

Emergency Preparedness

A must-have for FMs

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RISK MANAGEMENT OCCUPANCY & HUMAN FACTORS



Managing an office building or commercial property comes with a critical responsibility: ensuring the safety of tenants and continuity of operations during emergencies. A well-crafted emergency preparedness plan can mean the difference between chaos and an orderly, effective response when disaster strikes.

Risk Assessment: Effective emergency preparedness begins with a thorough risk assessment. Facility managers should identify the specific risks facing each property and evaluate how likely they are and what impact they could have. This means considering all hazard types from hurricanes and earthquakes to active shooters and power outages. The goal is to answer, “What can hurt us, how often might it occur, and what impact would it have on our people and operations?” Key categories of threats to assess include:

Natural disasters include location-specific hazards like hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, winter storms, wildfires and pandemics. Use historical data and local hazard maps to gauge exposure. For example, buildings in a coastal area faces hurricane and flood risks, while ones far from coasts may prioritize tornadoes and severe thunderstorms.

Security threats are human-caused dangers such as active shooter incidents, terrorism (bomb threats or improvised explosive devices), workplace violence, civil unrest and theft/vandalism. Consider crime rates in the area and the profile of tenants and keep in mind that high-profile companies may have an elevated security risk.

Technological & infrastructure failures encompass events like power failure (blackouts), telecommunications outages, cyberattacks on building systems, water main breaks, gas leaks or HVAC system failures. Even a burst pipe or elevator malfunction can become an emergency if not planned for. Assess critical building systems and what redundancies or fail-safes exist for each.

Conducting a property-specific risk assessment will highlight which scenarios must be prioritized. Use a threat matrix to plot likelihood versus impact for various hazards; this visual can clarify top risks. For each threat, evaluate the building's vulnerabilities: structural resilience, backup systems, security measures, etc.

For instance, if a building is in a flood zone, is critical equipment elevated or protected from water? If located in a high-crime area, are there access controls and surveillance in place? This process, sometimes called a hazard vulnerability assessment (HVA) or threat assessment, should be revisited periodically as conditions change.

Risk Assessment

Engage experts: Involve building engineers, security personnel and local emergency management officials to get a complete picture of potential hazards. They may identify risks that are overlooked such as nearby chemical facilities or rail lines posing hazmat threats.

Assess building systems: Inventory life-safety systems such as alarms, sprinklers, smoke control, emergency power, and evaluate their ability to handle various emergencies. Note any maintenance or code issues that could undermine performance in a crisis.

Prioritize & mitigate: Rank risks by severity and likelihood. Address high-priority vulnerabilities with mitigation measures where possible (install flood barriers, seismic retrofits, upgraded locks or cybersecurity tools). Not all emergencies can be prevented, but their impact can often be reduced.

Document findings: Keep a record of identified risks and mitigation steps taken. These findings will feed directly into emergency response and business continuity plans, ensuring planning is tailored to the threats most likely to be faced.

By illuminating the threat landscape for a property, a solid foundation for all further emergency planning is set. A company cannot be defended from danger if the threats are not known. With a clear risk profile in hand, targeted plans to protect life and property against those threats can now be developed.

Emergency response planning: An emergency response plan (ERP) or emergency action plan (EAP) documents the immediate actions facility managers and tenants will take when an incident occurs. This is the playbook for protecting lives and stabilizing the situation in the minutes and hours following an emergency. A comprehensive EAP should cover evacuation procedures, emergency communication, roles and responsibilities, and coordination with first responders. Some regulations require many workplaces (including commercial buildings) to

have a written EAP with specific minimum elements. Key components of an effective emergency response plan include:

Clear reporting procedures: How an emergency is reported and who has authority to initiate the response. For example, some mandate procedures for reporting a fire or other emergencies (pull fire alarm, call emergency services). Tenants and staff should know immediately how to raise the alarm and whom to contact (security desk, property manager, emergency services) in different scenarios.

Evacuation & shelter-in-place procedures: Detailed instructions for safe evacuation are critical. Identify primary and secondary exit routes from all areas of the building, assembly points outside and shelter-in-place locations if evacuation is not safe like during a tornado or chemical release. The plan should specify when to evacuate and when to stay put. Include maps or postings on each floor with exit routes and stairwell locations. Assign evacuation wardens or floor captains to guide people out and account for all occupants once outside. Also, plan for assisting individuals with disabilities or others who need help evacuating.

Roles & chain of command: Define an incident management structure for the building. Who is in charge during an emergency (the property manager or building engineer on duty)? Who are their alternates? Outline roles such as security team leader, facilities/engineering lead to handle utilities, communications lead and tenant liaison. This creates an on-site incident command system, which should integrate with arriving emergency services command. Floor wardens among tenant employees can help direct their coworkers. It is important to work toward establishing a clear chain of command and emergency team roles with backups. Ensure each person knows their responsibilities. For example, the engineer may be tasked with shutting down HVAC or power if needed, while the security lead meets first responders at the entrance.

Communication protocols: Communication is often the biggest challenge in a crisis. Establish multiple, redundant ways to alert everyone in the building. Fire alarm systems (bells/strobes) handle fire evacuation, but for other emergencies, public address announcements, text/email blast systems, phone trees or two-way radios may be needed. Emergency notification systems should be able to reach all occupants quickly with clear instructions. Pre-scripted emergency messages (for fire, severe weather, intruder, etc.) can save time and reduce confusion. Do not forget communication with outside responders and between on-site team members. Have a system for internal communications (radios or a dedicated phone line) and ensure someone is designated to call emergency services and relay vital information to arriving responders (location of the incident, people trapped, etc.).

Security & access control: In certain emergencies like an armed intruder or civil disturbance, evacuation may not be the safest immediate action; instead, lockdown or shelter-in-place could be called for. Plan how to secure the facility: can doors be locked or access controlled quickly? Train security staff on procedures for threats like a bomb threat or active shooter. For example, consider having an emergency action plan specifically for such incidents, including lockdown drills and emergency services coordination. Incorporate these security scenarios into the EAP so that the team and tenants know how to respond.

Medical response & rescue duties: Determine if any staff or tenant volunteers will be assigned roles like first aid or CPR in an emergency. Some EAP criteria could include identifying employees who will perform rescue or medical duties (if any). Many office buildings opt to simply evacuate and leave rescue to fire department professionals, but large facilities might train select staff in basic first aid or have an AED on site with trained users. If so, list those individuals and ensure they are properly trained and equipped. Also, make sure the plan addresses assisting anyone injured or trapped, to the extent safe and possible, until the fire department arrives.

Accountability is a crucial element during evacuations. The plan should include a method to account for all occupants once an evacuation or shelter-in-place is complete. This could involve printed tenant rosters, headcounts by floor wardens, a digital mustering system or a designated assembly area coordinator who collects status reports to quickly inform fire officials if anyone is missing or likely still inside. Practice this process during drills so it will function under stress.

Once the emergency response plan covers these, document it clearly and keep copies accessible. The plan should be in writing, available to all employees/tenants (electronic or print), and periodically reviewed and updated; plan a review with staff whenever responsibilities or conditions change. Distribute quick-reference guides or flip charts for tenant offices summarizing the key actions for different emergency types.

Emergency response planning

Follow regulatory guidelines: Ensure the plan meets requirements for EAPs; for example, including all six required elements such as evacuation routes, reporting procedures and contacts.

Leverage incident command system (ICS): Train the building response team in ICS principles. Team leaders should understand the basics of ICS, which is used by emergency services departments, so they can integrate smoothly with the command post that

responders establish. Even a simple delegation of roles and a hierarchy (incident commander, section leads) mirrors ICS and improves coordination.

Coordinate with first responders: Proactively engage local emergency services before an incident. Invite the fire department to do a pre-plan walkthrough of the building; they can offer pointers to improve evacuation routes or identify hazards. Know the local emergency services community liaison for guidance on threats like workplace violence. Incorporate any local requirements. Some jurisdictions require high-rise buildings to file EAPs with the fire department or other emergency entities. Establishing these relationships and aligning the plan with local emergency agencies' expectations will greatly smooth the response if an incident occurs.

Plan for special scenarios: Think beyond fire alarms. Develop specific procedures for scenarios such as bomb threats (using a checklist to gather info and deciding on evacuation or a search), suspicious packages, hazardous material spills (which might involve evacuation of only affected floors and HVAC shutdown), and extended power loss (when to evacuate or when to stay). An all-hazards plan addresses a spectrum of emergencies, from IT outages to terrorism. Use appendix checklists for these scenarios so nothing is overlooked.

Include tenant roles: Engage tenant companies in planning. Encourage each tenant to designate floor wardens and have their own internal protocols that mesh with the building plan. For example, a tenant might have a buddy system to assist co-workers with disabilities during an evacuation. The building plan should reference these arrangements. Collaboration ensures that when an alarm sounds, everyone in the building, property staff and tenant employees alike are working from the same playbook.

The emergency response plan should tell everyone in the building exactly what to do, where to go and who is in charge when an emergency happens. It must be specific enough to provide clear guidance so there is no guesswork in the moment, yet flexible for unexpected situations. With the plan in place, the next step is making sure it can be executed, which means preparing the infrastructure and supplies to support the response and training people to carry it out.

Emergency preparedness is an ongoing process, not a one-time project. It requires attention, resources and commitment from property management and tenants alike. Implementing best practices will help create a culture of safety and readiness. In doing so, not only the bricks and mortar of the building are protected, but more importantly the lives and livelihoods that depend on it. When an emergency strikes, be it a fire alarm at 3 p.m. on a Tuesday or a hurricane warning over the weekend, the response will be decisive, guiding tenants to safety and recovering swiftly. That peace of mind is the ultimate ROI of robust emergency preparedness.



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