

Emergency planning: Developing a viable response for your building

The recent hostage shooting in a downtown Portland office tower, the April 19 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center bombing in New York City, the Chicago flood and the Los Angeles earthquake, although separate events, should send a chill and strong message to property managers, owners and tenants everywhere — disaster planning for the unthinkable is mandatory today. While most will never have to deal with one of these major tragedies, the possibility exists.

When it comes to emergency planning, the property manager has two responsibilities that override all other considerations. They are, in order of priority, to protect the lives of the building's occupants and others on the premises, and to protect and preserve the property interests of the tenants and owner.

At the outset, property managers and owners must develop a keen awareness of what constitutes risk at their buildings, involve tenants in the process of developing a viable emergency program and integrate the plan into the everyday management of the building. In other words, develop a plan for systematic risk reduction.

Each property should be looked at as a unique entity that may be in need of unique emergency procedures. Further, preparing an emergency procedures plan requires extensive time, research and teamwork. No property manager working alone can create a comprehensive, well-conceived plan. It must be developed in cooperation with the property owner, the police and fire departments, service contractors, community service agencies and, most importantly, the tenants occupying the premises.

Risk assessment

The first phase involves assessing disaster and emergency potential. Disasters occur more frequently as a result of incidents caused by individuals (such as robberies and assaults) than from natural hazards.

Keeping both types of causes in mind, setting priorities on which types of breaches are most likely to occur is high on the list. The key to an effective risk assessment is the utilization of an extensive questionnaire. For instance, "What can happen on the property? What expo-

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sure exist on the property? What is being done now to prevent an occurrence? Is it enough? Is mitigation possible?"

Impact evaluation

Analyzing the various factors affecting the likelihood of certain emergencies occurring will require numerous meetings and extensive teamwork. Many diverse issues will need to be thoroughly addressed. For instance, certain areas of the country are more prone to given types of emergencies — specifically natural disasters — than others and must be planned for accordingly. Just as relevant as the geographic area within which a property is located is the immediate environment. The neighborhood in which a building is located can create its own set of unique problems. Also, office buildings and other commercial properties present special challenges because of their many and diverse tenancies, the presence of expensive office equipment, special electronic needs and a high volume of pedestrian traffic. Higher volume of pedestrian traffic often increases the probability of theft and assault.

Plan execution

Once the property management team has completed the risk assessment and analysis of the various factors, a property's emergency plan will be fully outlined in a comprehensive emergency procedures manual. This manual, designed by the property manager with the

emergency management team, should contain all of the information needed to safeguard tenants, visitors and property before, during and after an emergency. To be of most assistance, the manual should contain detailed instructions for everyone involved in an emergency to follow. Moreover, the emergency team and tenants should be drilled in the procedures and trained to know how to react in any type of emergency.

The emergency manual should contain an extensive list of telephone numbers for entities such as the police and fire departments, community services, utility companies and service contractors. The property manager also should include a complete description of the property and blueprints, including "as-built" drawings that clearly show the locations of mechanical equipment, utility and water shut-offs, elevators, stairwells, roof access, stand pipes, emergency generators and life-safety equipment.

The actual movement of people and the effectiveness of the communication to all involved will determine the success of the plan. Repetition produces confidence when a real emergency occurs.

Return to normal operation

The stress level of all involved will continue at a high level during this trying time. The property manager and the management team will be deluged with questions from tenants and the media regarding liability, coverage and perhaps even questions regarding the cause of the incident. Communication is the key. The tenants and the media will need continuous and regular news releases announcing the progress toward restoration. Lastly, reporting and documentation for insurance purposes cannot be underestimated.

I conclude with wise counsel shared by my father. Saying you're sorry to someone who has lost a loved one as a result of negligence just doesn't cut it. Disaster planning for the unthinkable is mandatory today. ▲