

Do You Need an Emergency Action Plan?

Emergency preparedness begins with assessing the risks and outlining procedures for mitigating and dealing with the consequences of those risks. By Patsy Stuke

If you have 10 or more employees, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires you to have an Emergency Action Plan (EAP). A well-designed EAP addresses a myriad of potential emergencies that might be expected in the workplace, and is an important part of any company's operation.

The plan will allow your organization to provide guidance during an emergency, discover unrecognized hazardous conditions and promote safety awareness. The objective of an EAP is to reduce human injury and damage to property in an emergency.

The Plan Can Uncover Deficiencies

The document needs to be well-organized and should be written as succinctly as possible. It should have a table of contents and tabs for easy access so that information can be gathered quickly. During the planning process, you may discover that you lack some resources, such as equipment, supplies or personnel training. This knowledge allows you to correct those deficiencies before an emergency occurs.

Developing the plan can start with a vulnerability assessment. The study will show how likely a situation is to occur, what means are available to prevent the situation, how to stop a situation should it occur and what steps are necessary for a given situation.

With preplanning, you eliminate chaos and allow trained personnel to make rapid decisions, shorten response time and communicate effectively. The plan should prepare your personnel to act immediately and correctly. And when reviewed and updated regularly, the EAP prepares your people for any type of emergency.

Include a list of external assistance organizations, such as fire departments, mobile rescue squads, ambulance services, police departments, hospitals, governmental agencies and utility companies.

Regular Safety Training

Companies should provide training on a regular schedule so that all personnel, including new hires and temporaries, will be familiar with the current plan. Communication, training and periodic drills will ensure adequate performance if the emergency plan must be carried out. Your EAP can prevent fatalities and injuries, reduce damage to facilities and equipment and increase the time frame for resumption of normal operations.

A key consideration in preparing your plan is the proper emergency communications equipment. This equipment will allow you to deliver specific messages to the building occupants when there is an emergency situation. Specific lists of building personnel and occupants should be kept current. The job titles of individuals to contact for further information in case of emergency should be maintained.

Common Elements of a Plan

EAPs vary in complexity according to the size and needs of the individual facility, but all share a few common elements:

- Escape route and procedure assignments for employees
- Employee(s) responsible for assessing the degree of risk to life and property, and coordinating emergency response activities, training and planning
- Written policies that designate a chain of command and list names of individuals who are responsible for making decisions
- Means for reporting emergencies
- Assignments and procedures for rescue and medical duties
- Procedures for staff members who must perform critical operations before evacuation (if applicable)
- Specific instructions for stopping business activities and shutting equipment down
- A designated gathering area and procedures to account for personnel once outside of the building
- Method of notification that all is clear and operations are ready to resume

The workplace EAP might address the possibility of terrorist activity, natural disasters, explosions, chemical spills and accidental release of toxic gases, as well as bodily harm and trauma caused by workplace violence.

Hazard Audit

It is important that you perform a building hazard audit to determine if your property has any specific hazards and potentially dangerous conditions that need special consideration. For example, your building might contain light manufacturing or assembly machinery; or, there could be dangerous materials kept on the premises. These are just a few of the types of special situations that need attention and consideration as you prepare your EAP.

An emergency plan will typically include:

- Possible emergencies, consequences, required actions, written procedures and available resources
- Detailed personnel lists, including home telephone numbers and employee duties and responsibilities
- Floor plans with electrical notations
- Large-scale maps showing evacuation routes and service conduits (such as gas and water lines)

Once your initial plan has been developed, you may want to go to the OSHA Web site for a checklist to see if your plan has covered all the bases. Go to www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/docs/eap_checklist.pdf.

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Published in Sept. '07 issue of KC Small Business Monthly