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EMERGENCY RESPONSE BEST PRACTICES

HOW TO HANDLE CRISIS, ROUTINE AND EMERGENT SITUATIONS

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Introduction

Healthcare facility managers face emergencies every single day. Some emergencies, however, are bigger than others. The issues facing healthcare are diverse and broad: Zika virus, Legionella growth and spread in buildings, power outages, flooding, severe weather, facility patient evacuations, and active shooters, just to name a few.

Do You Plan for the "Worst Case?"

One of the things I often hear continuity and emergency professionals say is that they "plan for the worst-case scenario." Whenever I hear that come out of someone's mouth, I immediately stop them; this is simply not true. Continuity professionals don't plan for the worst-case scenario, they plan for what they think will happen, what is called a "routine" emergency. What they plan for may be a really bad situation, but there is not enough time, money, or risk appetite to plan for the truly worst-case scenario.

"Routine" Emergency

To be clear, routine emergency[1] does not mean "easy." A routine emergency can still be difficult and challenging. In this context, "routine" refers to the relative predictability of the situation that permits advanced preparation. This risk is in the company's risk profile and the company is likely to have been able to take advantage of lessons learned from prior experiences. Continuity professionals are likely to have thought about what to plan for and what is needed, and they have probably trained for them and done exercises for them. Incident management, crisis communications, business continuity, and disaster recovery plans are filled with strategies to manage routine emergencies.

"Crisis" Emergency

A crisis emergency[2] is a much different animal. These types of events are distinguished by significant elements of novelty. This novelty makes the problem much more difficult to diagnose and then deal with. This type of emergency can have the following characteristics:

- The threats have never been encountered before, therefore, there are no plans to manage it.

[1] Managing Crisis: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies, Arnold Howitt and Herman Leonard, CQ Press, page 5.
[2] Ibid, page 6.

- It may be a familiar event, however, it is occurring at unprecedented speed, therefore developing an appropriate response is severely challenging.
- There may be a confluence of forces, which, while not new individually, in combination, pose unique challenges to the response.

The novel nature of a crisis emergency becomes a game-changer. Plans, processes, training, and exercises that may work well in routine emergency situations are frequently grossly inadequate in a crisis emergency, and may even be counterproductive. You realize that you have to start from scratch.

The crisis emergency also requires different capabilities; in other words, the plans and behaviors used for routine emergencies just won't work. The first thing that must be done is to identify the elements of the novelty; determine what makes this situation so different from others. In a cyber attack or breach, this novelty can often be surprising. You might begin the process thinking it is one thing, and then over time, realize it turned out to be something quite different. For example, you may think you are dealing with a routine IT problem or outage; over time, you see it is something more significant and sinister.

Once you identify the real problem and understand that the routine plans won't work, you have to improvise response measures that will be suitable to cope with the unanticipated aspects of the incident. In other words, you're in new territory; this hasn't been done before. Created out of necessity, these responses may be actions quite different than ever done before. Handling a crisis emergency may feel like you're building an airplane while flying it at the same time. It's not pretty, but it may be necessary.

Lastly, in a crisis emergency, you must respond in creative ways and, at the same time, be extremely adaptable executing these new and improvised solutions. You have to be on "full alert" at all times, as you don't know how the situation will change, and you must be prepared to shift or dart at a moment's notice. All of this makes people quite anxious, and during an exercise, this anxiety often manifests itself in varying degrees of excessively loud voices or hushed voices, frantic activities, and nervous laughter.

"Emergent Crisis"

An emergent crisis is a bit of a different animal. An emergent crisis poses special challenges in terms of recognizing its novelty as the situation begins to unfold because it may look a lot like a "routine" emergency in its early stages. It is only later when they reveal their unusual characteristics. Part of the problem is that leaders may be slow to see the new features or aspects of the emergency. They keep telling themselves that they know what they are seeing ("I know how to manage that…") and they fail to see the

differences and realize that the situation requires a different response. They become "wed" to their original solution and don't discover that it is really something quite different until it is too late.

A good example of an emergent crisis was the SARS emergency in Toronto in early 2003. Although the world was watching as a flu-like illness was beginning to take hold in Hong Kong, everyone was on the lookout for sick people from China. Toronto was unaware that the disease had already entered its city and was moving around to several different hospital facilities.

The index case (an older woman) returned to Toronto from Hong Kong on February 23, 2003, and died at home on March 5. No autopsy or medical examination was conducted. Her 44-year-old son went to an emergency department on March 7 with high fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. He was held in an open observation ward of a busy emergency department for 18 to 20 hours while awaiting admission[3]. Although they didn't know it at the time, a chain reaction had been set into motion.

The Toronto SARS outbreak occurred in two waves. SARS 1 was from March to April 2003, SARS 2 was from May to July 2003. Four hospitals were affected, and the city and region experienced major financial impacts when the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a travel advisory for Toronto on April 23. Even though the advisory was only in effect for seven days, tourism sustained a $350 million loss and retail sales declined by $380 million compared to the previous year.[4] In total, four people in Canada died from SARS, approximately 400 became ill, and 25,000 Toronto residents were placed in quarantine.

Your Team Needs These Three Essentials

What makes a team successful in an emergency? We have found that there are three things that your team must have mastered to be successful a routine, crisis, or emergent crisis emergency.

1. Clearly defined team roles and responsibilities.
2. Defined incident assessment team and process.
3. Written incident action plan to guide and document team activities.

[3] SARS in Canada: Anatomy of an Outbreak, *Public Health Canada* http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/sars-sras/naylor/2-eng.php#Outbreak

[4] Canadian Environmental Health Atlas http://www.ehatlas.ca/sars-severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome/case-study/sars-outbreak-canada

Organizing Your Team

Although many health care facilities teams may be part of a larger Hospital Incident Command System (HICS), that doesn't always mean that clear roles and responsibilities within the facility team have been defined. In particular, there may not be clear role definition between other teams. This is particularly true in an emergency. What are the specific roles of the facilities team? How do they work with other teams in the HICS model? There should be a checklist for each member of the facilities team performing different functions. Think of all of the things that need to be done in the first few minutes or hours of an incident. These need to be clearly defined and assigned.

For example, a list of assignments could include:

- Assist emergency responders and support their work. This may include providing keys, maps, MSDS, floor plans, details, or expertise.
- Conduct initial damage assessment.
- Contact contractors and vendors.
- Order supplies and equipment.
- Assist in patient transport.

Brainstorm with your team about all of the activities that would likely need to be done in most emergencies and develop detailed checklists to assist everyone on the team in staying organized and communicating status. Develop a list and use it in your next exercise, then continue to refine it with each exercise or plan activation.

Incident Assessment

When an Incident occurs, there are often a lot of assumptions about how information will be routed, who will be engaged, and how an activation will occur. When reviewing emergency plans, getting from the point of an incident occurring to plan activation is often completely silent.

It is critical that you develop a clear incident assessment plan that includes who evaluates the situation and the process that is used. This is called an Incident Assessment Team (IAT). An IAT is often comprised of key individuals in departments where most of the incidents likely occur. This includes facilities, security, technology, and key lines of business (think patient care), plus the Incident Commander.

Incident assessment includes having clearly defined processes, a team that makes the assessment, and the plan activation decisions. A simple flow from incident awareness to plan activation often includes six steps:

1. **Awareness.** An individual Initial Assessment Team member becomes aware of an incident through a variety of different means. If it could disrupt a mission-critical processes or patient care, the team member then goes to step 2.
2. **Assembly.** In the event that the Initial Assessment Team member feels the incident may be significant, s/he will activate the full Initial Assessment Team which then performs a formal assessment.
3. **Decision.** The Initial Assessment Team decides if the plan will be activated.
4. **Activate.** The organization's Incident Management Plan is activated.
5. **Plan.** The team develops an Incident Action Plan (next section).
6. **Brief.** Executives are briefed of the incident.

Incident Action Plans (IAP)

The Incident Action Plan (IAP) is one of the hallmarks of the Incident Command System and is critical for keeping your team organized, informing others of what you are doing, and getting assistance.

An IAP formally documents the operational period objectives, and the response strategy defined by team during response planning. It contains general tactics to achieve goals and objectives within the overall strategy, while providing important information on event and response parameters.[5] If using the HICS system, there may be additional documents included such as a logistics, communication, health and safety, or responder plans.

An IAP is comprised of five component steps:

1. Gaining situation awareness / situation status.
2. Developing strategic objectives.
3. Assigning all objectives (to a team or individual).
4. Determining the operational period.
5. Communicating the plan to all identified stakeholders.

[5] What is Incident Action Planning, Public Health Emergency
http://www.phe.gov/preparedness/planning/mscc/handbook/pages/appendixc.aspx

Situation Awareness / Situation Status

Where do you get situation awareness? How do you find out what is going on? There are many possibilities. It could include personal observations, employees, vendors, emergency responders, traditional media, social media, government officials, and more. Think about all of the options and then determine how you will validate the information to ensure you are not acting on rumors or speculation. You will also need to decide how you will keep track of all of the data. In many fast-moving emergencies, people describe the amount of information coming at them as “drinking out of a fire hose.”

Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives are a high-level statement of what you are going to do in this phase of the emergency. These objectives are short, clear, and descriptive, and state what action is to be achieved. The best strategic objectives are written with an action-oriented verb as the first word. This clearly tells the reader what the desired outcome is and provides guidance to the person assigned to achieve the result. The team or person who receives the objective may have many tasks listed under the objective to achieve the result.

Key action verbs might include words such as:

- Inspect.
- Evaluate.
- Develop.
- Conduct.
- Alert.
- Prepare.
- Communicate.

Assign All Objectives (to a Team or Individual).

All objectives are assigned to a person or a team. This is to ensure that everyone knows who is doing what and prevents other teams from “swimming in someone else’s lane.” In many emergencies, if ownership of an action is not clear, there are likely numerous people or teams all working on the same thing – or worse, no one is working on it at all.

Determine the Operational Period.

The operational period is how long to work on these objectives and actions before the team comes back together to assess status.[6] There is no set time for an operational period; they might be quite short in the beginning of an incident and get longer over time. They do not, however, exceed a 24-hour period.

Communicate the Plan to All Identified Stakeholders.

Once the Incident Action Plan has been developed and written, it can be then used to communicate to all of the key stakeholders. This includes the entire team, executives, other locations, emergency responders, Boards of directors, and others who require detailed information of the response effort.

Creating a Solid Team

A team doesn't become great simply because the right people have been picked, or the people picked are particularly smart or bright. They are great because they practice. Once you have selected the team and developed the plans, your work has really just started. You must provide regular training opportunities for them to incorporate the information into their very being. It needs to become "muscle memory" and this only comes with practice. The best training you can provide are exercises. Engage your team, ideally in at least two exercises per year. One exercise can be more conversational (such as a basic tabletop); a second exercise should involve actual response activities.[7]

Going Forward

Remember, building a successful response team for any type of emergency requires only three things:

1. Clearly defined team roles and responsibilities.
2. Defined incident assessment team and process.
3. Written incident action plan to guide and document team activities.

Your next disaster could be just around the corner. Get started today.

[6] ICS Training https://definedterm.com/a/definition/48051
[7] Emergency Management Exercises: From Response to Recovery, Regina Phelps, Chandi Media, https://www.amazon.com/Emergency-Management-Exercises-Response-Everything/dp/0983114307/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1474989398&sr=8-3&keywords=regina+phelp

About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it's a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning**: Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you're always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.

- **Assessment**: When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.

- **Response**: In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.

- **Delivery**: Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we're ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

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