically alter your team’s understanding that emergency protocols are urgent and of utmost importance. Make it clear that there are no work tasks that are more important than the safety of your team. Employees shouldn’t feel pressured to continue working, they should always be ready to put aside work in order to respond to an alarm or safety instructions. Members of the executive team must lead by example and participate in safety and evacuation drills—even if alarms or drills occur during important meetings or with project deadlines looming.

WHAT: Facility Agility Tactics

Implement these preventive measures and emergency response systems to prepare your property before catastrophe comes.

- **Facility checks:** Frequently conduct facility checks to ensure that emergency response equipment is in working order, and to reduce the risk of secondary hazards being present in your facilities during an emergency event. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers guidance for developing and carrying out workplace safety checks in its Small Business Handbook. The Handbook provides [sample self-inspection checklists](#) that address topics like fire prevention, walkways, stairs, exit doors, and more.
- **Emergency action plans:** Consider creating both facility-specific emergency response plans, as well as an overarching plan for response to a crisis that affects all your nonprofit’s properties. While crafting your plans, remember that they should be easy-to-reference *action* plans, not verbose manuals. Some organizations distribute simple written charts or graphics depicting response protocols for specific types of emergencies (think airplane safety booklets), which can be shared with staff or posted on the walls in the distinct sections of each facility. No matter where a staff member is in your facilities, he or she should be able to quickly access simple, clear instructions for immediate response to facility hazards such as a fire, flood, active shooter, earthquake, etc. If you prefer not to create response plans that address specific potential hazards and emergencies, then draft a flexible plan suitable for any emergency and test it against various scenarios during situational training.
- **Evacuation, lockdown and sheltering drills:** Practice myriad crisis response scenarios to reduce deer in the headlights syndrome when a real emergency occurs. Engage your staff teams to practice evacuation, lockdown, and sheltering drills regularly. Learn more about [emergency exit routes](#) from OSHA, and learn how to create [emergency exit diagrams](#) and [lockdown and shelter procedures](#) recommended by Safe-Wise Consulting, LLC. When conducting drills, allow your facility leaders and other emergency response leaders to take charge during these exercises. Both tabletop (mental response) and physical response exercises are incredibly helpful preparation, though many organizations opt to focus on tabletop exercises to reduce costs associated with drills and physical exercises. Before conducting any physical response exercises (e.g., pulling the fire alarm and practicing fire evacuation), notify local first responders (e.g., the fire department) that the drill is occurring. First responders might be willing to participate in the drill with your nonprofit’s team. For any emergency response exercise, try to create a scenario in which normal protocols or the normal operating environment are changed drastically or unexpectedly; this will enable your team to practice following emergency protocols in a stress-inducing environment that somewhat mimics that of a real crisis. The culture of each exercise should be that safety is paramount, and that emergency response leaders are empowered to make judgment calls to save lives and to maintain as safe an environment as possible. After completing tabletop scenarios or physical exercises, conduct an immediate after action review or debrief with participants—known as a *hot wash* in emergency management lingo—to determine crisis response strengths and weaknesses. Record every success and failure that is identified during the hot wash, and take time to define follow up actions and responsible parties. This is a critical stage in

emergency preparedness; your response capabilities will only improve if you and your team truly hold yourselves accountable for making necessary changes to your response protocols. After a hot wash, schedule a secondary debrief to share lessons learned and to provide time for teams to complete their action items and report back about new and improved emergency response procedures.

- **Emergency reporting protocols:** Establish and communicate your organization's protocols for reporting an emergency and getting the word out across your facilities. Whether it is dialing a number, pushing a button, or preferably a mix of available emergency reporting options, convey to all staff that reporting emergencies immediately is crucial. In case a team member is unsure whether a situation qualifies as an emergency, reiterate that you would rather welcome false alarms than let hesitation get in the way of emergency response.
- **Emergency notification systems:** Ensure that emergency notification systems are present and working throughout your facilities, to indicate that a crisis is occurring and the appropriate response (e.g., evacuation, sheltering, etc.). Notification should be two-part, including an alert to local law enforcement, medical, and emergency agencies, as well as alerts to the appropriate stakeholders of your nonprofit. Some alert systems allow users to send a GPS signal to police using a cellphone, or push a panic button that sends police a GPS signal for a specific facility. Educate your stakeholders about how to initiate the emergency notification system, so that a broad notification can be sent as soon as possible by anyone affected by the emergency. Also verify that any language and graphics used in notifications are clear, and their meanings have been communicated to your stakeholders before use during an emergency situation. Many types of emergency notification system exist, such as computer screen alerts/pop-ups, email alerts, text alerts sent to employee cell phones, or alerts on digital clocks (often present in university classrooms). A notification system should be layered if possible, to increase the chances that your staff and volunteers will quickly receive a notification in at least one format. When seeking notification support from third party providers, ask specific questions to determine which products best meet your needs. For example, some notification systems may advertise their ability to notify thousands of subscribers immediately, but what does *immediately* really mean? A delay of just one or two minutes could mean many lives lost in a whirlwind emergency situation. Aside from a broad emergency notification system, also confirm that your facility leaders and emergency response teams can stay in touch while countering a crisis. Establish a communication system that works in and across your facilities, and have a backup plan in place in case preferred protocols and communication devices fail.
- **Correct coverage:** Understand your insurance policies that offer coverage for property damage or loss, and business interruption (income) and extra expense. According to one source, under a business interruption policy, "the carrier is liable for the reduction in net income that results from suspension of operations—whether wholly or partially—due to a physical loss at the insured's premises." Extra expense coverage is for expenses incurred by your nonprofit during the period of restoration. Examples of extra expense include the cost of renting temporary space and the cost of notifying service recipients and the public about your temporary location. Many nonprofit leaders feel a sense of assurance after purchasing insurance, but understanding policy language is key to ensuring that your coverage can truly instill confidence. Read your insurance policies thoroughly, involve your facility leaders, and work with your insurance broker or agent to determine whether there are gaps in coverage for damage to or destruction of your facilities, and for lost income and extra costs you might incur while restoring operations and facilities. Understand the incidents or types of property damage that are excluded from coverage, and if needed, consider extending your insurance coverage or developing a contingency plan for managing costs associated with such exposures.

HOW: A Facility-Focused Mindset

Follow through with these five fail-safes to fortify your approach to facility emergency preparedness.

1. **Step into someone else's shoes.** According to a brief article in a July 2017 Safe-Wise Consulting newsletter, ***Emergency Planning: Accommodating for People with Disabilities***, "when preparing or reviewing your emergency plans, it's important to involve people with disabilities in identifying needs and evaluating effective emergency management plans. Issues that have the greatest impact on people with disabilities include: notification, evacuation, areas of refuge, access to their mobility devices or service animals, and access to information. In planning for emergencies, you should consider the needs of people who use mobility aids such as wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes or crutches, or people who have limited stamina. Plans should also include people who use oxygen or respirators, people who are blind or who have low vision, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, people who have a cognitive disability, people with mental illness, and those with other types of disabilities. Additional support and information is available at [gov](#) and from the US Department of labor ([DOL](#))." Visit the [Safe-Wise Online Resource](#)

[Library](#) for more information about facility safety and emergency preparedness.

2. **Call in the cavalry.** Work with first responders to bolster your facility emergency response plans before an emergency occurs. When asked, local first responders such as fire departments, police, and emergency medics might offer guidance about appropriate evacuation and response strategies based on the quirks of your facilities. Any prior knowledge these first responders have about your facilities will help them manage logistics during a crisis. By working with these representatives, you can also inform your staff teams of what to expect from first responders if an emergency occurs. For example, supporters of your nonprofit might not know that first responders could bypass injured people if the priority is containing or minimizing a threat (e.g., active shooter, biological or chemical hazard, etc.). Clarifying these expectations will better enable every stakeholder group to think clearly and prioritize action steps during a crisis.
3. **Meet your neighbors.** Especially if your nonprofit operates in a densely populated area or an area with limited assembly points (in case of evacuation), consider contacting other local businesses to discuss appropriate emergency procedures should a major crisis affect your city or town. You don't want to compete with other nearby businesses for evacuation and assembly space during a life-threatening emergency. If possible, also keep a line of communication open with neighbors during an emergency, in case your evacuation and assembly needs change.
4. **Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.** In case a crisis occurs, always plan for facility downtime and getting your facilities back to their normal operating status. *During* a crisis, what will you do if heating, air conditioning, electricity, or other systems and utilities stop functioning? These considerations could be especially critical if stakeholders are asked to shelter in place for an extended time. Or, for example, at a healthcare or social services facility that houses client prescriptions that must be refrigerated, or operates life-saving or life-supporting medical equipment for clients. Also consider various contingency plans to allow your nonprofit team to maintain mission-critical operations and services if your facilities are inoperable *after* a crisis. For example, establish a practical emergency telecommute plan for staff, and consider developing a reciprocal agreement with another organization to provide temporary office space and equipment. Develop a plan to ensure the continuity of mission-critical operations—regardless of the reason for disruption—and reflect on the steps that will be necessary to get your facilities and other programs/services back in operation. Business continuity planning helps determine which activities must be sustained without interruption, and also how to maintain mission-critical operations in the immediate wake of a crisis or emergency. A typical business continuity plan might outline a nonprofit's needs for workspace, equipment, technology, communications, vendors, and any other supports necessary to keep core programs and services available—even if the nonprofit's regular facilities are inaccessible or destroyed. Though planning for worst-case scenarios feels like the dark side of risk management, your team can benefit from anticipating various scenarios in which facilities are unusable, when a Plan B or Plan C must be adopted. Consider multiple possibilities for facility breakdowns and develop Plan B and Plan C in advance.
5. **Communicate constantly.** *Constantly* might be an exaggeration, but effective communication of emergency plans and response procedures is essential to emergency preparedness. Messaging about emergency response should be clear, repeated often, and instill a sense of urgency and significance. Similarly, thorough documentation during and after an emergency will enable your team to reflect effectively and better prepare for the next crisis. One easy but effective communication tip is to provide every staff member and volunteer with a personal reminder of initial emergency response steps. For example, a wallet-sized card or graphic could be attached to employee badges, added to work and personal cellphones, or kept at the desk of every employee in the facility. The card might include a basic map of the building with an easy-to-read evacuation route, plus basic protocols for reporting an emergency:
 - Stay calm and take a moment to assess the situation.
 - Call 911 if anyone is hurt or if the situation is serious. If you are not sure, call 911 just to be safe!
 - Start ABC Nonprofit's emergency response procedure by: _____ (e.g., triggering the emergency notification system, calling the emergency response team, etc.).
 - If you are told to evacuate or you believe evacuation is necessary, follow the evacuation route on the back of this card. Go to our assembly point _____. Watch out for hazards as you evacuate.

Facilities are literally the roof over your nonprofit's head. Proactive planning for facility emergencies will significantly benefit your mission whenever disaster strikes. When planning for facility emergencies, don't forget that *agility* refers to the ability to change direction quickly. To achieve true facility agility, always be willing to reflect on and revamp your approach to facility emergency preparedness. Take the time to learn from each emergency you experience, and you will fortify not only your facilities, but your nonprofit's mission.

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Resources:

- OSHA Emergency Exit Routes Factsheet, <http://safe-wise.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/emergency-exit-routes-factsheet.pdf>
- *Business Interruption Insurance: 8 Terms to Help You Understand What is Covered*, marsh.com/us/insights/research/business-insurance.html
- *Covering Losses with Business Interruption Insurance*, iii.org/article/covering-losses-with-business-interruption-insurance