

Repairs & Maintenance

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BE PROACTIVE, NOT REACTIVE

4 steps to improving emergency planning at your facilities

For a restaurant owner, a worst-case disaster scenario involving fire or water damage can seem unthinkable—until it suddenly becomes a reality.

In the aftermath of a disaster, a quick response by a disaster recovery and restoration specialist can help minimize property damage, as well as inventory and business losses. According to FEMA, 40 to 60 percent of small businesses may never reopen following a disaster.

In order to prepare for the worst, restaurant owners need a quick and convenient emergency disaster plan that connects them with their vendors, necessary contacts and pertinent information when disaster strikes. Disasters can be unpredictable and often strike without warning. That is why an emergency action plan is invaluable; in the midst of the confusion and panic that often surround a disaster, plan can help a restaurant owner or manager remain calm and regain clarity.

When contemplating emergency preparations, remember there are four key stages for emergency planning: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

MITIGATION

In this stage, you should conduct research to reduce future severity of an event. Look at your locations and ask, "What are our restaurants' greatest threats?" Consider fires, tornadoes, floods and more. Do you have locations in "tornado alley," that are at risk for hurricane damage or subject to severe freezing temperatures? Think outside the box of possibilities, without become a doomsday prepper. Once you have identified threats, then it's time to gather information.

An emergency action plan needs to contain critical property information that can help speed up response time after a disaster occurs. When creating your plan, be sure to:

- Document prior loss history. Your plan should include a log of the facility's prior loss history, which can provide first responders and restoration vendors with historical information on the building's condition.
- Identify and label utility shut-off locations. Meanwhile, in your plan, be sure to incorporate thorough information on the facility's utilities, which can help responders fulfill emergency shut-off requests much faster.

- Prioritize your contacts. Finally, include contact information for key personnel, which enables you to more readily start the recovery process and get priority questions answered in a timely manner.

Another best practice for your emergency disaster plan is the use of photos for documenting things like utility shut-offs. While descriptions are helpful, a photo can quickly show team members what they are looking for. Every restaurant owner, facility manager and decision maker has specific items that are important to them. This needs to be reflected in each emergency disaster plan.

PREPAREDNESS

After identifying your potential liabilities, the preparedness stage is when you establish your response activities.

First, think about your company's footprint. Are you national, regional or a single location? Take this into consideration when establishing all activities, such as communication between time zones. It's also important when selecting your emergency vendors. Your emergency disaster plan's key contacts will need to be able to mobilize at a moment's notice. If you're national, you will want a similar footprint with your vendors; that way, you're not waiting too long for help to arrive. Remember, speed is key!

RESPONSE

This is your practice stage. Once the preparedness stage is complete, the restaurants' staff and key contacts should conduct practice drills to make sure everyone understands the process.

Always have clear evacuation routes in your emergency action plan. Create fire evacuation routes, identify storm shelters and consider active shooter plans. While this last one is fresh on everyone's minds, your local law enforcement agencies might be able to provide you with additional information or provide training at your facility. Every disaster is different and unpredictable, so you must focus on a safe and quick execution. Practice makes perfect!

Evacuations are not the only thing you should practice. Remember, speed is key for any emergency disaster event. The quicker you can access necessary information and communicate, the faster you can seek help in restoring your building. The faster you respond to any size disaster, the less likely you'll be to incur secondary damage, reducing your downtime and overall costs. It's all about getting your restaurant operational again.

Also consider where you could be when a disaster strikes. Your disaster plan will be a useless document if it's located in the center of your destroyed facility. Plan a distribution chain for your disaster recovery plan among key contacts and various locations. Consider having a copy in your car, at home or anywhere that is easily accessible.

If you don't want to lug around a thick book or binder, go digital. The growing trend is to create a digital copy of your emergency disaster plan, which allows you to access the information, regardless of your location. It's all about helping the property owner evaluate their options, start their insurance request process and take the right steps to bring their property back to normal, pre-loss condition.

RECOVERY

During this stage, the facility is restored to pre-loss condition. This stage is when the insurance companies and qualified restoration vendors come in and provide their services.

The best way for the recovery to begin is for your team to remain proactive. This involves always keeping your emergency plan updated. People will come and go; updates will be made to the facility and utilities can change. This should be a dynamic document that changes with your business. If you don't keep it updated, you'll be several steps behind when disaster strikes.

Review your plan at least once a quarter, and walk through your facility verifying all information. When you review your action plans, also reach out to your emergency vendors. Simply touching base with them allows you to know if anything has changed on their end, enabling you to properly update your information.

4 KEYS TO REMEMBER

- Identify your facilities' greatest threats in order to reduce overall severity.
- Document all vital information, and establish clear communication activities.
- Practice, practice, practice! There is no "textbook" event, so expect the unexpected.
- Keep your plan updated and communicate all necessary information to your insurance company and emergency restoration vendors.

Nothing is worse than being unprepared in a time of need. Disasters will continue to happen, no matter how much you prepare. But what you can prepare for is how you will react in that situation. Having a plan in place gives you general direction and a small sense of comfort.

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