

Safety Cop



Have Evacuation Plan Ready

Now is a prudent time to take another look at your emergency evacuation procedures. Building evacuations are the most visible part of your organization's preparedness and disaster plan. The keys to successful evacuation — and survival — are establishing safe, effective egress routes; communicating them to all employees; and holding practice drills to get occupants out quickly and calmly. Life safety is the prime consideration.

Egress routes should provide the most direct way out, by passing hazardous areas whenever possible. These routes should be properly lit and wide enough to accommodate the number of persons expected to use them. Exits must be clearly marked and unobstructed (panic exit devices and alarm systems eliminate the need to double-lock critical fire exits). Have evacuation routes evaluated by someone outside your organization.

The evacuation plan must address occupants who may not be familiar with floor plans. Escape route diagrams (with a *you are here* legend) placed at strategic points can show hallways and exits; personnel designated as searchers and wardens should guide visitors and clients outside. Similarly, emergency personnel should be assigned to assist the disabled, and non-English speakers who may not understand warning signals or announcements.

Warning bells or signals must be audible over any background noise; add strobe lights when sound alone is insufficient, and also to alert the deaf or hearing-impaired. Signage and emergency lighting, required by many building codes, provide direction and illumination to guide occupants toward exits even in smoke conditions. These systems are usually run on battery backup when power fails, and should be tested regularly.

Conduct practice drills regularly. Management and workers should not feel that drills are unnecessary or inconvenient. Experience has shown their value in getting occupants out alive during disasters.

According to a published report, casualties at the World Trade Center may indicate shortcomings and strengths in how workers were trained to respond to emergencies. Casualty rates reportedly vary widely among companies below floors that took direct hits from the hijacked airliners. According to fire safety experts, the survival rates may correlate to the level of evacuation training and practice received by workers in the buildings.

Obtaining an accurate account of personnel after an evacuation is necessary, but it requires forethought. Designate specific safe gathering areas for personnel to report to after an evacuation. Once outside, a coordinator should perform a head count. Those missing but known to have been inside should be reported to the coordinator. No one should go back inside to search without proper authorization. Visitors such as contractors, suppliers and clients must also be accounted for. Medical attention or first aid may be required by those evacuated. These factors should be provided for in advance of need.

OSHA requires most businesses with 10 or more employees to have a written emergency plan. While writing, revising and promulgating your evacuation plan seems like a daunting task, it may be easier by involving employees and managers at all levels.

Evacuation planning is but one part of your entire disaster response. Once life safety has been fully addressed, other issues such as business continuity and organizational survival require a formalized strategy. Assistance is available from a number of sources, including companies who specialize in recovery services.

A 67- page booklet, *Emergency Management Guide For Business And Industry*, is available in from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's website. Visit the following address – <http://home.fema.gov/pdf/library/bizindst.pdf> – for a copy in Adobe Acrobat format.

Safety & Risk Management

