



PREPARING YOUR PRACTICE FOR A DISASTER



As a physician in Florida, you need to have an emergency plan in place to deal with crises, such as natural disasters. Hurricane season runs June 1 through November 30. It is critical that your office is prepared before a storm arrives.

Be Prepared: Develop a Disaster Plan

Developing a disaster plan during a calm time, when there is no threat, is essential for the health of your practice. Conduct a risk assessment of all potential emergencies; include procedures on emergency escapes, how to account for all employees and visitors, and where to report emergencies to local authorities. Practice the plan with your office staff.

Here are some key areas to consider as you build your plan:

Alternate location — Select an emergency office location in advance. Consider identifying an alternate site in a neighboring community where you can set up emergency operations, if needed.

- Even if you cannot be completely operational, plan for at minimum, a receptionist and basic supplies and equipment to manage emergency cases.

- Know your local hospital's disaster plan and where you will fit in. Know your area's evacuation routes, shelters and emergency numbers, including FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Shelter — Have a plan of where to find shelter.

- Do you work in an office building, hospital, skyscraper, or nursing home? Go directly to an enclosed, windowless area in the center of the building away from the glass.
- Interior stairwells are usually good places to take shelter.

Insurance coverage — Ensure that you have adequate insurance coverage for disasters.

- Check your policies to make sure you have business interruption coverage in a sufficient amount and understand all provisions surrounding it.
- Have adequate replacement insurance covering fire, flooding and catastrophic damage from natural disasters.
- Have your insurance agent's numbers handy.
- Inventory your practice's equipment for insurance purposes.

Employee communication — Communicate to staff as soon as possible about a possible office closure.

- If payday is approaching, include information on how direct deposit and live paychecks will be handled. Consider advance transmission, if a storm is on the way. Ensure your payroll processing organization has off site data sites. Plan for payroll continuity.
- If possible, include in staff communications: evacuation details, storm surge zones, predicted strength, and track the storm.
- Collect staff evacuation information.
- Keep a list (off site) of employees home phone numbers, cell phone numbers, e-mails, etc. Indicate on the list who has text message capabilities. Text messaging is more reliable in disaster situations.
- Update the list regularly as contact data change frequently.
- Include a likely contact location for each employee and a phone number for someone else who could serve as an alternate contact.

Patient communication — Be proactive in educating your patients on the proper way to contact your office in the face of a disaster.

- Post an alternate telephone number and e-mail address on your Web site and patient literature.
- Consider using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), which is a phone service that uses broadband Internet connectivity, as it is more likely to stay in service in the face of a natural disaster.
- Many answering services are down during a major disaster.
- During disaster events, 2-1-1 Northeast Florida United Way HELPLINE is activated by local and state emergency management officials to disseminate official information on shelter availability, evacuation routes, road closures and other important information.

Special needs patients — Talk to your special needs patients about making a disaster plan for themselves. Include the following:

- Special needs patients can pre-register for evacuation transportation by calling the 2-1-1 Northeast Florida United Way HELPLINE. A trained specialist will take personal contact information and ask additional questions about any special medical needs that may affect the type of transportation needed. The Special Transportation Registry is open year round for registration. Specialists have access to language interpreters in more than 150 languages.
- The 2-1-1 Northeast Florida United Way HELPLINE can assist with many daily needs before, during and after a disaster.
- Remind patients to wear medical alert tags or bracelets to identify their disability.
- Tell patients to locate more than one facility if they are dependent on a dialysis machine or other life-sustaining equipment or treatment.
- Have patients compile a list of physicians, relatives or friends who should be notified if they are hurt and ask them to provide the list to others.
- Have patients compile a medical information list that contains the names and numbers of physicians, medications, dosage instructions, and any existing conditions. Patients should make note of their adaptive equipment, allergies and any communication difficulties they have.
- Tell patients to keep their medical insurance and/or Medicare cards handy.

Develop a Disaster Plan *continued*

- Tell patients to keep specialized items ready, including extra wheelchair batteries, extra hearing aid batteries, oxygen, catheters, medication, prescriptions, food for service animals, etc.
- Remind them to make provisions for medications that require refrigeration.
- Patients with dementia should be registered in the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return Program at 1-888-572-8566.

Information systems — Take steps to protect your EMR, billing and financial data.

- Make sure that your data is backed up regularly, either to media or to an off-site server.
- Investigate automated back up services and weigh the pros and cons of signing on with one against making your own back up.
- If you do your own back up, remove it from the office each night to a secure location.
- Have a plan for restoring your data, once your office is operational again or you have set up an alternate location.

Documentation — If your patient charts are only on paper, devise a plan for protecting your patient records and other paper-based information as best as possible.

Generator support — Consider having a generator handy to help ensure your vaccines are safe and to help your office continue to operate. Also, consider moving vaccines to a location (e.g., hospital) that has generator power.

Vendor support — Set up a protocol for contacting your tech support and suppliers in the event of a wide spread disaster.

- Keep a list (off site) of all key vendors, which includes addresses, telephone numbers and websites.
- Update the list regularly. This kind of information can become obsolete quickly.
- In the event you need to establish operations at an alternate site, find out what emergency services your vendors provide and how to contact them.

Be Prepared: Secure Your Practice



When you hear you are in a hurricane's path, you should begin moving computers and delicate equipment to secure windowless places off the floor.

- Require all employees to back up computers.
- Remove office computer back up to an off site secure location.
- Disconnect computer power. Move computers to a secure windowless location. Tape employee's name to his/her equipment.
- Know how to turn off electricity, water and gas. Have appropriate tools. Remember, you will need a professional to turn back on your gas.
- Cover file cabinets with plastic sheets and make sure desk surfaces are empty, in case windows are broken.
- Bring outdoor furniture inside. These can become flying debris in strong winds.
- Stay out of elevators during disasters. You could become trapped if power is lost.
- Keep windows closed to avoid debris. It is a myth that you should open two windows to avoid a negative pressure build up.
- Have a similar plan for your home, family and pets.
- Make sure DCMS has your current e-mail so you can receive emergency notices from DCMS, which are helpful before, during and after disasters.

Volunteering: Before, During & After the Storm

Physician volunteers are critical in the event of a natural disaster. Many programs require training and certification prior to a storm arriving so now is the time to step up and volunteer!

- **Medical Reserve Corps:** The mission of the Florida Medical Reserve Corps Network Program is to augment local community health and medical services staff with pre-identified, trained and credentialed MRC volunteers. Contact BPRCHDPreparedness@flhealth.gov for additional information.
- **Volunteer Florida:** Volunteer Florida is the state's leading agency for volunteers and donations before, during, and after disasters. Call 1-800-FL-HELP-1 for volunteer information.
- **Red Cross:** Red Cross volunteers and staff work to deliver vital services – from providing relief and support to those in crisis, to helping you be prepared to respond in emergencies.

Information for Patients

- **Special Needs Patients:** Patients with special needs should sign up for the Florida Division of Emergency Management's Special Needs Registry. This allows emergency responders to provide appropriate assistance during a disaster. They can register at snr.floridadisaster.org.
- **United Way's 2-1-1 Helpline:** 2-1-1 connects Northeast Florida callers to health, social and human services and more than 4,000 community programs. This help resource is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and provides information to callers in Duval, Clay, Nassau, St. Johns, Baker, Putnam, Columbia, Suwanee and Hamilton counties. Dial (904) 632-0600 to access a United Way 2-1-1 call center specialist.
- **Prescription Information:** All health insurers, managed care organizations and other health entities must allow for early prescription refills in the event that the Governor issues an Executive Order declaring a State of Emergency or when a county Emergency Operations Center is activated. This mandate remains in effect until the Governor's Executive Order is rescinded or expires.

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