

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 an emergency operations plan (EOP), training staff, using effective communication, and maintaining strong leadership. Lack of planning and preparation may ultimately lead to catastrophic outcomes.

Each facility's EOP should include 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

Develop and implement an EOP for your facility that includes response strategies for communications, resources and assets, safety and security, staff responsibilities, utilities, and clinical support activities. Each element should specify in detail what your facility will do in an emergency.

2

Set into motion an incident command system (ICS) to coordinate command, operations, logistics, planning, and finance/administration activities. Be certain that facility 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 best to share information. 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 organization will oversee and control access to the facility 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, 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

Activate the emergency and standby power systems as needed. 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](#). These standards should provide guidance on decision-making about medical care in emergencies, disasters, or pandemics.

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.

12

Develop plans to manage staffing and coverage. Immediately plan for relief staff as well as rotation and rest for all staff. 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.

13

Make efforts to address staff members' physical and emotional needs. Provide workers with adequate and appropriate personal protective equipment. Find ways to assist staff with childcare, pet care, and elder care either onsite or offsite. Offer mental health resources and counseling to staff.

14

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.

15

Be certain to understand and 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.

16

Develop a plan to help the facility return to nonemergency operations. Debrief after the event and perform a facility-wide all-hazards vulnerability analysis. Use the results of the analysis to prioritize planning, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts.

Resource

For more information on this topic, see MedPro's [Risk Resources: Emergency Preparedness and Response](#).

Endnote

¹ The risk tips in this publication are based on the following sources: ECRI. (2020). *Emergency preparedness and response in aging services*. Retrieved from <https://assets.ecri.org/PDF/Solutions/Aging/COVID-WP-Emergency-Response-Aging.pdf>; 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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