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By Lauris Freidenfelds

Evacuation Essentials: Proper Planning Prevents Panic

I have always subscribed to the motto, "Proper Planning Prevents Panic." This is never more evident than during actual emergencies. I have personally experienced the narrowing of my vision and a foggy thought process when confronted with an unexpected, dangerous situation. And, even though I have been a part of the safety and security industry for decades, it is still frightening. For the average person, it can be paralyzing.

To maximize the safety of all, the general population should be involved in three aspects of emergency responses: Plan awareness and training, ensuring communications options are available, and drilling or practicing.

Although there are many emergencies that may require evacuations, the common thread should be a consistent plan, regardless of the threat. It's essential to review and assess the risks of your environment.

Develop plans that are simple and easy to read. Try to reduce the plans to just one page of bulleted items. There is no need to go into the history of active shooter incidents. Simply tell your people what to do and where to go. It is also a best practice to place these simple instructions out where people can see and read every day.

As much as possible, it is a best practice to keep evacuation routes the same for all emergencies. Creating different plans routes and routines for each type of emergency over-complicates the situation and can confuse people.

Additionally, something that frequently gets overlooked in the planning process is where people congregate after they exit a building. Ensure that the plan includes a mustering or rally location. These locations should be safe distance from the affected area, and a person—such as a fire warden—should be assigned to inventory who is out safely. More and more security professionals have been implementing new technology to collect the data of who is safely out of the building and have it available for the authorities. Emergency first responders want to know who, and how many people, are left in a hazardous area. They do not want to send their resources into the area if it has been completely evacuated.

Communication best practices

If you are a campus public safety leader, you probably recognize that every year you have up to 25% new students on the campus. They will be struggling to figure out their new environment. Many will be alone and on their own for the first time and inundated with information. Therefore, safety and security should contribute to their new student

orientation. Step one is explaining how an emergency will be communicated. It's crucial to get them included in the campus mass notification/communication system. An automatic enrollment system is the best option for everyone, since the "opt in" usually engages only a small percentage of the population. In fact, there are some statistics indicating that when the population is required to take action to enroll, only 30% to 50% do so. Of course, if there has been an incident on campus, those percentages increase.

The automatic enrollment option requires that you ask each person for a cell phone number to be used to contact them in an emergency. I have encountered the usual pushbacks to enrollment: "It is my personal phone, and I don't want the organization to have that number" or "I don't want the organization tracking my location." This may require building trust with your population.

To achieve the most effective means of mass communication, ensure that the messages are transmitted via multiple modalities. There are many options from SMSD/text, to mobile alert apps for smart phones, social media, fire evacuation voice system, public paging systems and digital signage.

Cell phone/SMS/text alerting systems have the highest degree of satisfaction and effectiveness, and today, almost everyone carries a smart phone and uses the texting feature. The systems have become more sophisticated in recent years and now include geo-fencing capabilities. Geo-fencing is the technological capability to send a text message to only those people in the geographic area of the incident. This helps in preventing panic or concern by people not affected. (Although it's tempting, it's important to avoid utilizing cell phone/SMS/text alerting systems for non-emergencies, as this will cause some to turn off the notifications. Don't send out messages about tuition payments or school store sales.)

If an emergency condition involves the loss of cell towers or connectivity, you will need an alternative method to reach out to your population. Consider the use of digital information signage, which can be converted to transmit emergency alerts. Many campuses now have these in every building. Most buildings have a fire command location (where the fire alarm system identifies the location of the fire) that will have an ability to communicate via that system. It's important to have a plan in place to utilize this system.

Additionally, make sure that the person who communicates via a voice system provides concise and calm messages. It is a good prac-



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tice to script the messages. You want to gain the attention of the population but not cause additional panic.

Put the plan into practice

Once you have oriented your people to emergency plans and you have established communications, it is time to practice, drill or exercise the plans. Do not run an evacuation exercise before your people have been trained.

Fire evacuation drills are the most common exercise. These should be practiced regularly to the point where your people can participate in a routine manner, without panic. If a real incident were to happen, there will be fear naturally, but the routine will help them evacuate safely. Most local authorities will determine the frequency of the drills. Ensure there is adequate and appropriate signage along the route.

Unfortunately, we now live in an environment where a fire is not the only emergency hazard. Active shooter scenarios and threats by people are far too common. The two main active threat response protocols are the "Run, Hide, Fight" plan and the ALICE (Alert, Lock-down, Inform, Counter and Evacuate) plan. Regardless of which plan

you subscribe to, ensure that your people have been trained and then exercise the plan. Again, this training should be accomplished before an incident. Train your people to be aware of their surroundings. How do they get to the nearest evacuation route? When is it best to hide, and when should they evacuate/run?

I would recommend that the active threat exercise be conducted at least once per year. There may be local compliance requirements, but another motto I use to handle an emergency is, "We want to be more than compliant; we want to be ready." Saving lives is more than worth the time invested. 🙏

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