

An aerial photograph of a city street scene, featuring a large parking lot, a circular glass-roofed structure, and various buildings. A semi-transparent blue overlay covers the bottom half of the image, where the title and date are located.

Emergency Response Playbook

June 2020

For those who manage to make a difference.™

IREM® Emergency Response Playbook

For Real Estate Managers

June 4, 2020

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Introduction

Social and political turmoil, along with natural disasters, are unpredictable in their onset and effects. Before you know it, you can find your property in dangerous circumstances.

This playbook is for when you need to act now, and you need quick reference to what you need to do to protect your property, its financial position, and most importantly – the people who live and work there.

Besides referencing credible guidance, you should also lean on your network of property management and service provider contacts. Crises often present unique challenges that aren't covered in any guides or manuals, and your network can be invaluable for sharing experiences, working through problems, and identifying resources.

Following are best practices for ongoing emergency planning. Whenever possible, you should adhere to these practices so that you're best prepared for a crisis situation.

- Create an emergency procedures plan for every property, regardless of size or function, that addresses the property's unique needs. Contents of the plan include:
 - The property's emergency response team
 - Communications procedures
 - How property staff will respond to different types of emergencies
 - Names and contact information for police, fire, utility, and local government emergency response personnel
 - Your property's contractor team, as well as alternates for each service provider
 - A process for notifying the proper authorities and interested parties (lease holders, ownership, insurance companies, local emergency authorities, management company personnel) in the event of an emergency
 - How to inform tenants/residents of management's role in an emergency
 - How tenants/residents should respond in an emergency
 - Insurance and restoration contacts and requirements
 - Procedures for dealing with any damage
 - Conditions and procedures for returning to the property
- Maintain and update the plan periodically (at least annually).
- Communicate the plan frequently and make it readily accessible to all affected parties.
- Support the plan through employee and tenant/resident training and engagement.
- Debrief lessons learned after emergencies and incorporate them into the emergency procedures plan.

This playbook is not meant to provide comprehensive guidance on emergency and disaster planning. For further information, see [*Before and After Disaster Strikes: Developing an Emergency Procedures Manual \(4th ed.\)*](#), which this playbook references.

Communications

- ☐ Use a mass communication system (PA, email, text) and have a back-up plan for when equipment fails or becomes unavailable.
- ☐ Set expectations with stakeholders on method and frequency of communication, as well as response time.
- ☐ Do your best to maintain a calm and professional tone to prevent panic.
- ☐ Help tenants/residents understand when a situation is rapidly developing and new instructions or guidelines may become necessary.
- ☐ Know your tenants/residents so that you can accommodate special needs and circumstances and communicate specific instructions.
- ☐ Have a public relations policy in place to handle questions from the media.
- ☐ Never avoid the media, who will cover the event with or without your cooperation.
- ☐ Use one, consistent contact, a public relations firm, or your corporate communications team to deal with the media.
- ☐ Have a social media policy in place to manage coverage of the property on those platforms.

Preparing the property

- ☐ Store water, first aid products, and other items you may need in an emergency.
- ☐ Examine and reinforce all access points.
- ☐ Review the property, procedures, and areas of preparation with security staff.
- ☐ Install fencing and barriers to prevent and limit access.
- ☐ Board up windows and doors.
- ☐ Inspect and test alarms, sprinklers, floodlights, fire doors, and other emergency response equipment.
- ☐ Remove valuable items, including critical documents and files.
- ☐ Turn off utilities and shut down equipment.

Evacuating the property

- ☐ Unless danger is imminent, follow the orders and advisories of local authorities on when full or partial evacuation is necessary.
- ☐ Know existing evacuation plans and routes, which often must adhere to local ordinances and will vary by property type.
- ☐ Ensure that evacuation routes are clearly posted throughout the property.
- ☐ Determine a method (alarm, PA system, mass text) to initiate and announce the evacuation.
- ☐ Use stairwells in an evacuation. Only the fire department should use the elevator.
- ☐ Have a plan for and pay close attention to children and those with special needs.
- ☐ Establish an area for occupants to gather for head counts and, if necessary, medical treatment.
- ☐ Follow the directions of the police and fire department when they arrive on the scene.

Working with the authorities

- ☐ Keep a current list of police, fire, utility company, and local government contacts.
- ☐ Establish one point of contact between your team and the authorities.
- ☐ Attend update meetings and conference calls with government officials, who typically include the local business community in their emergency communications.
- ☐ Educate officials on specific impacts to the homes, workplaces, or stores you manage. Your local IREM chapter and other professional organizations can help amplify your voice.

Activating insurance coverage

- ☐ Document the event, including your response, impacts, communications, recovery, and expenses.
- ☐ Know your insurance policy, including coverage, limits, deductibles, coinsurance penalties, and riders.
- ☐ Review leases to determine insurance requirements and responsibilities.
- ☐ File claims according to the processes your insurance carriers prescribe (e.g., online, toll-free number).

- ☐ Determine the need for a restoration specialist. The adjuster may recommend one, who will represent the property's interests, but you can typically use your own. Restoration specialists are proficient at working with insurance companies and can help get the fullest coverage possible.
- ☐ Keep in mind that the adjuster's team doesn't represent the interests of the property. The adjuster's team may include construction contractors, engineers, and other service providers.
- ☐ Make sure you get all requests for information from the adjuster in writing.
- ☐ Consider securing the services of a public adjuster to represent the property's interests for large, complex claims.

Managing recovery

- ☐ If safe to do so, walk the property to assess its condition, level of damage, and areas of focus for mitigation and restoration activities.
- ☐ Identify and clear any hazardous conditions or debris.
- ☐ Check for any damage to the foundation or structural supports.
- ☐ Clear debris, patch holes, and remove wet or damaged materials after the event to prevent further damage.
- ☐ Inspect building systems, including water, power, lighting, and HVAC, before turning on utilities. Use a service provider or utility representative if necessary.
- ☐ Hire a restoration specialist, if necessary, to handle all aspects of recovery and get the property back to normal operations as quickly as possible.
- ☐ Identify your contractor team, as well as back-ups. Remember that large, widespread disasters will put a strain on local resources, and contractors may be difficult to secure. Your restoration specialist will have a team of professionals.
- ☐ Make sure the restoration follows local building codes.
- ☐ Set conditions that determine when the property is safe for occupants to return. You will likely have to follow local ordinances and codes in setting these conditions.
- ☐ Defer to local building inspectors or fire officials, when possible, on when it is safe to re-occupy the property.

Conclusion

The unpredictability of emergencies requires flexibility on the part of property managers. These tips, provided for quick reference, can help you adapt to developing conditions, while also following best practices and covering your bases.

And another reminder to use your network! Your colleagues and partners are often dealing with similar problems and may have already devised solutions. Leaning on one another in times of crisis will help you all protect the properties and people you're responsible for. You'll also be able to provide general support to one another, so crucial in challenging times.

Resources and references

[American Red Cross](#)

[*Before and After Disaster Strikes: Developing an Emergency Procedures Manual \(4th ed.\)*](#)

[National Fire Protection Association \(NFPA\)](#)

[National Hurricane Service](#)

[National Organization for Restoration and Remediation Professionals](#)

[National Weather Service](#)

[Public Safety Canada](#)

[U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#)

[U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#)