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Preparing an emergency action plan: Protect your property and your tenants in a crisis




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It's 2:30 PM and the alarm bells in your building just went off. Nobody expects an emergency or disaster – especially one that affects them, their building or its occupants. Yet the simple truth is that emergencies and disasters can strike anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Would your tenants know whether it was a drill, test, or actual emergency? Does your building have an emergency evacuation or disaster plan in place?

Having a sound evacuation plan will save lives and minimize the effect an incident may have on your building.

The primary consideration in any emergency situation must be the safety and well being of your building's occupants. It is imperative that your tenants are properly prepared and that an orderly evacuation plan is in effect.

The essential outcome of a successful plan is business continuity – Think about how a disaster could affect you as a property owner: displaced tenants equates to reduced income. An orderly process expedites evacuation, allowing emergency responders unobstructed access to control the emergency and potentially thwart excessive damage to your building.

An Ounce of Prevention...

Fire safety and disaster preparedness are essential elements of building ownership – Few people can think clearly or logically in a crisis. An unforeseen event in the workplace can cause inflated anxiety and panic, therefore, it is extremely important to establish a viable emergency action plan for your building before a crisis situation arises.

The occasional or mandated drill is not enough to assure the safety of all building occupants. Building owners can effectively reduce their liability prior to any incident by offering a comprehensive emergency action plan for their tenants. This plan must address specific procedures for all types of

emergencies.

Items to Consider in Preparation of the Plan:

When developing an emergency action plan, take into consideration the wide variety of potential emergencies that could occur in and around your building. Potential emergencies may include, but are not limited to:

- Fire
- Power outage
- Release of chemical or biological materials
- Flooding
- Roof collapse
- Toxic gas release
- Radiological accidents
- Hurricane or tornado
- Explosive incident
- Civil disturbances
- Bomb threat/suspicious package
- Workplace violence resulting in bodily harm and trauma

No Standard Plan:

There is no standard building evacuation plan. Each building is unique unto itself, therefore evacuation procedures and requirements will vary by:

- Building Type: Office, Industrial, or Retail.
- Building Construction and Age of Building: Glass and Steel, Brick, etc.
- Building Size: Total square footage and number of floors.
- Location: Near Roadway, Railroad, Water, Power Lines, etc.

It is imperative that the plan offers a way to alert all tenants and their employees, including those who are disabled. Additionally, there should be a manager, executive or other representative from each company or floor within the building appointed to supervise the evacuation and account for all personnel. Some key issues to consider:

- What types of businesses occupy the building?
- How many occupants are on each floor?
- Are hazardous chemicals used or stored within the building?
- Are there physically challenged persons in the building who will need assistance in the event of an evacuation?
- Are alert systems in place for those persons who are sight or hearing impaired?
- How will occupants who do not speak English be alerted?

The Evacuation: Professional Survey, Drills and Procedures

To begin, it is recommended that a licensed safety expert be contracted to create the evacuation plan for your property. This trained professional will inspect your property and address its specific needs. Hiring an outside consultant to develop an evacuation plan and educate all occupants on safety procedures will aid in reducing your liability as the building owner – a minimal investment for peace-of-mind. The consultant will also conduct training programs to educate all occupants in fire safety and other dangerous situations that could occur. All emergency action plans should be continually revised and updated to meet structural and facility changes.

Once the building's evacuation plan is completed it should be submitted in writing, signed and acknowledged, by all existing and new employees then placed in their personnel folder. It's also a good idea for tenants to keep an up-to-date list of emergency contacts in case of an evacuation. Evening and weekend building occupants must also be presented with written procedures and offered evacuation drills that cater to their specific needs.

Drills

From the time we entered elementary school, we were primed in evacuation procedures. Those who participated in the "duck and cover" drills of the 1950s and 1960s can remember the feeling of panic and ineffectuality as we dived beneath our desks at the wail of an ear-piercing siren. Others recall the basic fire drill, in which we were taught to quietly and calmly take the hand of a classmate, form a line and follow our teacher through the corridors and out of the school building. The fundamentals learned as children, albeit a futile effort to escape harm in some cases, serve as a foundation for an orderly process and procedure during an evacuation.

Regulations regarding the frequency of fire drills and whether spontaneous or announced drills are mandated vary by state, county, township and municipality. Certain institutions such as healthcare facilities, are not permitted to announce drills in advance. To ensure the safety of your tenants, drills should be conducted monthly to keep building occupants in practice and prepared for an emergency situation. All emergency exits should be clearly marked and an emergency lighting system should be put in place in case of a blackout or smoky conditions. Fire extinguishers, smoke detection systems and water sprinklers should be

maintained and tested regularly to ensure proper functionality.

Procedures

In an emergency, the safety of all occupants must be addressed first before focusing on property damage. In any crisis situation, a mode of communication such as a portable radio unit or public address system should be established to keep occupants informed of all developments. A buddy system should be established to prevent people from finding themselves alone in a dangerous situation. In the event of an evacuation, all building occupants should be instructed to report directly to an assigned assembly point for a headcount ensuring that everyone has safely exited the building. A press liaison should be appointed to represent the building and deliver accurate information about the situation eliminating any incorrect facts about the cause of the emergency or status of building occupants reaching the press.

Emergency Action Plan Checklist:

- Hire a safety and evacuation consultant to design an emergency action plan and conduct training for building occupants on all floors.
- All occupants and their employees should learn and sign an acknowledgement of their emergency action plan.
- The plan should address the needs of night, weekend and disabled occupants.
- Each tenant must have a designated evacuation warden at all times to lead an emergency evacuation.

Real estate ownership is frequently challenged with legal issues and liabilities, taking the initiative to provide an evacuation program for your building's occupants may help you to avoid unnecessary claims and lessen your vulnerability to costly lawsuits and most importantly, avoid the potential of bodily harm to your tenants and employees. Keep in mind, the price you pay to hire a safety consultant to protect your interest is minimal relative to property damage and liability costs.

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