

Creating an Evacuation Plan – planning for an emergency

(Brotherhood Mutual Insurance)

You rarely expect an emergency to affect your congregation, but realistically, a situation can happen at any time. Whether it is a natural disaster or man-made situation, you should be prepared with a plan of action, outlined and practiced ahead of time.

The need for an evacuation plan:

As part of emergency and disaster preparedness plans, your facility should have an evacuation plan. You should also have a shelter in place plan. The reasons for evacuation vary greatly, from fire to severe weather, violence to hazardous materials or gas leaks.

Since it is impossible to anticipate exactly what type of emergency your ministry may face, your evacuation plan should be simple enough to carry out quickly, specific enough to be helpful, and versatile enough to play to a variety of situations.

Putting your plan together:

Start by evaluating your equipment and systems to determine if you have sufficient warning and communications tools. Identify those items in your plan. Some equipment and systems to consider include:

- Detectors such as smoke alarms, Carbon monoxide alarms, weather radio, etc.
- Warning systems or signals throughout the facility that include both audible alarms and flashing lights
- Communications tools including overhead public address system and/or walkie-talkies in the classrooms and other key areas
- Flashlights in classrooms and other key areas
- Evacuation maps posted visibly throughout the facility and specific to each area

Next identify essential roles and how these roles can be filled regardless of who is in the facility at the time of the event. The rules to consider include:

- Who will monitor the situation: weather radio, news, television, social media, etc.
- Who has the authority to order an evacuation?
- Who will activate the warning systems and signals (alarms, overhead announcements, messages by walkie-talkie, etc.)?
- Who is in charge of leading groups from different areas of the building, and what happens when these individuals are not available or not present?

- How will you know who is in your building at any given time, and how will you account for everyone, in order to ensure everyone has moved to safety?
- Who will do headcounts before and after evacuation?
- Are there critical systems that need to be shut down? If so, who can or will be responsible?
- Who will contact and talk to emergency services authorities and respond to the media?
- Who has the authority to call the “all clear”?

Along with evaluating your equipment, systems, and rolls, you will need to create evacuation maps and identify emergency exits, routes, and destinations. These maps include:

- Create maps that included the building and grounds, and post these throughout the facility. Ensure that emergency exits and routes, at least two per area, are clearly marked.
- Designated areas for people to assemble both inside and outside, depending on the reason for the evacuation. Outdoor gathering areas should be at least 150 feet away from the building.
- Remember that not all evacuations will mean sending people outside. In certain instances, it is safer to remain inside, to shelter in place. For instance, during a tornado, you will want people to assemble in an internal room, a room with a lot of walls, and away from exterior windows.
- Designating specific destination locations will enable you to account for people, and help you know who might be missing.

Plain language during an emergency:

During an emergency, it is important to let people know what is happening. Leadership will need to know the situation so they can properly direct others. In general, people need to know where to go and what to do.

FEMA recommends the use of plain language during an emergency, as opposed to code words like condition white or code orange. People who do not use those codes every day will not know what they mean, nor will guests or temporary employees. Use plain, clear simple language.

Other considerations:

Keep in mind that there may be people with special needs in your facility at the time of an emergency. Special needs could include anything from hearing or visual impairment to physical limitations, and even those who do not speak English.

How will your warning systems (sound, light, overhead communication) and evacuation maps and routes affect them? How will your plan be affected when members of leadership are not in the building? Will those who are in the building know what to do and where to go?

Review and practice:

It's a good idea to have a trained, emergency services professional review your plan and help identify weaknesses, suggest improvements, and ensure compliance. Typically, your local police, fire, EMS

organizations will help review your plan at no charge.

Once you have developed a plan, you should review, practice, and update it with your staff and volunteers at least annually. The training and practice should include:

- Include a review of the plan and your orientation of all new staff members and volunteers. Be sure everyone knows how to use the various detection systems, alarms, and communications tools.
- Do tabletop and walk through exercises with staff at least once a year.
- Couple evacuation training and retraining with other efforts, such as a half-day child care training session.
- Involve your congregation. Although the thought of having an evacuation drill on Sunday morning might seem daunting, it would actually be a good test of your systems, equipment, plan, and staff.
- Consider holding a drill either after service or between services. Consider holding both internal and external evacuation. You might alternate these drills every six months. Use the exercise as a way to encourage your members to develop their own evacuation plans for their homes.
- Update your plan at least once a year, and after each exercise or drill, based on what you learn. Communicate updates to staff and volunteers

Beyond the evacuation plan:

The evacuation plan is just one element in your emergency tool kit. Yet it is an essential one. Even the best evacuation plan has limitations. You will need additional emergency and disaster preparedness plans to actually carry you through various situations.

See www.ready.gov for more information and tips.