

Hurricane Helpers

Chris Munkvold

How an emergency response partner can help you prepare for the upcoming season

Spring is here, and hurricane season is approaching yet again.

In 2017, we saw devastation and destruction brought on by three separate hurricane events on the Gulf Coast and in the Caribbean. Each of these events brought different challenges as every storm impacted each region differently. From the severe flooding of Hurricane Harvey to the wind damage caused by Irma and Maria, each required different preparation and problem-solving.

But as each hurricane is different, every facility should have a preparedness plan for each event.

PARTNER UP

An effective plan starts with understanding when decisions need to be made to prepare each location for an impending hurricane event. An emergency response partner is a great resource to help build a plan and prepare for the upcoming season.

The following are tips for establishing your emergency response plan:

IDENTIFY AT-RISK LOCATIONS

The best plan always starts with identifying the stores that may be located in high-impact zones, such as storm-surge locations, historically flood-prone areas and coastal regions. Each location should have an emergency communication plan to keep employees safe and to establish when to evacuate in the event of an emergency. You should also communicate your list of at-risk stores to your emergency response provider. This will make it easy for your provider to communicate to the locations that may be in the path of a hurricane up to a week or more in advance.

PLAN FOR TEMPORARY POWER

Determine if you are likely to need temporary power. If so, reserving generators and cables and prearranging daily refueling are a must. As a rule, you will want to reserve generators and cabling five to seven days prior to a landfall event. As an example, during Harvey and Irma, generators were being deployed from as far as Seattle. Most generators in the country were reserved or rented a couple of days before landfall, so procuring a generator after landfall was only possible if others canceled their reservations or rentals. The closer a storm gets to making landfall, the harder it becomes to procure temporary power. In order to reserve the proper-sized generator and cables, know how many volts and amps you will need to operate your business. This will determine the size of the generator and how much cabling you'll need.

TRACK THE STORM

It is critical to receive at least daily updates from a trusted source to track the path and intensity of a storm system. A 50-mile shift in the storm's track can have a major impact on which of your locations are impacted. There are several options available to obtain this information. Emergency response vendors typically subscribe to a national weather service that provides updates at least once a day during severe weather events. Many clients track this information internally or have their own weather service that provides them with daily updates. The more information you are receiving during these events, the better.

BOARD AND SANDBAG

Deciding on when and if to board up and sand bag your facility is difficult. First, determine if your facility has hurricane glass and/or shutters. If so, performing a board up may be unnecessary. Hurricane glass is code in a large section of the coastal communities, but a lot of restaurants do not have this information readily available. As a rule, if a third party performs board ups and installs sandbags, inform them which locations need to be secured at least three days prior to a landfall event. Sourcing plywood, sandbags and labor within 48 hours of a storm making landfall is difficult, and you risk not getting all your requested facilities secured.

PROTECT ROOF-TOP UNITS (RTUs)

During severe weather, an RTU can cause extensive damage if it is blown off the curbing. Not only does water have a clear path to enter your building, causing potential damage and cleanup, the roof membrane can become damaged from the RTU tumbling on the roof. An inexpensive and proactive solution is to fasten the RTUs to the curbs in high-risk locations.

COMPLETE POST-EVENT INSPECTIONS

Once a hurricane has made landfall and access has been re-established to your facility, perform a post-event inspection prior to re-opening the business. The inspection can be performed by in-house personnel or by a third party. Develop a checklist ahead of an event to identify any hazardous building conditions or general damage to the property.

PERFORM RESTORATION

If your building is adversely impacted during an event and restoration services are needed, having a firm under contract in advance of an event is critical to ensuring a timely and cost-effective response. An emergency response vendor should be under contract prior to an event and committed to restoring your properties and starting work as soon as authorities grant safe access to the area.

The cost of any of the above services can vary widely based on the size of your building, the number of entry points (windows and doors), the intensity of the storm and your timing. In the event that one of your properties is damaged by a severe weather event, your emergency response partner will provide you with a rate sheet that can be negotiated prior to the start of the hurricane season to allow you to keep costs in line with your expectations.

Being prepared for a hurricane with a plan of action and an emergency response partner provides facility managers with more accurate timelines, cost savings and peace of mind. When hurricane season begins, expect the best, but plan for the worst. By developing a sound and proactive plan by region, you will give yourselves the best chance to have your restaurants back in business and minimize the potential for risk, making the hurricane season a safe and manageable one.

Chris Munkvold is the Senior Vice President of Watterson, a provider of emergency response services, facilities management and environmental services to commercial clients across the United States and Canada.