





The Employee's Role in Disaster Preparedness

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List situations where employees may need to use their disaster support skills
2. Discuss steps to enhance skills needed during a disaster
3. Examine types of personal planning that can help during a disaster

Every healthcare facility has a disaster plan, and every department within the healthcare facility has a tailored disaster plan based on the facility's master plan. The role of the Sterile Processing department (SPD) is to provide critical support—and during a disaster, that role is especially important. Disaster plans, therefore, are critical for helping ensure that SPDs are able to continue providing support to customers and patients. Even more important are the people who are charged with carrying out that plan. Sterile Processing (SP) staff members must be prepared to enact their plan on a moment's notice. Each member should understand their role and feel comfortable carrying out the duties that go with it. Being confident in the disaster plan can save time in situations where time is essential. By taking time to prepare, employees can increase their confidence and level of service as needed. This lesson addresses considerations for disaster planning in the SPD.

Objective 1: List situations where employees may need to use their disaster support skills

Disasters can come at any time and in any form. They are never planned and can occur when the SPD is at its busiest. SP professionals must be prepared to respond appropriately to numerous urgent requests. All employees must understand their responsibilities and be able to fulfill those duties regardless of how stressful a situation or disaster becomes.

Some disasters happen within the facility (e.g., fire, loss of power, water-related incidents or even loss of the facility's computer system). A disaster that strikes within the facility is called an internal disaster. While the community surrounding the healthcare facility may not be impacted, these instances will affect the healthcare facility's operations and require special and appropriate responses from employees.

Disasters that strike the surrounding community can also affect the healthcare facility. Floods, tornados,



hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters can challenge the health and safety of a community as well as the operations of the facility. Manmade emergencies can also impact a healthcare facility and cause the facility to shift into disaster response mode to serve the needs of patients. Situations such as mass shootings, explosions, fires, chemical spills and other incidents are called external disasters. These types of disasters threaten the normal operations of the healthcare facility and may require additional staffing, equipment and supplies to serve the increased demand.

When both internal and external disasters are discussed, the tendency is to address the healthcare facility as a whole (i.e., “The facility implements its disaster plan” or “The facility readies for large numbers of patients”). Within that facility, however, are numerous departments, each providing a different type of service. Each department must be ready to ensure that its role is carried out flawlessly, so optimal patient care can be delivered. The department must identify any possible needs and put into place a plan to address those needs. This requires effective communication between departments and work areas. Once requirements have been identified, every employee in every department must be able to assume their assigned responsibilities and carry them out effectively and safely.

When disaster strikes, every employee is impacted and must understand their responsibilities to ensure their department provides the level of service required. Disaster response takes planning at all levels of the healthcare facility, and it also requires training and practice.

Objective 2: Discuss steps to enhance skills needed during a disaster

Ask any SP professional who has been through a disaster and they will likely admit that it was a sobering experience. During disasters, service needs often increase, and employees in each work area must understand their role and ensure that they are prepared to carry out the necessary responsibilities (e.g., employees in the assembly and sterilization area may need to survey any unsterile trays and prioritize which ones may be needed for emergency use). When an SPD goes into a disaster mode, it must shift into a higher level of focus, with all minds and efforts directed toward preparation, anticipation and service.

The time to prepare for disaster response is before a disaster happens. Too often, disaster planning appears good on paper, but individuals within a specific department or work area may not pay close attention to detail. Much like a safety inservice may have some employees assuming injuries won't happen in their department, disaster training may also be met with similar indifference. To serve their roles and meet their responsibilities, all SP professionals must take disaster planning seriously. What follows are some basic steps to help the SP staff prepare for and respond to a disaster:

Step 1: Learn the department's role in a disaster. Needs change during disasters, and in some cases, a department's services may also change. For example, SP may need to provide supplies, equipment and instruments to triage areas or facilitate different distribution systems for equipment and procedural needs. Those services should be outlined in the department's disaster plan. The department manager should be able to answer any questions about

emergency processes. If deliveries might be needed in unfamiliar areas, a walk-through should be conducted as a part of employee training. SP staff should be aware that they may be asked to make rounds and deliveries differently. They may also need to shift routine duties to prioritize new needs.

Step 2: Understand your role in a disaster. During a disaster, every employee's role is important.

Increased workload requires additional effort from every employee during very stressful times. Take time to understand the duties and responsibilities of each SP position during a disaster and ask questions if any duty is unclear. It is important to understand the specific codes that may be issued via intercom or signal alarms and how those codes impact operations. Also, employees must become familiar with emergency and alternative exits in case an internal disaster prevents the use of the main exit and evacuation becomes necessary. When disaster strikes, actions should be second nature and not cause confusion.

SP staff members are also responsible for keeping the facility abreast of changes in their contact information. During a disaster, it may be necessary to reach staff members to convey information about changed “report to work” times or the need for additional or immediate help. For those reasons, departments should keep contact information on file and have an emergency callback process, so employees can be notified. SP staff must ensure that the department has up-to-date phone numbers and other contact information to facilitate communication.

Step 3: Actively participate in all drills and discussions pertaining to disaster preparedness. Emotions run high during any disaster.



Employees who feel confident in their responsibilities and processes can reduce stress, save precious time and prevent injuries. Disaster drills are also opportunities to identify areas in need of improvement. Good communication during and after a drill can enhance response during a disaster. Every employee should be encouraged to ask questions and make suggestions for improvements in the response process.

Objective 3: Examine types of personal planning that can help during a disaster

Disaster preparedness should also be planned on a personal level. Just as the facility asks, “What do we need to do to respond to a disaster?” each employee should ask, “What do I need to respond to a disaster?” For example, if an employee would require extended childcare to remain at work during a disaster, it would be wise to put in place a plan to enact if needed. A talk with a childcare provider, neighbor or family member can help establish a plan for emergencies.

Other planning for personal needs, including medication requirements, should also be considered. If prescription medication would be required to complete an extended shift or shifts, employees should determine whether a 24-hour supply could be made available and stored at work. Employees should not rely on getting prescriptions for personal needs filled during a disaster, because the pharmacy will also be busy serving patient needs. Other personal needs should also be addressed. During an extended shift, employees should consider whether a clean pair of socks or the opportunity to freshen up with a toothbrush, toothpaste and mouthwash would be important and beneficial. Most SP employees have locker space where they can keep a small kit of personal items.

Finally, employees should prepare mentally for a disaster. Watching a disaster on televised news is not the same as preparing for a disaster on a personal level. When external disasters happen, employees are not exempt from the disaster. For example, SP staff may be working at the hospital during a hurricane and simultaneously worrying about their family, friends and property, which can take a heavy toll. There is no way to anticipate what that stress would feel like or how it may impact work quality; but discussing different types of emergencies or, if possible, speaking with some who has experienced a disaster as an SP employee can help prepare individuals for a real event.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important thing any employee can do to prepare for a disaster is realize that such incidents do not just happen to other facilities and communities. Every healthcare facility runs the risk of serving in a disaster—and during a community disaster, a healthcare facility plays a much different role than many other businesses. While schools and most businesses may close, healthcare facilities evacuate and close only in the direst circumstances. Similar to law enforcement and the fire department, healthcare facilities remain open and step up to serve their communities during disasters. Those who have chosen to serve in healthcare know they will be asked to serve when other entities have closed. This is the expectation of the community and a responsibility that SP employees must take seriously. 🗣️

RESOURCES

Central Service Leadership Manual, Third Ed. 2020. Chapter 14: Safety, Emergency Planning and Disaster Preparedness, pp. 167–184.

HSPA. “Disasters Don’t Discriminate: Expert Advice on Managing Emergencies Like a Pro.” *PROCESS* January/February 2019, pp. 61–65.