

WORKPLACE EMERGENCIES AND EVACUATIONS

Online
Training



Introduction

Nobody expects an emergency or disaster especially one that affects them, their employees, and their business personally. Yet the simple truth is that emergencies and disasters can strike anyone, anytime, and anywhere. You and your employees could be forced to evacuate your company when you least expect it.

This booklet is designed to help you, the employer, plan for that possibility. The best way to protect yourself, your workers, and your business is to expect the unexpected and develop a well-thought out emergency action plan to guide you when immediate action is necessary.

What is workplace emergency

A workplace emergency is an unforeseen situation that threatens your employees, customers, or the public; disrupts or shuts down your operations; or causes physical or environmental damage. Emergencies may be natural or manmade and include the following:

- Floods,
- Hurricanes,
- Tornadoes,
- Fires,
- Toxic gas releases,
- Chemical spills,
- Radiological accidents,
- Explosions,
- Civil disturbances, and
- Workplace violence resulting in bodily harm and trauma.



What is an emergency action plan?

An emergency action plan covers designated actions employers and employees must take to ensure employee safety from fire and other emergencies. Not all employers are required to establish an emergency action plan. Even if you are not specifically required to do so, compiling an emergency action plan is a good way to protect yourself, your employees, and your business during an emergency.

Putting together a comprehensive emergency action plan that deals with all types of issues specific to your worksite is not difficult.

You may find it beneficial to include your management team and employees in the process. Explain your goal of protecting lives and property in the event of an emergency, and ask for their help in establishing and implementing your emergency action plan. Their commitment and support are critical to the plan's success.

When developing your emergency action plan, it's a good idea to look at a wide variety of potential emergencies that could occur in your workplace. It should be tailored to your worksite and include information about all potential sources of emergencies. Developing an emergency action plan means you should do a hazard assessment to determine what, if any, physical or chemical hazards in your workplaces could cause an emergency. If you have more than one worksite, each site should have an emergency action plan.

At a minimum, your emergency action plan must 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, titles, departments, and telephone numbers of individuals both within and outside your company to contact for additional information or explanation of duties and responsibilities under the emergency plan;
- Procedures for employees who remain to perform or shut down critical plant operations, operate fire extinguishers, or perform other essential services that cannot be shut down for every emergency alarm before evacuating; and
- Rescue and medical duties for any workers designated to perform them.

You also may want to consider designating an assembly location and procedures to account for all employees after an evacuation. The site of an alternative communications center to be used in the event of a fire or explosion and secure on- or offsite location to store originals or duplicate copies of accounting records, legal documents, your employees' emergency contact lists, and other essential records.

How to alert employees to an emergency?

Your plan must include a way to alert employees, including disabled workers, to evacuate or take other action, and how to report emergencies, as required. Among the steps you must take are the following:

- Make sure alarms are distinctive and recognized by all employees as a signal to evacuate the work area or perform actions identified in your plan;
- Make available an emergency communications system such as a public address system, portable radio unit, or other means to notify employees of the emergency and to contact local law enforcement, the fire department, and others; and
- Stipulate that alarms must be able to be heard, seen, or otherwise perceived by everyone in the workplace. You might want to consider providing an auxiliary power supply in the event that electricity is shut off.

Although it is not specifically required by OSHA, you also may want to consider the following:

- Using tactile devices to alert employees who would not otherwise be able to recognize an audible or visual alarm; and
- Providing an updated list of key personnel such as the plant manager or physician, in order of priority, to notify in the event of an emergency during off-duty hours.

Under what conditions should you call for an evacuation

In the event of an emergency, local emergency officials may order you to evacuate your premises. In some cases, they may instruct you to shut off the water, gas, and electricity. If you have access to radio or television, listen to newscasts to keep informed and follow whatever official orders you receive.

In other cases, a designated person within your business should be responsible for making the decision to evacuate or shut down operations. Protecting the health and safety of everyone in the facility should be the first priority. In the event of a fire, an immediate evacuation to a predetermined area away from the facility is the best way to protect employees. On the other hand, evacuating employees may not be the best response to an emergency such as a toxic gas release at a facility across town from your business.

The type of building you work in may be a factor in your decision. Most buildings are vulnerable to the effects of disasters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, or explosions. The extent of the damage depends on the type of emergency and the building's construction. Modern factories and office buildings, for example, are framed in steel and are structurally more sound than neighborhood business premises may be. In a disaster such as a major earthquake or explosion, however, nearly every type of structure will be affected. Some buildings will collapse and others will be left with weakened floors and walls.

Establishing evacuation routes and exits

When preparing your emergency action plan, designate primary and secondary evacuation routes and exits. To the extent possible under the conditions, ensure that evacuation routes and emergency exits meet the following conditions:

- Clearly marked and well lit;
- Wide enough to accommodate the number of evacuating personnel;
- Unobstructed and clear of debris at all times; and
- Unlikely to expose evacuating personnel to additional hazards.

If you prepare drawings that show evacuation routes and exits, post them prominently for all employees to see.

How to account for employees after an evacuation

Accounting for all employees following an evacuation is critical. Confusion in the assembly areas can lead to delays in rescuing anyone trapped in the building, or unnecessary and dangerous search-and-rescue operations. To ensure the fastest, most accurate accountability of your employees, you may want to consider including these steps in your emergency action plan:

- Designate assembly areas where employees should gather after evacuating;
- Take a head count after the evacuation. Identify the names and last known locations of anyone not accounted for and pass them to the official in charge;
- Establish a method for accounting for non-employees such as suppliers and customers; and
- Establish procedures for further evacuation in case the incident expands. This may consist of sending employees home by normal means or providing them with transportation to an offsite location.



Medical assistance should you provide during an emergency

If your company does not have a formal medical program, you may want to investigate ways to provide medical and first-aid services. If medical facilities are available near your worksite, you can make arrangements for them to handle emergency cases. Provide your employees with a written emergency medical procedure to minimize confusion during an emergency.

If an infirmary, clinic, or hospital is not close to your workplace, ensure that onsite person(s) have adequate training in first aid. The American Red Cross, some insurance providers, local safety councils, fire departments, or other resources may be able to provide this training. Treatment of a serious injury should begin within 3 to 4 minutes of the accident.

Consult with a physician to order appropriate first-aid supplies for emergencies. Medical personnel must be accessible to provide advice and consultation in resolving health problems that occur in the workplace. Establish a relationship with a local ambulance service so transportation is readily available for emergencies.

What role should employees play in your emergency action plan?

The best emergency action plans include employees in the planning process, specify what employees should do during an emergency, and ensure that employees receive proper training for emergencies. When you include your employees in your planning, encourage them to offer suggestions about potential hazards, worst-case scenarios, and proper emergency responses. After you develop the plan, review it with your employees to make sure everyone knows what to do before, during and after an emergency. Keep a copy of your emergency action plan in a convenient location where employees can get to it, or provide all employees a copy. If you have 10 or fewer employees, you may communicate your plan orally. In the event of an emergency, it could be important to have ready access to important personal information about your employees. This includes their home telephone numbers, the names and telephone numbers of their next of kin, and medical information.

