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PREPARING FOR THE WORST

Local fire departments help property managers plan for disasters *by James Parker*

For the first several minutes of any emergency—be it a fire, a medical emergency or an approaching hurricane—people inside an affected building and those responsible for managing it will be the ones who respond. Having a solid emergency plan is critical in case emergency responders cannot get to the property immediately.

“Emergencies are just that,” said Rose Evans, CPM, and vice president of property management for Levin Management Corporation. “You don’t have time to prepare for them when they happen, so you need to have a plan in place. You want to protect your building, tenants and customers.”

While an all-hazards emergency management program can take years to develop, property managers do not have to go it alone when it comes to emergency preparedness. Preparation requires a team effort—from stakeholders and tenants to emergency responders.

ALL ABOARD

To get the wheels in motion and inspire a team to focus on an emergency management plan, property managers must secure involvement from investors, owners and senior management, said Don Schmidt of Preparedness Inc., a risk consulting company in Sharon, Massachusetts.

“If management doesn’t buy into it, it’s going to be much more difficult to get the program developed and implemented,” Schmidt said. “Support from senior management will help to get other people who need to be involved, involved. It tells everyone this is a priority.”

Showing senior management how emergency planning can affect business is essential in gaining support, he said. Senior managers should be educated on the many regulations requiring emergency planning; alerted to industry practices that have become a standard of care; and asked to consider how prepared their building would have been in some of the recent major disasters.

“It is about saving lives and it’s about protecting property,” Schmidt said. “And by protecting property, you are protecting your business operations—as well as avoiding any civil liability or damage to your brand, image or reputation.”

Schmidt said support from owners and investors must come in the form of a written policy—vesting designated individuals with the authority to develop, implement and

update an emergency management program. Written statements should also be widely communicated so everyone is aware of the policy and the important role each person plays.

“A written statement establishes the overall program; it authorizes the person or persons to develop, implement and keep that program current; and it should be consistent with the overall mission of the organization,” Schmidt said.

PLANNING FOR THE ELEMENTS

When support is in place, management can take action. Before creating a plan, performing a hazard analysis to determine the risks people might face at any property—residential, commercial, industrial or office—is essential, Schmidt said. Properties may be in areas prone to earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados or other disasters, and property managers must be prepared to respond to any incident.

“You need to understand the impact each type of hazard would have on the people, the property, your operations and the environment,” Schmidt said. “You need to figure out what you need to do not only to protect lives but also to stay in business.”

To read up on the national preparedness standard, visit the National Fire Protection Association’s Web site at www.nfpa.org.

Property managers should approach the process scenario by scenario, said Donn Carr, property manager for the Avenues Mall in Jacksonville, Fla. Stakeholders in the organization, including the safety manager, facilities manager and anyone else with relevant expertise, should work together to develop a list of possible circumstances.

For every identifiable hazard, a set of standard operating procedures must exist, said Steve Burchesky, president of U.S. Life Safety Inc., an emergency planning consulting firm based in Houston, Pa. The National Fire Protection Association Standard 1600—or the national preparedness standard—can help property managers develop appropriate operating procedures.

The standard establishes a common set of criteria for disaster management, emergency management and business continuity programs. It also identifies methodologies for

exercising those plans and lists resource organizations within the fields of disaster recovery, emergency management and business continuity planning.

“[It] contains the essential elements that need to be included in any effective emergency management program,” Schmidt said. “Once you have these essentials in place, you can tailor your program to meet the specific needs of your facility.

Basing a property’s emergency management plan on the national preparedness standard also helps tremendously when local responders are enlisted to further develop or approve a plan.

COMMANDING PRESENCE

The local fire department can be an invaluable resource for creating a property’s emergency plan, Burchesky said. It of course has access to all relevant fire code and regulatory requirements, and it may have a sample plan that can be tailored to meet a property’s specific needs.

Burchesky said consulting the fire department while developing an emergency program keeps property managers from reinventing the wheel. The fire department also benefits from such cooperation because its efforts and the property’s efforts are coordinated in advance, said Mike Cyphers, emergency management coordinator with the Henderson, Nev., Fire Department.

“Most fire departments or local emergency management agencies are very happy to help local businesses with their

emergency plans,” Cyphers said. “The better prepared the public and local businesses are, the easier our job will be should an emergency occur.”

Inspecting a property is one of the first steps a fire department takes in aiding property managers with their plans, said Fire Marshal Mike McCully of the Bloomfield, Mich., Fire Department. He said inspectors look over the facility, identify potential hazards, help managers produce a plan and provide technical advice.

For property managers’ purposes, the most important part of inspections is to identify fire hazards and escape routes, McCully said. The inspector looks for means of egress, any obstructions that might slow or prevent a quick escape and safe meeting places for evacuees.

Westgate Management Co., in Lawrenceville, N.J., worked with police and fire departments when putting its emergency plans together two years ago. The local responders helped with evacuation procedures, performing drills and speaking to residents about fire safety, said Steven M. Friedman, CPM, and Westgate’s vice president.

“When you have an emergency, the fire and police officials are your most important asset and ally,” he said. “The fire officials have the experience and equipment to react quickly to an emergency and protect the owner’s assets and building.”

In addition to helping local businesses prepare, many fire departments engage in pre-incident planning of their own, working out their response plans before an incident happens. Coordinating planning efforts will make everyone’s job easier, Burchesky said.

Fire department officials can also introduce property management staff to the Incident Command System—an emergency management system used nationwide use to handle everything from disaster zones to car crashes. It is a method for managing resources—including personnel—during an emergency to maximize efficiency and improve safety.

Coordinating a property’s incident command system with the local first responders’ system is essential, Schmidt said. When first responders arrive, ensuring the



Photo: FEMA

Local first responders are invaluable resources for property managers involved in emergency planning.

property's command system is in tune with the first responders' command system will help make a smooth transition as they begin their efforts.

"If you don't coordinate in advance, there may be a delay," Schmidt said. "It may be seconds, it may be minutes, but there is a delay. Coordinating in advance will enable the incident commander to implement the best decisions as quickly as possible."

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

All the planning and coordination in the world won't pay off unless all management staff are trained and tenants or residents are aware of the plan. Schmidt said facilities should have regular tabletop exercises and periodic full-scale drills involving local fire, police and emergency medical services as well as any other agency that would respond to a crisis.



Having a plan is not enough, experts say. Property managers need to conduct regular emergency drills.

In a tabletop exercise, an emergency team and local responders examine a hypothetical emergency. During the exercise, team members rehearse their roles and become more familiar and comfortable with their responsibilities. The practice identifies the plan's gaps and deficiencies, so local first responders can help correct them.

Such exercises can trigger staff to think ahead and anticipate worst-case scenarios. Burchesky said staff members should think of details like assisting occupants who might need special assistance—including the elderly or disabled. Fire departments and management companies should receive information about such individuals in advance.

"Adults learn by doing," Schmidt said. "The more interaction and actual practice the people have, the better prepared they will be."

Drills help ensure the tools required to respond to a

disaster are in place and functioning properly. Devices like smoke detectors, alarms or public address systems, cell phones, other mobile technology and a means for notifying the fire department or other first responders need clearance, Schmidt said.

He said every member of the management team must be able to locate, activate and operate every fire protection and life safety feature in a building. Any equipment should be readily available and in reliable condition. If a smoke detector goes off, everyone must know the location of that detector, he said.

"Lack of knowledge can result in costly mistakes," Schmidt said.

THE NEVER-ENDING PURSUIT

An emergency management plan is never truly complete or perfect. Carr of Avenues Mall said management must periodically revisit plans. He spent much of the past year revamping the emergency plan for his mall, which is located in the hurricane-prone state of Florida.

"The number and type of [emergency] scenarios is constantly changing," Carr said. "Ten years ago, who would have thought about a 'dirty bomb,' or about someone putting a toxic spore into your air-conditioning system? Now, property managers need to consider these kinds of hazards."

Schmidt said an up-to-date emergency management plan is essential because so much changes over time. He said property management staff—and thereby the emergency response team—often changes; the building can change because of renovation or construction; and hazards that might affect a building can change.

"Too often documents are written and they sit on a shelf collecting dust," Schmidt said. "If the plan is not periodically reviewed, it may not adequately address the hazards, and the procedures might not be correct. Evaluate changes in people, facilities and...hazards or the knowledge of hazards that can impact the building or people within."

Evans of Levin Management said in spite of the time and research required to put together an effective emergency management plan, a plan is necessary to protect the business, the building and its occupants.

"It's overwhelming to put one together from scratch when you're doing the everyday business of managing properties," Evans said. "But it's well worth it because you need to know how to react to various disasters." □

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