

Emergency Preparedness



KEY ISSUES

A strong sense of security and peace of mind is one of the key reasons a resident chooses a senior living community. To adequately prepare for emergencies, senior living communities need to imagine the unimaginable—how to survive under dire, life-threatening conditions. A single hurricane, earthquake, fire, tornado or blizzard can have devastating consequences. Early preparation and proper planning are essential to meeting these (mostly) unforeseen yet inevitable events. While there is no single emergency plan that can be applied to all emergencies, it is important to have a strategy and contingencies in place for potential disasters.

KEY FINDINGS

- To effectively prepare for emergencies, senior living communities need to prepare in advance of unforeseen events, harnessing operational resources, ensuring there are enough critical supplies, staffing and facilities.
- A strong emergency preparedness plan includes financial planning and an effective communications plan.
- A comprehensive emergency preparedness plan includes guidelines during and after an event. During the emergency, management needs to be vigilant about record-keeping and flexible in its decision-making. Best practices include logging all communication, properly assessing energy and resource needs, and ensuring the privacy of residents.

ANALYSIS

A comprehensive emergency preparedness plan touches multiple operational facets.

Early preparation and proper planning are essential to meeting needs during these unforeseen yet inevitable events. Depending upon the region, emergency preparedness requires having a plan in place both for unpredictable disasters (such as an unexpected storm, fire or earthquake) and events with more advanced warning, such as a hurricane. Additionally, any region can be affected by a power outage, chemical spill, bomb threat or workplace violence. Each type of disaster brings with it unique circumstances, which means a senior living community needs to be flexible and adaptive. While there is no single emergency plan that can be applied to all emergencies, it is important to have a strategy and contingencies in place for potential disasters. This report outlines best practices for emergency preparedness, looking specifically at hurricanes. Emergency preparedness plans for hurricane-affected areas demonstrate not only how a single event requires compound, interconnected plans for residents and staff but also the risks inherent in not preparing adequately. However, most of these best practices can be applied to other types of emergencies, such as blizzards, fires or chemical spills that may also require evacuation plans.

Most of the preparation for emergencies needs to take place prior to the event. In other words, a community should be in a constant state of preparation and readiness. However, senior living communities need to understand that managing an emergency situation requires not just upfront investment in planning, but also flexibility and follow-through during and after the event (Fig. 1). Senior living communities need to prepare for the possibility that state-approved emergency plans may fail; thus it is critical to have backup plans in place prior to an emergency occurring. It is also important for senior living communities to imagine the unimaginable and try to prepare for that—how can a community survive in desperate straits? Prior to an emergency, a senior living community needs to address several key areas that will ensure its ability to figuratively (and sometimes quite literally) ride out the storm. These include plans for uninterrupted clinical care, an evacuation protocol, proper financial planning and a comprehensive communications strategy.



Figure 1: Emergency Preparations

Prior to Event

- Harness operational resources
- Train staff
- Establish evacuation protocol
- Develop vendor relationships
- Prepare financially
- Create communications plan

During Event

- Assess energy needs
- Enable communication channels
- Log all communication
- Ensure privacy
- Provide additional supplies
- Staff adequately
- Be flexible

Post-Event

- Assess energy needs
- Enable communication channels
- Log all communication
- Ensure privacy
- Provide additional supplies
- Staff adequately
- Be flexible

Figure 2: Emergency Preparations: Pre-event

PREPARATION	CHECKLIST
Harness operational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain reserves of food and water • Determine healthcare, transportation and childcare plan for staff • Understand energy needs—backup generator and fuel • Develop redundancies
Train staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish expectations prior to hire • Includes clinical staff, housekeeping, food service, maintenance, others
Establish evacuation protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish evacuation protocol • Determine which residents need additional assistance • Document medical supplies, medication and accessories • Leave enough time for evacuation • Secure transportation • Identify a confirmed location to move skilled nursing
Develop vendor relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivate relationships with local police, fire, hospitals, hotels
Prepare financially	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish relationship with payroll courier that can deliver cash • Maintain cash reserves on site for evacuation supplies • Budget annually for evacuations to cover the deductible
Create communications plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure clear, open channels of communication • Website • Toll-free numbers • Consider channels like social media, email, and text messaging

Source: Life Care Services

Prior To Emergency

Prior to an emergency, senior living communities should have a plan in place that encompasses several variables:

- **Harness operational resources:** An adequately prepared senior living community needs to develop a plan for immediate, unexpected disasters (Fig. 2). Immediate critical supplies and resources should be on hand for at least 72 hours in the event of an emergency, with firm plans on how to resupply should the emergency last longer than three days. It also includes a plan for health care, transportation and child care for employees' families. Additionally, while most senior living communities have a portable generator on site, they should be performing preventive maintenance to ensure the generator is capable of running 24 hours a day in the event of an emergency. A comprehensive plan will also consider what to connect a generator to for adequate emergency operations. There should also be redundancies in place should the generator fail. A senior living community should expect power, water and fuel restoration to be unavailable for at least 10 days after an event, and should plan accordingly (Fig. 3). This includes having vendors available to replenish key supplies.

Figure 3: Preparing Critical Resources and Supplies: Energy, Water, Food

ENERGY	WATER	FOOD/SUPPLIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know generator connections • Establish relationship with electrician • Identify fuel delivery resources • Set up temporary equipment in safe place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan for both potable and nonpotable uses • Install on-site storage tank (if possible) • Identify all water sources • Establish sewage management plan • Average amount of potable water needed: three gallons/ resident per day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan for both potable and nonpotable uses • Install on-site storage tank (if possible) • Identify all water sources • Establish sewage management plan • Average amount of potable water needed: three gallons/ resident per day

Source: Life Care Services

A good emergency preparedness plan will also include a refrigerated truck, stocked with food that runs on fuel rather than electricity. During an emergency, most supplies and resources will be inaccessible locally. As a result, a senior living community should partner with a group purchasing entity that can act as a liaison for supply orders. To be truly prepared, a senior living community needs to have several backup plans in place in case of failure.

Figure 4: Preparing Critical Resources and Supplies

STAFFING
Establish clinical staffing assignments
Assign staff to pre- and post-emergency teams
Identify expectations in employee handbook, consequences for noncompliance, and exemption situations
Establish 12-hour rotating shifts
Ensure housekeeping and maintenance staff are assigned for cleanup and meal service
Establish list of duties and responsibilities
Develop and communicate pay expectations, organize bonus payment plans, and comply with wage and hour laws
Complement clinical staff with home health personnel and case managers
Establish accommodations for children and pets, set up day care
Identify resources for auto fuel for staff
Identify transportation for staff
Create payroll payment register when power and internet access is not available

Source: Life Care Services

- **Train staff:** Staff should be prepared on evacuation procedures, what to do in the event of a community lockdown, and management expectations for performance (Fig. 4). Senior living communities also need to ensure there is adequate staff coverage, not just for health care, but also housekeeping, food service, and all the other departments tasked with taking care of the resident population. Expectations for employees during emergencies should be included in their job description before their hiring and should be included in an upfront agreement, as well as annual reminders of the commitment. Accommodations should be made to allow staff to bring family members with them during the evacuation.

Figure 5: Preparing Critical Resources and Supplies: Facilities & Transportation

FACILITIES	HOUSING/HOTEL	TRANSPORTATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract with general contractor/structural engineer to assess habitation • Can expand contractor role to manage subcontractors, restoration personnel • Contract with restoration company in conjunction with insurance company • Negotiate roofing contract in advance • Prenegotiate costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify housing for skilled nursing residents • Identify housing for IL/AL residents • If in hotel, prenegotiate rates • Plan for local hotel, and for facility more than three hours drive away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract with multiple bus companies for departure and return • Know travel restrictions • Determine alternative routes in case of road closures • Identify staff members to assist with loading and unloading more frail residents • Stagger departure times

Source: Life Care Services

- **Establish evacuation protocol:** In some cases, evacuation may be necessary. As a result, it is essential to have a protocol in place for evacuation procedures (Fig. 5). This includes determining which residents will need additional assistance prior to evacuating, documenting medical supplies, medication and accessories such as wheelchairs and canes that will need to accompany residents, and leaving enough time for evacuation (Fig. 6). Often, a mandatory evacuation notice will come too late given the complexity of moving an elderly population to a safer location. Strong leadership is needed to determine the timing for evacuations. Additionally, management needs to be able to secure transportation for the community for an efficient relocation process. Last, management needs to identify a confirmed location to move the skilled nursing residents to that is in relatively close proximity to the community, since these residents are usually unable to sustain long-distance transportation. In most situations, residents will be moved using the community bus or rented buses. For those residents whose health is compromised, private ambulance services may be needed for transportation.

Figure 6: Supply Checklist for Residents and Employees

Medication: 30-day supply
 Food/water: 10-day supply
 Luggage: 1-bag limit
 Flashlights/batteries/lanterns
 Clothing/toiletries
 Personal documents
 Sleeping bags



- **Develop vendor relationships:** One of the key components for a successful emergency plan is having solid, established relationships with local authorities and vendors. Keeping an open line of communication with local police, fire departments and hospitals is critical as is having a strong relationship with hotels that can house the residents temporarily in the event of an evacuation.
- **Prepare financially:** Preparing for an emergency doesn't just require managing staff, resident expectations or physical resources. It also requires adequate financial planning to ensure comprehensive coverage when business is interrupted. Best practices include purchasing an insurance plan that covers nonmandatory evacuations, since senior living community leaders often need to make the decision to evacuate earlier than the official order is given by local authorities to allow enough time to transport residents. Without power, processing payroll is also a challenge, so senior living communities should establish a relationship with a courier that can deliver cash instead of checks. Additionally, a senior living community should have cash reserves on site, including enough cash for evacuation supplies such as fuel, ice or water since, without power, credit cards are not a viable option and neither are ATMs. A good emergency preparedness plan will build into the annual budget a line item for evacuations.
- **Create a communications plan:** This is perhaps one of the most critical components to preparing for an emergency. A senior living community needs to ensure clear, open channels of communication (often hindered by power outages) for its residents, its staff, and family members who are concerned about the well-being of their loved ones. A strong communications plan is necessary to ensure that employees understand their role in an emergency, and it should be in place prior to adverse weather seasons. For instance, in states affected by hurricanes, the development of the emergency preparedness plan, and its corresponding communications plan, should occur three to four months before the June 1–November 30 hurricane season. Additionally, it is likely that the communications infrastructure will be destroyed during an emergency. Senior living communities should not expect mobile phones, email and electricity to work, so alternate communication plans should be established so family members can find out the status of their loved ones and management can effectively manage resources.

MINI CASE STUDY

Hurricane Call Center

Situation:

Each year, senior living communities in hurricane-prone states are affected by adverse weather conditions brought on by storms. During the most intense hurricanes, it is often necessary to evacuate residents to a safer location. Hurricanes often affect local communications infrastructure, knocking out power lines and cell towers, making it impossible to call or send emails to family members from the emergency location.

Objective:

Provide a real-time communications platform for family members of residents who are affected by hurricanes.

Strategy:

Set up an out-of-state 24-hour hotline and website with constantly updated information, making it very easy for family members to get information on their loved ones, leave messages and make contact with them.

Solution:

Prior to hurricanes, community leadership informs residents and family members that a call center and website are activated to provide frequent, consistent updates. To ensure proper staffing, the call center should be manned in a remote location away from the site of the emergency. Additionally, as part of normal annual preparations, community management collects current emergency contact information, which is transmitted to an office located outside of the affected state(s). Every four hours, on a 24-hour basis, updates on the residents are posted to the website, including evacuation

information.

Prior to the event, senior living community management has secured satellite phones to communicate in case local and cell phone services are debilitated.

Regardless of platform, all communication is logged, providing documentation that may help mitigate risk should an unfortunate event or an accident occur during the emergency. All calls are documented, time stamped, marked for follow-up, and closed out upon completion.

Recommendation:

Frequent and consistent updates on the website not only reassure family members, but they also reduce the burden on the call center. Staffing an out-of-state hotline around the clock during an emergency may be costly in the short term, but provides benefits not just to residents, but to their family members as well.



Figure 7: Emergency Preparations: During Event

PREPARATION	CHECKLIST
Harness operational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess energy needs—what is essential? • Provide additional supplies—toiletries, medical accessories
Create communications plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide real-time updates • Establish channel to allow family members to connect to loved ones • Log all communication
Ensure privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide tents and screens
Prepare staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff for triage
Be flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need staff for services such as food preparation, janitorial and administrative support

Source: Life Care Services

During Emergency

While much of the work of preparing for an emergency situation needs to take place prior to the event, there is still a great deal of work to be done during and after the event to avoid unnecessary risk (Fig. 7). During the emergency, management needs to be vigilant about recordkeeping and flexible in its decision-making.

- **Assess energy needs:** If the community has not evacuated, management needs to assess what essentials should be run on the generator and how much fuel is necessary to continue running the generator.
- **Enable communication channels:** With many family members separated by distance from their loved ones, it is essential that senior living communities manage a real-time, centralized communications platform. This can include a website and toll-free number that provides updates and a channel for families to connect. This needs to be operated from an office outside of the affected states.

- **Ensure privacy:** If a community has been evacuated to a triage location, a senior living community needs to provide privacy to residents receiving clinical care. Tents and screens may be necessary to ensure residents can maintain their dignity while receiving care.
- **Provide additional supplies:** During an evacuation, it is very likely that residents may have left behind some crucial supplies. Senior living communities should be able to supply residents with additional toiletries and medical necessities.
- **Staff adequately:** During an emergency, it's critical to staff the triage center with healthcare professionals. Yet, a senior living community also needs to staff appropriately for food preparation, janitorial services and administrative support. Plans should also be made to provide additional staff from outside the affected area.
- **Be flexible:** This is perhaps one of the most important elements of a strong emergency preparedness plan. Because no two emergencies are exactly the same, it is critical that management and staff remain flexible and adaptive in order to respond quickly to change.

Figure 8: Emergency Preparations: Post-Event

PREPARATION	CHECKLIST
Harness operational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate damage • Employee contractors, electricians, roofers, etc. • Coordinate repair and construction efforts
Provide relief staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange for relief workers
Attend to residents' personal needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist with care for resident animals, including walking dogs • Try to resume everyday routine
Communicate recovery plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to update residents, staff results on return, relief and recovery efforts

Source: Life Care Services

Post-Emergency

After an emergency event, senior living communities still need to closely monitor multiple components to mitigate risk (Fig 8). Damage to the community, exhausted staff and vague communication all pose risks:

- **Evaluate damage:** As mentioned previously, senior living communities should establish relationships with vendors throughout the year. Having strong relationships with contractors, electricians, roofers and other professionals will help speed recovery efforts. It is critical that senior living communities have a maintenance plan and staff that evaluates the property for damage and is able to coordinate repair and construction efforts.
- **Provide relief staff:** Post-emergency, staff members who have been on-call and working during the event are likely exhausted. Management should arrange for relief staff as soon as possible. Many of the staff may have had damage to their personal property and effects that they will also need to deal with.
- **Attend to residents' and staff personal needs:** After an emergency and particularly in evacuations, residents' lives have been interrupted. One of the most overlooked but important components to resuming everyday life is attending to the less critical needs of residents. This may include small acts of kindness such as walking their dogs or feeding their fish. What seems like a small gesture in these situations is likely to increase satisfaction exponentially.
- **Communicate recovery plans clearly:** Once again, communication is critical at this juncture. Senior living communities should communicate plans to both staff and residents with respect to return, relief and recovery efforts.

Conclusion

Clearly, a comprehensive emergency preparedness plan involves coordinating many moving parts. Senior living community management needs to own this entire process, from start to finish. Obviously, there are outside stakeholders that are brought into the process throughout an emergency but ultimate responsibility lies with a community's executive director and administrator. Mitigating risk and ensuring the safety of residents is not an easy task, but with "security" ranked so high in importance and satisfaction, it is crucial to the success of a community.



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