

TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Emergency Preparedness

What you should know

Human Resources, along with Safety and Risk Management, often plays a crucial role in planning for emergencies and disasters within an Organization. It is the role of leaders in these departments to create **Emergency Action Plans** and to be the point person if a disaster were to happen. While no one wants to imagine the possible disaster, it is wise for leaders within an organization to plan for the worst (as they hope for the best). It is prudent to plan for major business interruptions before they happen to avoid rash decisions and uncertainty during the chaos of an emergency.

There are many types of emergencies for which organizations should prepare – workplace violence, accidents on the job with catastrophic results, natural disasters, fire, technology equipment failures, power outages, and epidemics to name but a few. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in 2020 there were 2.7 recordable accidents per every 100 full time workers within the private industry. Additionally, the BLS puts the annual number of workplace homicides at about 400, showing that workplace violence is a real and present threat. Natural disasters and technology failures are also an ever-present threat to be weary of as validated by recent tornadoes in the south that destroyed an Amazon warehouse. Employers should identify worst-case scenarios and potential dangers that could be a threat to their industry or their location specifically (for example, Michigan employers do not need to be as concerned about hurricanes as an employer on Florida's coastline) and intentionally design coordinated plans to deal with possible repercussions or realistic threats.

Many employers conduct safety orientation during new hire onboarding and believe they have fulfilled their responsibilities through these trainings BUT that may not be enough. Employers should create **Emergency Action Plans** that identify and specify contingency plans for all types of emergencies and their workforce should be trained annually. Whenever new equipment is added or a change in layout or design of the facility takes place, all employees should be made aware of how those changes might impact evacuation routes and other safety-related situations. Organizations change over time, and they should review and update emergency plans accordingly.

What we know

TEA's recently released **Policy and Benefits (P&B) Survey** reports that 66% of employers polled have an active Safety Committee. Creating a Safety Committee would be a beneficial first step towards emergency planning for many employers (especially smaller organizations where individuals often perform many different functions and operate in various locations). Employers should look for a wide variety of members in the organization to join a Safety Committee so that multiple perspectives and experiences can be shared. Getting "buy-in" from coworkers will go a long way during policy implementation. Having a designated team help create the plan also will make it less daunting if the work can be split between several people. TEA's Safety Roundtable often points out that one person should not be responsible for safety – it is everybody's job!

The P&B Survey also reported that 66% of employers surveyed conduct fire drills and only 47% conduct tornado drills. While MIOASHA does not mandate these drills, it is still a best practice to conduct them in the event a natural disaster occurs. As a leader within an organization, one should be striving to implement these best practices and promote a culture of caring with a safety-conscious mind.

What it means

Many employers are not fully prepared for workplace emergencies and they all should take efforts to improve. Having a documented and communicated *Emergency Action Plan* allows employers to focus on other critical business matters rather than worrying about the implementation of important practices that do not come up on a daily basis. As a good practice, the plan should be updated regularly, approved, and implemented (along with ongoing training) at least annually. In the event of an emergency, there will be a lot on everyone's mind, so being prepared lightens that burden and provides reassurance. If an employee is assigned with a task to complete at the time of an emergency, he or she can focus on that one task and trust that the others are being completed as described in the *Emergency Action Plan*.

Employees appreciate when safety is apparent in company culture. Knowing that these plans exist and that their employer is prepared is pivotal for them to feel safe and secure within the workplace. Having a safe environment critical to employee well-being and is an area that TEA asks about within our Employee Engagement Surveys. Having an *Emergency Action Plan* and communicating it – with proper trainings – and being more upfront about safety initiatives that are in place will help establish safety as a core value while reinforcing to employees that their life and livelihood are top priorities.

What you can do

Emergency Preparedness is of great interest (especially with the weather warming up and tornado season almost upon us). Employers should review their emergency plans and update (or create) them accordingly. Employers should evaluate their training methods and see if they should be doing anything more to ingrain them within the Organization's culture. Developing the *Emergency Action Plan* can be a very formidable task, but once the hard work of creating it is done, it will be easier to update as needed. In the unfortunate event an emergency occurs, an organization will be very thankful that those plans were previously developed.

According to **Ready: Business** (an organization created in partnership between DHS and FEMA to help small to midsize businesses prepare their employees, operations, and assets in the event of an emergency), there are 10 steps to developing an *Emergency Action Plan*:

1. Review performance objectives for the program.
2. Run a Risk Assessment and review hazard or threat scenarios identified
3. Assess the availability and capabilities of resources for incident stabilization including people, systems, and equipment available within your business and from external sources
4. Talk with public emergency services (e.g., fire, police, and emergency medical services) to determine their response time to your facility, knowledge of your facility and its hazards and their capabilities to stabilize an emergency at your facility
5. Determine if there are any regulations pertaining to emergency planning at your facility then address applicable regulations in the plan in advance
6. Develop protective actions for life safety (evacuation, shelter, shelter-in-place, lockdown), including having a list of employees and visitor logs (from front desk, etc.) and assigning someone to account for everyone in the building during an evacuation or when sheltering in place

7. Develop hazard and threat-specific emergency procedures using the Emergency Response Plan for Businesses.
8. Coordinate emergency planning with public emergency services to stabilize incidents involving the hazards at your facility (AND within those near your location)
9. Train personnel so they can fulfill their roles and responsibilities
10. Facilitate exercises to practice your plan

Life Safety is always the most important thing to be concerned about when there is an emergency. The second priority is stabilizing the incident to minimize potential damage. The thought of prioritizing life should always be prevalent when writing an *Emergency Action Plan*. Employers should collaborate with their Safety Committee to get each person's input and assistance through the development process AND as it is being implemented. Having diversity and different perspectives on a committee can go a long way to having an acceptable and implementable *Emergency Action Plan*. A supervisor on the plant floor might have more knowledge about the machine operations than someone in the office. Having input from all levels is invaluable and it helps promote teamwork, encourages buy-in, and promotes a unified culture.

Along with creating the *Emergency Action Plan*, employers should also consider what to do after and emergency strikes and the "dust settles" so to speak. Employers need to think about their employee wellbeing, staffing, compensation, benefits, and IT related concerns. SHRM posed the following questions employers should consider before a disaster strikes:

- How can we communicate to employees after disaster strikes? Can we produce an automated message? Are employees' phone numbers easily accessible?
- Who are the essential employees who must report to work?
- Can we offer remote work or flexible schedules?
- Can we offer transportation or alternative locations to perform necessary work?
- If employees are unable to work due to a catastrophe, will employees continue to get paid? For how long? Will hazard pay be offered?
- If business operations are suspended, will benefit plans continue to be offered?
- How will the business maintain its IT business data? Are servers backed up?
- Do we have enough technology to have employees work remotely?

Answering those questions may require more feedback than from just a company's Safety Committee but having buy-in from business owners and leaders is pivotal. Again, creating an established policy helps minimize questions after a disaster strikes so that actions can be taken quickly and with confidence.

When an emergency occurs, the last thing people should be doing is working out a plan. Having pre-established guidelines are beneficial and can make a disaster a little less disastrous.