

9/7/08

## **National Preparedness Month – September 2008:**

### **THE BUCK STOPS HERE:**

#### **Employer Responsibilities in Emergencies**

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Employers have to follow certain regulations regarding emergency preparedness. The U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is charged with issuing these obligations to employers in order to ensure that their office or place of business is prepared to handle an emergency situation. These responsibilities include:

1. Posting clear and visible signs that label exits and show routes of emergency exits.
2. Establishing an emergency plan and communicating it to employees.
3. Eliminating possible hazards from the workplace.

It is important for employees and employers alike to be aware of these rules and make sure that they are followed. While OSHA provides legal guidelines for employers and business owners, there are certain practices that are important, but are not legally required. It is important that employers *and* employees stay up-to-date on the most current federal and industry recommendations for emergency preparation and planning. When it comes to emergency preparedness, simply meeting the bare minimum of requirements is unwise, because so much more can be done in order to be fully prepared for any situation that arises.

#### **Recommended Preparedness Tips for Employers:**

**1. Being informed.** Any number of emergencies and disasters can occur at any time. Employers should spend time looking into which emergencies are most likely to strike their company, based on several factors: location, size and the nature of the business. Look at other businesses like yours, and other businesses in your general area to see which emergencies you should be preparing for. A common mistake made by business owners is having a plan for only one type of emergency. For instance, a business might have a thorough fire

9/7/08

evacuation plan, but no plan whatsoever regarding a situation that calls for a shelter-in-place response.

**2. Communication between employers and employees.** There should be a clear emergency plan that is understood by all employers and employees—regardless of their level in the business. People panic when they do not know what is happening, and that is why it is important for every employee to have a clear idea of what would take place in any given emergency. Employers should have knowledge of any special needs or disabilities that their employees have which would require special assistance. The emergency plan should be discussed often on a regular scheduled basis, as well as when a new employee is hired.

**3. Creating emergency supply kits.** Of course, a large corporation cannot be expected to create specialized emergency kits for each and every person who works at the company. However, employers and employees can work together to decide what should be the responsibility of the company, and what should be the responsibility of the employee. Companies may decide that they will be responsible for basics that each employee will need (i.e., keeping on hand a supply of food and water that could last each person at least three days), while employees will agree to keep any extra or specialized supplies in their own portable emergency kit.

**4. Safety of employees.** As in any emergency situation, at home or at a place of business, the first and foremost concern is the safety of everyone involved. Much like schools and households, businesses can follow these same rules: Have a meeting place outside your office building or store where every employee of the company can meet; have a complete list of all workers to check each off when they are confirmed to be okay, and; have a telephone number (on an outside answering message system) that employees can call and leave a message letting the company know that they are okay.

### **When Tragedy Cannot be Avoided – What Employers Can Do**

Emergencies and disasters are a fact of life. No matter how prepared we are, they will still happen, and as most people spend a majority of their day in the workplace, it is obvious that the potential for disaster will follow them there.

9/7/08

It is important for employers to remember that people can be emotionally affected by a disaster or emergency even when it does not seem that they have a direct connection to it. We have seen from national events such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina that the effects of a disaster reach much farther than the immediate surrounding area. The following are three suggestions for employers for dealing with people who, in one way or another, have been affected by an emergency.

**1. Provide communication opportunities.** People react to disasters and emergencies in different ways. Although many people may not be in the mood to be sociable after a tragedy takes place, it can be helpful for them to be able to vent feelings of frustration or stress. Even something as simple as an office-wide lunch meeting may create a sense of community and encourage people to grieve socially. A charity social event is a wonderful opportunity for this, because people will be able to get together to better communicate about the event, while also contributing to a worthwhile cause.

**2. Be honest and open with information.** During any type of emergency, people will constantly be exchanging information that may or may not be factual. It is important for employers to communicate the same information to everyone. People deserve to know the truth, and should be informed of all information possible without breaking any confidentiality standards. Knowing all of the straight facts can calm people down and increase productivity because people may be less inclined to seek information via the Internet or inter-office gossip.

**3. Understand peoples' feelings.** Employees are naturally going to feel upset, sad, or stressed after a major emergency or disaster occurs. Understand that people take differing amounts of time to adjust to situations; while one person may be able to return to work with full productivity, someone else may need more time. The most important thing to remember is that people will adjust to the situation in their own ways, and that is why it's necessary for employers to be kind and understanding during and after emergency situations.

## **Responsibilities**

Being in a position of leadership in a company comes with many responsibilities. One of the most important ones is knowing how to handle emergency situations.

9/7/08

Taking the appropriate steps towards emergency preparedness might save not only your business, but the lives of your employees and yourself.

## **Resource for Businesses:**

### **READY Business**

<http://www.ready.gov/business/index.html>

READY Business, a division of READY.gov under the Department of Homeland Security, provides tips and suggestions, as well as legal mandates that employers have when it comes to preparing their business for emergency situations.

## **About The Authors**

**John Cavanagh** is Communications Director for Bridge Multimedia and Chief Researcher for Emergency Preparedness Online.

**Anne Malia** writes about technology and emergency preparedness for people with special needs and has contributed to the production of

[EmergencyPrepOnline.org](http://EmergencyPrepOnline.org) and [EdTechOnline.org](http://EdTechOnline.org).

**Article inquiries welcome.** On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or [jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com](mailto:jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com).**