

PREPARING FOR EMERGENCIES



What is an Emergency?

An **emergency** is a sudden unforeseen crisis, usually involving danger, which calls for immediate action. It is a situation that can directly or indirectly affect a single employee, an entire workplace, or impact a whole community. Emergencies can happen before, during or after work hours and be caused by a range of events and hazards involving both nature and people.

Workplaces in California are at risk for many different types of emergencies including:

- **Natural disasters** (earthquakes, floods)
- **Extreme weather** (storms, heat)
- **Fires** (building fires, wildfires)
- **Chemical or hazardous material spills or releases**
- **Major transportation or vehicle accidents** (involving trucks, buses, cars, forklifts, etc.)
- **Incidents of violence**
- **Bomb threats**
- **Medical emergencies**
- **Employee deaths** (suicide, homicide, unintentional or natural)
- **Acts of terror**
- **Outbreaks of disease or infections** (HINI virus)

Your workplace may be at risk for some of the emergency situations listed above. Focus on these possibilities when developing or reviewing your **Emergency Action Plan**. It is crucial that your plan meets the unique needs of your workplace, your employees and local residents.

What Should Emergency Action Plans Include?

Start by forming an emergency committee and identify who should be involved in developing your plan. Involve different department representatives, employees and management. Effective planning begins with leadership, management support and open communication. Your plan needs to address state and local safety laws and must comply with governmental agency regulations. Although Cal/OSHA does not explicitly require every business to have an Emergency Action Plan, most businesses need to have

one to meet local city or county requirements, or because a business's work falls under other Cal/OSHA standards that do require one. It is a good idea for every business to have an Emergency Action Plan.

The Cal/OSHA Emergency Action Plan standard (§ 3220) sets minimum requirements for what the Plan should include when a workplace has an emergency action plan. Employers with more than 10 employees must have such a plan in writing. Employers with 10 or fewer employees do not need to have a written plan, but they do need to meet all the other requirements of the Emergency Action Plan standard and must communicate these elements to employees.

When they are required, Emergency Action Plans must include the following elements:

- Procedures for reporting a fire or other emergency
- Procedures for emergency evacuation, including the types of evacuation and exit route assignments
- Procedures to be followed by employees who remain to operate critical operations before they evacuate
- Procedures to account for all employees after evacuation
- Procedures to be followed by employees performing rescue or medical duties
- An employee alarm system that has a distinctive signal for each purpose and provides warning for necessary emergency action as called for in the emergency action plan. The employee alarm must be capable of being perceived above ambient noise or light levels by all employees in the affected portions of the workplace. Tactile devices may be used to alert those employees who would not otherwise be able to recognize the audible or visual alarm.
- Training for each employee on the preferred means of reporting emergencies, such as manual pull box alarms, public address systems, radio or telephones. The employer must also designate and train employees to assist in a safe and orderly evacuation of other employees.
- Emergency telephone numbers which must be posted near telephones, employee notice boards, and other conspicuous locations when telephones serve as a means of reporting emergencies
- The name or job title of every employee who may be contacted by employees who need more information about the plan or an explanation of their duties under the plan.

The employer must review the emergency action plan with each employee covered by the plan when the plan is first developed or the employee is assigned initially to a job; when the employee's responsibilities under the plan change; and when the plan is changed.

Take the time to develop a complete, comprehensive plan and review it at least once a year. Partner with emergency responders such as fire fighters and work with organizations such as the American Red Cross. There must also be a process in place for evaluating the effectiveness of a response after an incident occurs.



Tips on Specific Types of Emergencies

Below are tips on three different types of emergencies that California workplaces are at risk for.

Violence

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), workplace violence is defined as any physical assault, threatening behavior, or verbal abuse that occurs in the work setting. The National Crime Victimization Survey, conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice (1993-99), estimated that approximately 900 work-related homicides and 1.7 million total assaults occurred each year in the U.S. Workplace violence accounted for 18% of all violent crime in 1993-99. Preliminary figures from 2007 show there were 610 work-related homicides in the U.S. that year.

Every worksite should have a clear and comprehensive violence prevention program if there is a potential risk of violence. The key components of an effective workplace violence prevention program are specified in guidelines issued by Cal/OSHA and federal OSHA. According to both state and federal guidelines, an effective violence prevention program should include these components:

1. Management commitment and employee involvement

The first step is to involve employees, managers, and the union (if any) in a meaningful way. An existing joint labor-management safety and health committee can take on the responsibility of establishing a workplace violence prevention program.

2. Workplace security analysis

A workplace security analysis includes a step-by-step inspection of the workplace to identify potential hazards for workplace violence. It also includes a review of records documenting past violent incidents in the workplace and a survey of employees.

3. Hazardous prevention and control measures

Based on the information from your workplace analysis, the committee should select and implement control measures to make the workplace safer. Some examples of control measures for workplace violence are:

- Improve visibility through better lighting, mirrors, cameras, and removal of obstructions.
- Install security equipment such as key cards, alarm systems, and panic buttons.
- Install “drop safes” in stores and other workplaces that deal with money.
- Train employees about warning signs of potential violence, risk factors, preventive measures, and how to respond to violent incidents.
- Make sure that staffing is adequate on all shifts and provide mobile phones for workers in the field.

4. Incident reporting and follow-up procedures

- Response to threats— The violence prevention program may include provisions for a threat assessment team with members from Human Resources, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), security, management, and unions. The team should investigate specific threats that are made and determine what is necessary to prevent them from being carried out.
- Response to violent incidents— The prevention program should include follow-up procedures for providing medical and psychological services to victims after a violent or threatening incident on the job. They should also include “critical incident debriefing” immediately after a violent incident for all staff affected by the incident. This involves a meeting between affected staff and a trained counselor.
- Reporting— All violent incidents and threats should be reported. Information from these reports should be reviewed and analyzed by the committee on a regular basis to help modify the program.

Earthquakes

Earthquakes are a particular concern for California workplaces. During an earthquake if you are:

Indoors: Drop, Cover and Hold: Drop to the floor, take cover under a sturdy desk or table and hold on to it tightly. Be prepared to move with it until the shaking stops. If you are not near a desk or table, drop to the floor against the interior wall and protect your head and neck with your arms. Avoid windows, mirrors, hanging objects, hazardous chemicals, and cabinets with doors that swing open and contain loose or heavy items. If inside, stay inside until the shaking stops!

Outdoors: Move to an open space away from power lines, trees, signs, buildings, vehicles and other hazards. Lie down or crouch because your legs will be unsteady. Look around to be aware of dangers that may require movement.

Remember: Indoors or outdoors, take action at the first indication of an earthquake. Do not panic, run for building exits or use an elevator. Tell others around you to take cover. Stay under cover until shaking stops. If indoors, evacuation should occur as soon as possible after an earthquake due to the possibility of aftershocks, building collapse, fires or explosions.

Fires

Building damage, injuries or deaths due to fires can be avoided or reduced if:

- Aisles and hallways are kept clear at all times.
- Excessive paper or other combustibles in offices are properly stored.
- Employees know the locations of fire extinguishers and understand how to use them.



Should your workplace encounter a fire or find significant smoke in an enclosed area, do the following:

- Report the fire/smoke to emergency personnel; pull the nearest fire alarm and call 911.
- Evacuate the area immediately via the nearest exit and close the doors behind you.
- Proceed to your designated outside meeting area for emergencies.

Severe Weather

Severe thunderstorms, tornados, flash floods and other kinds of severe weather happen in all areas of the United States and can occur with little, if any, warning. Consequently, it is best to prepare a severe weather plan in advance and train employees and managers to carry it out effectively. Your severe weather plan should include the following:

- A system for receiving critical weather information at your workplace. Use a Public Alert Radio (weather radio), tuned to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Weather Service. Radio receivers can be purchased at many retail stores, through catalogs and over the internet. You can also tune into the Weather Channel if your workplace has cable television access.
- A system for alerting employees, managers and customers. Most workplaces utilize alarm systems or a public address system to alert employees and others about emergencies. It is important to have an emergency back-up system, such as an air horn or megaphone, in the event of loss of electricity. Remember that attending to workers and customers with disabilities may require special attention and planning.
- Identification of safe areas of refuge. Finding appropriate places for shelter during a storm can be a challenge. Portable buildings are extremely vulnerable to high winds and so should not be used as areas of refuge in severe weather. Large rooms, like a warehouse, with expansive roofs may also be a problem since the collapse of an outer wall may bring down the roof. Rooms with large windows are also not recommended since they may shatter, sending glass flying and wind circulating in the room which can cause additional problems. The best locations for safe areas of refuge are small interior rooms and interior hallways away from exterior doors.

Train employees and managers about the severe weather plan. It is essential that employees know what alarms sound like and what to do in the case of severe weather. Holding periodic drills allows you to train everyone in the work environment as well as assess the effectiveness of your plan.