

DISASTER PLANNING

Make Emergency Preparedness and Response Part of Your Safety and Health Management Program

by Edwin G. Foulke, Jr.

Nobody knows when a disaster will strike—especially one that affects your employees, business, or you personally. Yet, the simple truth is that a disaster can strike anyone, anytime, and anywhere.

As we have seen, emergencies can result from natural or man-made causes, including hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, explosions, fires, toxic gas releases, chemical spills, radiological accidents, and, unfortunately, terrorism.

People are sometimes forced to evacuate their workplace without warning and when it is least expected. It is important for people to think clearly and logically in a crisis. That is why emergency preparedness is critically important.

You can protect yourself, those you work with, and your business, by expecting the unexpected and by developing a well-thought-out emergency action plan to guide you when immediate action becomes necessary. While OSHA does not require all establishments to have an emergency action plan, the agency certainly encourages all businesses to have one.

An emergency action plan outlines the actions employees should take to ensure their safety if a fire or other emergency situation occurs. Well developed emergency plans and proper employee training will result in fewer employee injuries during an emergency. Lack of planning may lead to a disorganized evacuation or emergency response and can result in greater confusion, injuries, and property damage.

For example, OSHA's Manhattan area office staff used their emergency action plan during the 2001 terrorist attacks to successfully evacuate their offices on the top floor of the World Trade Center's Building 6. Several OSHA staff members helped to evacuate a colleague who was temporarily wheelchair-bound. By following the prepared plan for evacuating someone in a wheelchair, they quickly implemented evacuation procedures that required them to use the freight elevator to the building's basement, into a parking garage, down some steps, and into another garage, where they escaped the building. A staff member later said that following their plan is probably what saved their lives—had they taken the extra time to walk

down eight floors, they may not have made it out of the building before it collapsed.

At a minimum, an emergency action plan should include the following:

- A preferred method for reporting fires and other emergencies;
- An evacuation policy and procedure;
- Emergency escape procedures and route assignments, such as floor plans, workplace maps, and safe or refuge areas;
- Names and contact information for all internal and external individuals and an explanation of their responsibilities under the emergency plan;
- Procedures for employees who perform critical plant operations or essential services;
- Rescue and medical duties for any employees designated to perform them; and
- Drills—Having a plan is a good start, but it must be practiced to become effective.

Your emergency action plan can be enhanced by designating an assembly location and procedures to account for all employees after an evacuation.

For more details on how to develop an effective emergency action plan, please visit www.osha.gov. OSHA also offers free, confidential professional advice through our Consultation program, where employers can learn about potential hazards at their worksites and how to improve their occupational safety and health management systems.

The path to a safer workplace begins with a commitment by employers to identify, assess, and learn about safety and health hazards. OSHA has free resources to help employees and employers implement safety and health management systems.

Every employee deserves to go home safely at the end of each work day. By working together, we can make great strides in making that a reality.

Edwin G. Foulke, Jr. is Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health. cr