

Responding to Workplace Emergencies

In the aftermath of the recent tornadoes that devastated several areas of Oklahoma, this may be an opportune time to review our emergency and disaster response preparedness at our institutions. The importance of an effective workplace emergency and disaster preparedness program cannot be over-emphasized. There are many benefits from such a program including reduced injuries and loss of life, a reduction in property damage, improved employee morale, and reduced insurance claims. Emergencies still occur in spite of efforts to prevent them. Consequently, proper planning for emergencies is necessary to minimize employee injury and property damage. In this newsletter we'll discuss the basic steps to handle emergencies in the workplace. These emergencies include natural disasters such as tornadoes and floods, fires, explosions, chemical spills, accidental releases of toxic gases, and bodily harm and trauma caused by workplace violence.

Planning

The effectiveness of response during emergencies depends on the amount of planning and training performed. Management must show its support for safety programs and the importance of emergency planning. Little can be done to promote a safe workplace if management is not truly interested in employee protection and in minimizing property loss. It is management's responsibility to see that a program is instituted and that it is frequently reviewed and updated. The input and support of all employees must be obtained to ensure an effective program. The emergency response plan should be developed locally and should be comprehensive enough to deal with all types of emergencies specific to that site. When emergency action plans are required by a particular OSHA standard the plan must be in writing. The plan must include, as a minimum, the following elements:

- (1) Emergency escape procedures and emergency escape route assignments,
- (2) Procedures to be followed by employees who remain to perform (or shut down) critical facility operations before the facility is evacuated,
- (3) Procedures to account for all employees after emergency evacuation has been completed,
- (4) Rescue and medical duties for those employees who may perform them,
- (5) The preferred means for reporting fires and other emergencies, and
- (6) Names or regular job titles of persons or departments to be contacted for further information or explanation of duties under the plan.

The emergency action plan should address all potential emergencies that can be expected in the workplace. It will be necessary to perform a hazard audit to determine toxic materials in the workplace, hazards, and potentially dangerous conditions. The institution must list in detail the procedures to be taken by those employees who must remain behind to care for essential facility operations until their evacuation becomes absolutely necessary. This may include monitoring plant power supplies, water supplies, and other essential services that cannot be shut down for every emergency alarm, and use of fire extinguishers.

For emergency evacuation, the use of floor plans or workplace maps that clearly show the emergency escape routes and safe or refuge areas should be included in the plan. All employees must be told what actions they are to take in emergency situations that may occur in the workplace, such as a designated meeting location after evacuation.

This plan must be reviewed with employees initially when the plan is developed, whenever the employee's responsibilities under the plan change, and whenever the plan is changed. A copy should be kept where employees can refer to it at convenient times. In fact, to go a step further, the college could provide the employees with a copy of the plan, particularly all new employees.

Chain of Command

An emergency response coordinator and a back-up coordinator must be designated. The coordinator may be responsible for facility-wide operations, public information and ensuring that outside aid is called in. A back-up coordinator ensures that a trained person is always available. Duties of the coordinator include:

- Determining what emergencies may occur and seeing that emergency procedures are developed to address them.
- Directing all emergency activities including evacuation of personnel.
- Ensuring that outside emergency services such as medical aid and local fire departments are called when necessary.
- Directing the shutdown of facility operations when necessary.

Communications

Effective emergency communication is vital. During a major emergency involving a fire or explosion it may be necessary to accomplish a complete evacuation. Normal services, such as electricity, water, and telephones, may be non-existent. Under these conditions, it may be necessary to have an alternate area to which employees can report or that can act as a focal point for incoming and outgoing calls. Since time is an essential element for adequate response, the person designated as being in charge should make this the alternate headquarters so that they can

be easily reached. The college must provide emergency alarms and ensure that employees know how to report emergencies. An updated list of key personnel and off-duty telephone numbers should be maintained. Emergency communications equipment such as amateur radio systems, public address systems, or portable radio units should be present for notifying employees of the emergency and for contacting local authorities such as law enforcement officials, the fire department, and private sector charitable groups.

A method of communication also is needed to alert employees to the evacuation or to take other action as required in the plan. Alarms must be audible or able to be seen by all personnel and have an auxiliary power supply in the event electricity is affected. The alarm must be distinctive and recognizable as a signal to evacuate the work area or perform actions designated under the emergency action plan. The college must explain to each employee the means for reporting emergencies, such as manual pull box alarms, public address systems, or telephones. Emergency telephone numbers should be posted on or near telephones, on employees' notice boards, or in other conspicuous locations. The warning plan should be in writing and management must be sure each employee knows what it means and what action is to be taken.

A system should be established for accounting for personnel once workers have been evacuated with a person in the control center responsible for notifying police or emergency response team members of persons believed missing.

Effective security procedures, such as cordoned off areas, can prevent unauthorized access and protect vital records and equipment. Duplicate records can be kept in off-site locations for essential accounting files, legal documents and lists of employees' relatives to be notified in case of emergency.

Every employee needs to know details of the emergency action plan, including evacuation plans, alarm systems, reporting procedures for personnel, shutdown procedures, and types of potential emergencies. Drills should be held at random intervals, at least annually, and include if possible, outside police and fire authorities.

Employees exposed to accidental chemical splashes, falling objects, flying particles, unknown atmospheres with inadequate oxygen or toxic gases, fires, live electrical wiring, or similar emergencies need personal protective equipment, including:

- Safety glasses, goggles, or face shields for eye protection.
- Hard hats and safety shoes
- Properly selected and fitted respirators
- Whole body coverings, gloves, hoods, and boots.
- Body protection for abnormal environmental conditions such as extreme temperatures.

Training

Training is important to the effectiveness of an emergency plan. Before implementing an emergency action plan, a sufficient number of persons must be trained to assist in the safe and orderly evacuation of employees. Training for each type of disaster response is necessary so that employees know what actions are required. All employees should be trained in the following:

1. Evacuation plans,
2. Alarm systems,
3. Reporting procedures for personnel,
4. Shutdown procedures, and
5. Types of potential emergencies.

These training programs must be provided as follows:

1. Initially when the plan is developed,
2. For all new employees,
3. When new equipment, materials, or processes are introduced,
4. When procedures have been updated or revised,
5. When exercises show that employee performance must be improved, and
6. At least annually.

As an employee of the State of Oklahoma, you **must** respond to emergency situations on your campus. Your actions may be as simple as calling 911 (or the local equivalent) for help, using a fire extinguisher to put out a small fire, or making sure that everyone in your office has evacuated after an alarm has sounded. Your institution's responsibility is *not* to train you in first aid or emergency care, but to train you in the proper procedures to follow when an emergency or disaster occurs.

Medical Assistance

In a major emergency, time is a critical factor in minimizing injuries. Institutions not near an infirmary, clinic, or hospital should have someone on-site trained in first aid, have medical personnel readily available for advice and consultation, and develop written emergency medical procedures. Giving emergency medical care is not normally a responsibility of a higher education institution. In particular, *your* obligation as an individual employee to an injured person extends only to obtaining the proper assistance, such as an ambulance or EMT. Only if you have been fully certified in first aid or emergency medical care, may you then give medical assistance to any injured person.

The institution must ensure the ready avail-ability of medical personnel for advice and consultation on matters of employees' health. This does not mean that health care must be provided, but rather, if health problems develop in the work-place, medical help will be available to resolve them.

It is essential that first aid supplies are available for emergency use. Sufficient ambulance service should be available to handle any emergency. This requires advance contact with ambulance services to ensure they become familiar with facility locations, access routes, and hospital locations.

If the fire alarm or tornado siren sounded right this very minute while you were reading this newsletter, what would you do? Is your institution prepared in the event of an emergency or disaster occurring that could have devastating and far-reaching effects?

Emergency Preparedness Checklist

1. ____ Does the college have an Emergency Preparedness Plan that addresses all potential emergencies that can be expected in the workplace?
2. ____ Is the Emergency Preparedness Plan reviewed and updated annually?
3. ____ Are all employees trained on emergency escape procedures and emergency escape route assignments?
4. ____ Are floor plans or workplace maps that clearly show the emergency escape routes and safe or refuge areas included in the plan?
5. ____ Are procedures in place to account for all employees after emergency evacuation has been completed?
6. ____ Are procedures established for employees who remain to perform (or shut down) critical plant operations before those operations are evacuated?
7. ____ Are the preferred means for reporting fires and other emergencies included in the plan?
8. ____ Has a hazard audit been performed to determine toxic materials in the workplace, hazards, and potentially dangerous conditions?
9. ____ Does the plan identify the names or regular job titles of persons or departments to be contacted for further information or explanation of duties under the plan?
10. ____ Does the plan identify rescue and medical duties for those employees who may perform them?
11. ____ Are emergency communications equipment available?

12. ____ Are emergency alarms audible or able to be seen by all personnel?

13. ____ Are first-aid supplies available for emergency use?