

Prepare for the unexpected with an emergency action plan



An emergency action plan is designed to ensure safety at the time of the emergency.

Natural and man-made disasters and other workplace emergencies can strike anytime, anywhere. Clear thinking is difficult when a crisis is occurring, so having an emergency action plan ready is the best way to ensure that the proper steps are taken.

A workplace emergency is a potentially catastrophic situation that can threaten employees, customers or the public, disrupts or shuts down operations, or causes physical or environmental damage. Emergencies may include any of the following:

- Weather events like floods, wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, winter storms, earthquakes, etc.
- Fires and explosions
- Chemical spills, toxic gas releases and radiological accidents
- Civil disturbances, bomb/other threats and workplace violence

Although some workplace emergencies are caused by operations in the facility, others are possible based on geographical location. For instance, a chemical manufacturer has a higher risk of a toxic spill than an office complex, and a business in California has a higher risk of earthquake damage.

In either case, the first step in developing an emergency action plan is to brainstorm the “what ifs” for worst-case scenarios. What if a fire broke out in the boiler room? What if a tornado warning was issued in the area? What if a train carrying hazardous materials derailed on the tracks behind the facility? Emergency action planning is essentially an exercise in repeatedly asking, “what if?” and then planning a logical response to each potential emergency.

Develop a written emergency action plan

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), an emergency action plan must be in writing, kept in the workplace and available to employees for review at every location that has 11 or more employees. Although locations with 10 or fewer employees may communicate the plan orally, it is still a best practice for small businesses to put the plan into writing to ensure continuity in the event of personnel changes.

Emergency action plans are one piece of a larger concept of disaster recovery and business continuity planning. An emergency action plan, as indicated by its inclusion in OSHA 1910 Subpart E on Exit Routes and Emergency Planning, is designed to ensure safety *at the time of the emergency*. However, all businesses are encouraged to expand their plans to include recovery efforts such as rebuilding, cleanup, meeting customer demands, etc.



Designate areas where employees should gather after evacuating.

It is often beneficial to include a diverse selection of management and employees in the emergency action planning process. The group should work together to develop a plan that includes procedures for at least the following elements:

1. Reporting of the emergency. Determine the preferred procedures for reporting emergencies, such as dialing 911 or an internal emergency number, pulling a manual fire alarm or by other methods. Key to reporting and responding to emergency situations is the use of an alarm or other employee notification system, such as a public-address intercom. If an alarm system is used, it should:
 - Use distinct sounds, audible above the ambient noise in the facility and recognized by employees as a signal to evacuate or shelter-in-place, as identified in the plan.
 - Be seen and heard by everyone in the workplace, including individuals who are blind or deaf. A combination audio and visual alarm (sound and flashing lights) is recommended in these situations.
 - Consider having a backup power supply for electrically-powered alarms in the event of power failure.
2. Evacuation plan, including type of evacuation and exit route assignments. Decide who is authorized to order an evacuation, under what conditions an evacuation would be necessary, how to evacuate and what routes to take. Develop and post exit diagrams to identify the escape routes to be followed by employees from each specific facility location. Evacuation procedures also often describe actions employees should take before and while evacuating such as shutting windows, turning off equipment and closing doors behind them.

Check with your local fire department—even invite the fire department into the facility—for recommendations regarding evacuation procedures. Some emergencies call for a shelter-in-place response, such as when the building is threatened by a tornado or a chemical spill has occurred outside the building. Consider these, and proper places of refuge, such as an internal safe room, when developing the plan.
3. Critical plant operations before evacuating. Determine which employees are required to operate fire extinguishers or shut down gas and/or electrical systems and other special equipment that could be damaged if left operating or create additional hazards to emergency responders (i.e., releasing hazardous materials). This is another area where the fire department can assist in identifying recommended practices. Be sure to include statements that instruct when employees should abandon these unique responsibilities to ensure they can evacuate safely.
4. Accounting for all employees after evacuation. Name one or more evacuation wardens who are responsible for ensuring everyone gets out safely during evacuations. These employees may perform activities like checking work areas, offices and restrooms before evacuating and taking a roll call in the designated assembly area. To ensure the quickest and most accurate accountability of employees in an emergency:

- Designate areas, both inside and outside the workplace, where employees should gather after evacuating. Assembly locations within the building are often referred to as areas of refuge or shelter-in-place areas. Make sure the assembly area has sufficient space to accommodate all employees. Exterior assembly areas, used when the building must be evacuated, are typically located in parking lots or other open areas away from busy streets. Landmarks (e.g., flagpole, company sign) create simple reminders of where employees should go when 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. 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 cause unnecessary and dangerous search-and-rescue operations.
 - Establish a method for accounting for non-employees such as suppliers and customers. One way to do this is to have all visitors sign in at the front desk, and have the receptionist take the sign-in sheet on the way out.
 - 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.
5. Identify employees that can perform rescue or medical duties. Most small organizations rely on local public resources such as the local fire department or hospital to provide these services. Determine what responsibilities, if any, will be completed by employees and ensure those employees are trained to perform the assigned duties (e.g., first aid, CPR).
6. Who to contact for more information about the plan. Document the names, titles, departments and telephone numbers of employees who can be contacted for additional information and/or explanation of their duties under the plan.

Employee training: putting it all together

Once a plan is developed, training should be provided to each employee who is affected by the plan. Training should also occur when:

- New employees are hired or otherwise begin working at the facility, during an orientation program
- New equipment, layouts, materials, or processes are introduced into the workplace that affect evacuation plans
- Emergency procedures are revised or updated

Although training programs will vary based on factors such as size of the workplace and workforce, processes used, materials handled, and the availability of onsite or outside resources, certain aspects of emergency action plans are standard among most businesses. General training on the emergency action plan should include at least the following components:

Look to OSHA for additional resources.

OSHA provides an Evacuation Plans and Procedures eTool to help businesses develop and implement an effective plan. This eTool includes an Expert System that creates a basic plan that meets the needs of most small- and medium-sized businesses, as well as providing a foundation for a large-business plan. Visit [osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/](https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/) to get started.



- Elements of the emergency action plan, including types of potential emergencies, reporting procedures, alarm systems, evacuation plans and shutdown procedures
- Special hazards at the facility such as flammable materials, toxic chemicals, radioactive sources, or water-reactive substances
- The names and contact information of those in charge during an emergency
- Fire extinguisher and medical care preferences; clearly state whether employees should use fire extinguishers on their own or if they should instead report fire emergencies through another method, consistent with your fire prevention plan

Following the employee training program, it is a good idea to hold practice drills to keep employees prepared. After each drill, gather management and employees to evaluate the effectiveness of the drill, identify strengths and weaknesses of the plan, and work to improve it.

Many businesses hold annual evacuation and shelter-in-place drills, and at the same time, offer refresher training to employees. A short program each year can help to keep employees aware of their responsibilities and preferred actions in the event of a workplace emergency.

Consider unique situations

When developing an emergency action plan, unique situations are sometimes encountered. In multi-employer facilities, it can be helpful to coordinate efforts with any other companies or employee groups in the building. Find out if they have any special hazards that affect the facility and coordinate evacuation meeting locations.

In some facilities, hazards may be encountered during evacuation or shelter-in-place that require personal protective equipment (PPE) such as respirators, body suits, or similar devices. Ensure an adequate quantity of accessible PPE is available for these situations.

If relying on assistance from local emergency responders such as the fire department, local HAZMAT teams, or other outside responders, coordinate emergency plans with these organizations so that both sides are aware of the capabilities and expectations of the emergency response. If medical response is not available within 3-4 minutes of a serious injury, consider training an on-site emergency response team in first aid, CPR and similar topics. This training is available from the American Red Cross, fire departments and similar entities.

Resources that can help.

Nationwide's [MyLossControlServices.com](https://www.nationwide.com/loss-control-services) supplies our members access to helpful resources. Search for "disaster" on our website to gain access to several disaster preparation planning resources. The Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) offers in partnership with Nationwide, An Easy-to-use guide to business continuity planning with a link to the OFB-EZ program.

Providing solutions to help our members manage risk®

For your risk management and safety needs, contact Nationwide Loss Control Services: 1-866-808-2101 or LCS@nationwide.com.