Lessons Learned

Excerpted from IFMA's Emergency Preparedness Workshop 2005, Glin Jay CFM, CFMJ, IFMA Fellow; Audrey Kaplan, CFM; Bill Gregory, CFM, IFMA Fellow

Lesson #1: Mandatory Training of All Personnel

If any emergency preparedness training is done, most organizations only train their core group or disaster recovery team. A survivor of the Oklahoma City bombing (April 19, 1995) insists that *all* employees should receive *some* training. Organizations must plan for the possibility that they may lose some of their most experienced personnel. Depending upon the severity of the disaster and the number of casualties, organizations may have to rely on second, third or fourth level personnel to perform needed functions. The Federal Credit Union in the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City lost 18 of their 33 employees, including the majority of their senior managers at the Vice President level. The brokerage and bonds firm, Cantor Fitzgerald, lost 700 of its 1,000 key personnel from the office in the World Trade Center (September 11, 2001).

People tend to address their personal and domestic needs first, before they deal with work-related issues. Some members of the recovery team may have significant to overwhelming family responsibilities after a regional disaster all over the USA—perhaps having lost their home or car, may be without child care services, or have other serious problems that keep them from reporting to work. As such, it is imperative that a business or government agency has three or four trained personnel assigned to each critical recovery function. Not *every* employee needs to be assigned disaster recovery responsibilities. However, when many people are trained and practiced, there is less likely to be confusion during the emergency and there is a higher probability of smooth recovery for the people and the business.

Lesson #2: Employers Must Address the Gamut of Human Needs

Immediately after an emergency, people need a range of services and support—physical, spiritual, emotional and logistical. Those with obvious injury should receive medical attention. Others may appear uninjured, but have lives that are totally altered. They may have lost loved ones or professional associates. Their personal items may be lost, damaged or inaccessible. For example, following a bomb explosion, the crime scene would be cordoned-off, preventing people from getting to their cars (with or without damage) so they don't have their regular transportation. In one case, an employer made rental cars available to employees to meet temporary transportation needs. Resources for social counseling and other types of assistance may also need to be identified and enlisted.

Lesson #3: Individuals with Special Skills and Training Can Make the Difference

People who can potentially be useful during an emergency include those who have military training, another job related to security or safety, emergency medical training, or are a background in law enforcement. Find out who in the organization has special training or experiences, and keep this list with the emergency response plan. When preparing the emergency response plan, contact these people to seek their agreement to be assigned to a recovery team.

Lesson #4: Cultivate a Good Corporate and Law Enforcement/Public Safety Relationship

Having some staff member pre-authorized to enter restricted zones is beneficial to organizations needing to get back into the areas cordoned-off by rescue workers. In one case, the organization had a reserve deputy sheriff on its staff. After a bomb explosion, this person was allowed back into the facility to retrieve critical information and equipment. If someone on staff has safety and law enforcement connections or authority, be sure to recognize that person as a possible resource and include him/her on one of the recovery teams. If no one currently fits this category but has a safety/law enforcement interest, consider encouraging or sponsoring him/her to develop in this area.

Lesson #5: You Must Know Who Left the Building

There needs to be a good way to determine who (by name and, if possible, by department) has escaped the building. A standard practice is to have two meeting areas—one fairly close to the facility and the other some “safe” distance away. Supervisors or wardens must be assigned responsibility for collecting the roll count. People who are not seriously injured should check-in at the designated area and then wait for instructions to return to work or leave the site. A separate list or head count is tallied by those attending to people too injured to report.

Though a seemingly simple task, getting a reliable head count is rife with difficulty. In the chaos of an emergency, people with a strong desire to flee may phone their loved ones or friends to pick them up, completely forgetting the reporting process.

Lesson #6: Visitors and Guests are Equally Affected by the Emergency
When a disaster occurs, the enterprise may have several guests in the building who are not familiar with evacuation procedures, routes, exits and accountability meeting areas. When setting emergency procedures, these building users need to be considered to ensure their safety.

Lesson #7: Pay Issues Must Be Resolved and Communicated to the Employees
All employees may not be required for the recovery. Furthermore, the facilities, capabilities and equipment required for them to work may not be available. Normally, salaried workers would expect to get regular payments. Hourly, part-time or temporary workers should know in advance how or if they will continue to receive income.

If the organization has the resources (through profits, an insurance policy, or seeing the value of the goodwill), uninterrupted pay and benefits should go to all workers. Following the destruction of the World Trade Center, the brokerage firm, Cantor Fitzgerald gave 10 years of health insurance to families of lost employees, including unborn children. That was particularly important because the attack left behind 60 pregnant widows.

Workers who are receiving a salary, but may not be needed at work for some time should be told that they are on a “standby” status and need to be available on short notice. Employees should understand that it is frowned upon to us the “standby” status for personal shopping, recreation, or a vacation, especially when co-workers assigned to a recovery team are working hard to get the enterprise up and running.

Lesson #8: Distribute the Recovery Work Equitably

Frequently, the burden for the recovery goes to a few key people who may be overworked and under great stress. There may be recovery support activities that other employees can do during this time. This will help avoid feelings that some are doing all the work and others are getting a “free ride”. To avoid burnout, divide the recovery personnel into balanced teams for shift work early into the recovery process.