

Responding to an Emergency

When an emergency occurs, hospitals and healthcare facilities must respond by implementing various systems and processes to keep their employees and patients as safe as possible, protect the property and the environment, and meet basic human needs.

An effective emergency response entails developing emergency plans and protocols, training staff, using effective communication, and maintaining strong leadership. Lack of planning and preparation may ultimately lead to poor patient outcomes and loss of life.

Facilities should have an emergency operations plan (EOP) that also includes a communication plan, crisis standards of care, a surge protocol, an incident command system protocol, a triage protocol, a disaster volunteers program, a healthcare coalition plan, and more.

To support hospitals and healthcare facilities, numerous healthcare quality and safety organizations have developed guidance on emergency preparedness response and recovery. From a high-level perspective, we offer these risk tips from that guidance.¹

1

Put into place your facility's EOP. The response elements in that plan — communications, resources and assets, safety and security, staff responsibilities, utilities, and clinical support activities — should specify in detail what your facility will do in an emergency. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS') Healthcare Emergency Preparedness Information Gateway (TRACIE) provides [various resources on emergency operations plans](#) including education and training; guidelines; and plans, tools, and templates.

2

Set into motion an incident command center (ICS) to coordinate command, operations, logistics, planning, and finance/administration activities. Be certain that hospital staff are trained sufficiently on the structure and functions of the ICS and that other staff and community networks are aware of their roles.

3

Implement any emergency-specific plans or protocols (e.g., active shooter, pandemic, shelter in place, evacuations, mass fatalities, etc.)

4

Initiate your emergency communications plan and determine how information will be shared. Inform facility staff members of their roles and responsibilities within the plan. Have a public information spokesperson coordinate communication with the public, media, and health authorities. Make sure that the sharing and release of information meets HIPAA requirements.

5

Step up and intensify the facility's safety and security plans. Specify how the facility will oversee and control access to it by staff, patients, visitors, volunteers, vendors, and others during an emergency. Make sure these plans include protocols for safeguarding individuals as well as critical supplies, equipment, and infrastructure.

6

Have a process in place to extend temporary privileges to medical staff. Be ready to use volunteer healthcare providers if necessary. [The Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals](#) is a federal program administered on the state level that verifies volunteer healthcare providers' identification and qualifications before an emergency.

7

Establish a clear method to maintain patient triage operations. Appoint an experienced triage officer to oversee it. Locate the triage area close to essential personnel, supplies, and services, and clearly mark the entrance and exit routes. Ensure that waiting areas are secured from environmental hazards and work areas have sufficient space, light, and access to auxiliary power.

8

Carefully assess the facility's logistics and supply management chains, including access to supplies, staff, equipment, medication, food, potable water, and fuel, and replenish as needed. Develop and maintain an inventory of these items, and establish contingency agreements with vendors to ensure the purchase and prompt delivery of them when needed to respond to an emergency.

9

Turn on the emergency and standby power systems. Make sure to monitor the amount of emergency fuel storage and proper operation of associated equipment and systems.

10

Set up your facility's crisis standards of care (CSC). These standards should provide guidance on decision-making about medical care in emergencies, disasters, or pandemics. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine provide a framework in [Crisis Standards of Care: A Systems Framework for Catastrophic Disaster Response](#).

11

Account for number of beds as well as availability of human and essential resources and adaptability of facility space when determining the facility's surge capacity. When responding to an emergency, monitor the facility's surge capacity according to the facility's EOP. If capacity is exceeded, transfer or divert residents. HHS' TRACIE has more information on [Hospital Surge Capacity and Immediate Bed Availability](#).

12

Make efforts to address staff needs. Immediately plan for relief staff as well as rotation and rest for all staff. Provide workers with appropriate personal protective equipment. Consider how to address staffing if a disaster occurs during a shift change. Plan how to use staff in a remote location who cannot get to the facility. Find ways to assist staff with childcare, pet care, and elder care either onsite or offsite. Offer mental health resources and counseling to staff.

13

Implement a manual system for documenting patient care and other essential information in the event that electronic systems are unavailable or temporary staff members do not know how to operate them.

14

Be certain to understand as well as comply with all regulations set forth by your facility's accrediting agency related to emergency response and preparedness. These may include specific requirements, standards, and guidance.

15

Enable recovery activities and address any insufficiencies to help the facility return to nonemergency operations. Debrief after the event and perform a facility-wide all-hazards vulnerability analysis. Use the analysis of these risks to prioritize planning, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts.

Resources

- [American Hospital Association: Emergency Readiness](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Healthcare Workers: Emergency Preparedness and Response](#)
- [Department of Health and Human Services: 2017-2022 Health Care Preparedness and Response Capabilities](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency: Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans](#)

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- [Occupational Safety and Health Administration: Emergency Preparedness and Response](#)
 - [Rural Health Information Hub: Rural Emergency Preparedness and Response](#)
 - [The Joint Commission: Emergency Management](#)
 - [World Health Organization: Hospital Emergency Response Checklist](#)

Endnotes

¹ ECRI. (2019, February 15). Emergency preparedness: Response and recovery. Aging Services Risk Management. Retrieved from www.ecri.org/components/CCRM/Pages/SafEnv7_1.aspx; World Health Organization. (2011). Hospital emergency response checklist. Retrieved from www.who.int/publications/i/item/hospital-emergency-response-checklist; California Hospital Association. (2020). CHA hospital activation of the emergency operations plan checklist. Retrieved from www.calhospitalprepare.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/eop_checklist_mar_2020.pdf

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