

Emergency Evacuation Strategies

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications, Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

Fires, explosions, chemical releases, violence or biological releases pose a threat to everyone in your organization's facilities. One way to ensure the safety of all affected populations and reduce the risk to your organization is to have an evacuation plan. The beauty of this strategy is that even the smallest organization operating with meager resources can afford to develop and implement an evacuation plan. The downside is you can't afford not to implement it. One of the most devastating losses to an organization is the loss of human life. Not only is it emotionally depleting, it can involve adverse publicity, large settlements, loss of organizational leadership, and the inability to deliver programs or services. Thus, your emergency evacuation plan can make life-or-death differences for your staff, volunteers, visitors, vendors and program participants. It could also mean life or death for your mission.

Safe Passage

The goal of all evacuation plans is to provide safe passage from the building for all people. Try to establish a single route — no matter what the threat — to make it easy for people to remember and follow. As you plot the evacuation route, you'll want to take into account and avoid passing by or through areas where additional risks lurk: janitorial/housekeeping supply closets, boiler and machinery rooms, chemical storage areas, fuel supplies, chemistry or art labs, and large expanses of glass (windows and skylights). Since elevators and escalators (which can fail and cause additional injuries) are to be avoided, the route will have to use stairways, fire escapes and/or windows, possibly with escape ladders.

Nose Count

The evacuation isn't complete until everyone is accounted for, thus you'll need to designate a rendezvous point far enough from your facility to keep people out of harm's way. Perhaps pick a place across the street and down the block, rather than choosing the driveway in front of the building where emergency vehicles or debris and smoke could threaten folks once they're out of the building. Consider contacting your local fire department for advice on a suitable spot to convene employees following an evacuation. In a small organization, it will be easier to verify that everyone's assembled or who is missing. In a large operation, or an organization with many programs and/or sites, it will be more efficient to divide and conquer. Program or department heads can be assigned responsibility for verifying the whereabouts of the people in their charge. In addition to employees, volunteers and program participants, these leaders most likely will be aware of visitors, vendors, board members, reporters and others interacting with their department or program who were in the building at the time the emergency evacuation was declared. Once you've established if anyone's missing, inform emergency crews about the results of your headcount and allow them to take over the search from the person's last known location within the facility. In general, no one should return to the building until the emergency professionals (fire, police, EMT, Hazmat team) have given permission indicating that the threat has passed and it's safe to return to the building.

Responsibilities

In general the responsibilities for developing the plan and carrying it out fall as follows:

Organization Responsibilities

- Develop an emergency evacuation plan (include accommodations and assistance for those with mobility problems). Educate staff (paid and volunteer) about evacuation procedures, policies and routes. Run evacuation drills that include staff and program participants. Train specific personnel in appropriate use of extinguishers (Note: consult with your local fire department about this issue. Some departments strongly advise against training staff to use extinguishers as it results in a deviation from the evacuation plan. Instead of leaving the building as expected, staff remain to “fight the fire” because they believe they have been trained to do so.)
- Post a map on each floor of each facility showing the specific exit route, and the location of stairways, fire alarms and extinguishers.

Staff Responsibilities

- Know the layout of the building in which you work. Know the location of fire alarms, fire extinguishers and exits. Know how to test doors for safe passage prior to opening. Know where the staircases are and where they exit on the grounds. Know the location of the designated gathering point. Know the emergency phone numbers for fire, police, and EMTs.
- Know and fulfill your specific assignment(s).

Everyone’s Responsibilities

- Take action when the emergency announcement (alarm, intercom announcement) is made. Stop what you’re doing and move quickly to an exit. Congregate at the predetermined gathering point. Note mentally who is missing from your immediate group and report this to the person(s) in charge.
- Wait at the gathering point until you are cleared to return to the building or are sent home for the day.

Sample Plan

The following sample is written as a response to a fire. Some tweaking will be required to accommodate special considerations for physically or mentally impaired individuals, for an explosion or bomb threat, a chemical release or spill, a biohazard exposure, or an incident of violence on your premises. An evacuation plan for each special accommodation could be developed and filed in your organization’s Crisis Management Manual.

SAMPLE Fire Evacuation Plan

Action to take:

1. When alarm sounds, everyone leave the building.
 - a. Use stairways unless smoke-filled. Don’t use elevators or escalators. Turn off computer. Turn off lights; close doors and windows as you leave. Don’t lock them.
 - b. Cross Main Street at the corner with the light and gather in front of the EF&G Building — the designated gathering point.
2. If the alarm is false, the ringing will stop, which indicates that people may re-enter the building. If the alarm continues to sound, everyone should continue to exit the building and go to the designated gathering point and wait for the fire trucks to arrive.
3. If there is a fire and the fire department hasn’t arrived, call the fire department (from a phone outside the building, and report the location of the fire (street address and site within the building, if possible). Everyone remain outside the building.
4. (Only use a fire extinguisher if you’re trained to use it and the fire is small. Do this only after the alarm is sounding.)
5. Fire department personnel will determine how to manage utilities.
6. Wait for the fire department to give the OK before anyone re-enters the building.

You can also translate this into a quick checklist that can be posted in key spots throughout the building.

Fire Alarm sounds.

Shut off computer.

Turn off lights.

Close windows. Don't lock.

Guide any program participant, and assist staff, if appropriate.

Close doors behind you. Don't lock.

Follow escape route.

Meet at ____ building.

Make certain everyone's accounted for.

Special Considerations

Accommodations for Physically or Mentally Impaired Individuals

National Fire Protection 101 Life Safety Code, The Americans with Disabilities Act, and American National Standard A227.1 include standards that relate to permanently or temporarily impaired people. In a nutshell, these include knowing where these people are located throughout the day or evening. Physically impaired individuals should go to a predetermined "safe area" — an enclosed stairwell or a room just off the hallway or corridor, and wait for assistance. In the room, they should close the door; and drape a piece of clothing across or out the window to signal they are waiting for help.

Chemical Release or Spill

Chemical agents are poisonous gases, liquids or solids that cause serious injuries or death. Treatment varies depending on the type of agent, amount of agent used and the length of exposure. Consult your local fire department for advice on responding to these hazards.

Biological Agents Release

Biological agents are organisms or toxins that produce illness in people. Unless an informant or terrorist alerts authorities to an attack, it's almost impossible to know the attack has occurred. Victims require immediate attention of professional medical personnel.

Violence

When the building is threatened with impending attack, there may be enough time to evacuate the building safely. If not, or if the attack is the first notification of an emergency, people may have to wait until they identify where the gunman is before they evacuate. Another solution is the lockdown, which has been used in schools since the 1999 Columbine shootings. Teachers keep students secured in classrooms with shades drawn. Work with your local police and fire departments to determine the best way to respond to an act of violence and write your instructions accordingly.

Explosions

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, if items are falling, get under a sturdy table or desk. If there's a fire:

- Stay low to the floor and exit the building as quickly as possible.
- Cover nose and mouth with a wet cloth.
- Use the palm of your hand and forearm to feel the lower, middle and upper parts of a closed door. If it isn't hot, brace yourself against the door and open it slowly. If it's hot to the touch, don't open the door; find an alternate escape route.
- Heavy smoke and poisonous gases collect first along the ceiling. Stay below the smoke at all times.

More Information

Read our book on crisis management: [*Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving Crisis in a Nonprofit*](#).

Explore the [Workplace Safety Toolkit](#).