Safety Cop

Make Sure You're Never Left in the Dark

As the multi-state blackout during the summer of 2003 proved, emergency readiness is not just for natural disasters or terrorism; it is needed for infrastructure failures such as power outages. The investigation into the cause of the blackout is over, but you can avoid the blame game in your workplace by preparing to cope with a power failure.

PLAN LIKE A PRO

Review your emergency response plan for the following:

— Does it cover evacuating your premises safely during a power failure?

— How will workers shut down work in progress, and electrical, hydraulic and pneumatic equipment?

— Does your plan include guiding customers or clients safely to the street, or providing a waiting area where they can listen for accurate news about the situation and decide what to do next?

— After ensuring a safe exit, how can you assist the evacuees who can't get home (very common in urban areas where many workers commute by railroad)?

Preparation for power outages requires planning for the ability to sustain workers (and possibly customers) while there is no power, or no practical way to get home. During a blackout some persons may need or want to stay put for a while. Hotel guests sleeping on sidewalks and workers staying over in building lobbies were common sights during the 2003 blackout.

Ideally, if your premises remain open, safety should be assured for the public and your workers at all times. This means adequate emergency lighting and ventilation, working telephones and radios, and backup power for pumps if required for fresh water and toilets.

SAFE EXITS & LIGHTING

Plan to get everyone out of a darkened building safely by maintaining clear, unobstructed exits at all times. This is critically important, especially if emergency lighting fails or is inadequate. Boxes or idle machines stored in a passageway can cause serious injuries as occupants navigate their way through dark halls and stairs.

Painted on stairways, edge and landing markings can help guide workers safely under less-than-ideal lighting conditions. Required hand and side rails on stairs and around floor openings should be secured in place.

Test battery-operated emergency lighting and exit signs on a regular schedule. Workers in all areas should have an unobstructed view of directional exit signs to guide them toward exit doors. Flashlights should be kept in good working order, and easily accessible to super visors, safety team members, everyone responsible for conducting evacuations.

Designate searchers in advance to check restrooms, storage areas, and other lightless rooms. These safety team members should report to their posts immediately when a blackout occurs.

Each employee should consider keeping an inexpensive flashlight in his or her work area. Never allow workers to light candles during a blackout; the risk of fire is too great.

STANDBY POWER

Some businesses have generators that provide backup power. Many precautions are required for their safe use. Trained, responsible employees can run professionally installed and maintained units fairly easily.

Portable generators, however, can cause carbon monoxide poisoning, fire, electrocution and equipment damage if not properly used. They must be run outdoors, with equipment connected to the electrical outlets on the generator units.

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Public utilities caution against back feeding, i.e. trying to power an electrical circuit or system by plugging the generator's output into the building's wiring. (This can only be done with a professionally installed cutover switch.)

Back feeding can damage electrical equipment or the power grid itself. Fuel for the generator must be safely stored when not needed

Some employees may need to remain on premises to safely shut down machines or processes; provisions for them, such as task lighting, drinking water, food, toilet facilities and safe access to all required areas has to be in place permanently.

An important part of their task will be to shut down all machines that could restart when power returns, and stop the flow of chemicals used in the processes halted by the blackout. Similarly, gas flames, heating and cooling systems, sump pumps, water-pressure pumps and the like should be checked.

Washrooms on lower floors, where water pres sure is adequate, can be used, but electronically operated faucets and toilets won't work unless they are battery powered. Plan in advance which restrooms can be used during a blackout, and have adequate handheld or permanent emergency lighting available.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Communications between your emergency response team members can be hampered by lack of electric power. Cordless phones won't work, so have some dependable, old-fashioned telephones available. Battery-operated, two-way radios may work, but cell phones are notoriously unreliable during an outage.

Check with your elevator service company about emergency telephones in each lift. Can trapped passengers talk to a starter, guard or other responsible party?

Some newer elevators are equipped with systems that will bring the car to the next available floor and open the doors when power is lost. Worth considering: a generator that powers a designated elevator for evacuating injured or disabled workers from upper floors.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Consider a buddy system for returning home by pairing employees who live near each other. Keep maps for alternate travel plans and routes in a central location.

Finally, delegate responsibility for supervising your facility if it's kept open, or for locking up if it will be closed. Have keys for electronically locked areas, since these types of locks may not operate during blackouts. Some locks are fail-safe — they will open when power is lost; others are fail-secure, which will stay locked.

Those responsible for closing or patrolling the workplace should know how to operate electrically controlled gates and garage doors manually.

Having your response team trained, equipped and ready for blackouts will help your employees and customers get out safely, get home with confidence, and avoid the nasty surprises that accompany power outages.