

Are You Ready? Emergency and Disaster Planning Tips

By *Bill Avery*

Parks & Recreation Magazine

It's probably easy to remember where you were and what you were doing last Sept. 11. America had been shaken, violently, and was still reeling when, the next month, the biological agent anthrax was introduced in the U.S. postal system. What was next? When would it end?

As we learned at this time of great uncertainty and rapidly unfolding events, there are no perfect emergency and disaster plans. For starters, as we learned last fall, it's impossible to predict and prepare for every emergency that might occur. But with a well-constructed emergency and disaster plan in place, a more expeditious and organized response can reduce injuries, save lives and minimize property losses. Because parks and recreation agencies are so woven into the fabric of American life, it's crucial that you have a well thought-out and practiced plan. If you think you're set in this regard because you have a program written out on a few sheets of paper, you're wrong.

Planning Your Plan

The broad categories for emergency and disaster plan development include recognition, preparation, response, recovery and restoration. Disaster and catastrophic loss-prevention efforts should be the basis for every emergency and disaster plan, but with the understanding that prevention techniques aren't always successful. When you begin to develop your plan, or when you review and update your existing plan, start by asking some basic questions, such as:

- What is it we do?
- Who do we do it for?
- What are our potential exposures?
- What is the response time for emergency workers at our location?
- If emergency workers aren't available during a crisis, what must we be prepared to handle?

It helps to ask these questions while thinking about a few scenarios. For example, consider that a major storm has resulted in hundreds of injuries in your community. You're isolated by poor weather conditions, highways have been declared closed and your facility can't depend on immediate outside support. Operate on the assumption that if something can go wrong, it will. Think through what you'll need to do in each phase for this and other types of emergencies and disasters.

Communication is Key

The most important aspect of an emergency and disaster plan is your ability to communicate. Without communication, your efforts to seek assistance, organize,

mobilize, coordinate efforts and delegate assignments become impossible. Mobile phones have taken a greater role in emergency and disaster planning, but as we learned on Sept. 11, it's wise not to over-rely on them. Hand-held portable radios remain an integral tool for coordinating internal functions. Battery back-up systems for radio control rooms and relay centers are crucial in times of disaster. Power-assisted megaphones can also play an important role in moving large numbers of people and transmitting vital safety instructions when public address systems aren't available or have been rendered inoperable. The bottom line is that you can't manage a disaster without the ability to communicate internally and externally.

Crowd Management

There's a critical difference between crowd management and crowd control. Crowd control entails taking measures to regain order in an unmanaged crowd; it's a response taken when crowd behavior begins to disrupt acceptable operating conditions. Crowd management, in contrast, entails having the planning in place to move large numbers of people in an orderly fashion. Crowd control is almost always the purview of law enforcement personnel, but the responsibility for crowd management belongs to all personnel.

There are infinite possibilities of what can bring disorder to an assembly of people. The most obvious these days is terrorism; more common examples include religious, racial, social and political clashes among groups, controversial speakers or vendors, labor disputes and other volatile issues. When preparing for special events, you need to evaluate all aspects of your likely crowd and identify any potential disruptions.

Evacuation planning is an important part of crowd management. Designated safe-refuge staging areas are fundamental to all emergency and disaster plans. Additional considerations are necessary for evacuating physically, mentally, visually and hearing-challenged guests. You must know and understand the handling requirements for all likely guests for indoor and outdoor evacuations.

When planning special events, evaluating specific, recognized characteristics associated with the attending groups' historical behavior should help you determine if you'll need to incorporate any special requirements into your crowd management plan. Planning in this regard includes equipment needs and anticipated staffing levels. Items to consider include generators, electrical requirements, dedicated phone service signs, specific language requirements, security levels, law enforcement personnel, insurance, indemnification's and contracts, and a comprehensive risk-management evaluation of all aspects of the event.

Resources

If a catastrophic event occurs at your location, you should already know what and where the resources are to handle any needs that may arise. The resources can include equipment, personnel and specialized services.

Equipment resources can include a portable generator, portable lighting, megaphones, flashlights, spare batteries, utility shut-off/turn-on wrenches, high-visibility vests, hardhats, rope, saws, hammers, crowbars and a map identifying personnel locations and hazardous material storage areas, including gas and other utility main shut-off devices.

Maintain a list, including phone numbers, of people who speak foreign languages, special-equipment operators, helicopter rescue operators, crane and high-reach equipment companies and other emergency responders as based on location and potential need.

Operations that provide services for the public have a responsibility to plan for what-if scenarios. They must develop, implement and practice their emergency and disaster plans. The unthinkable can happen at your facility. Are you ready?

*Bill Avery is president of Avery Safety Consulting, in Orlando, Fla. He has published *Emergency Disaster Planning Guidelines and Procedures*, a book for the sport, leisure and entertainment industries. See www.e-disasterguide.com.*