



IREM® From the Front Lines Podcast

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Bonus episode

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National Preparedness Month and preparing for disaster

Erin:

Welcome to another edition of From the Front Lines, where we discuss both the day-to-day, and one-of-a-kind issues facing real estate managers. In this special bonus episode of From the Front Lines, Jeffrey Lapin CPM®, ARM®, joins us to recognize the start of National Preparedness Month and talk to us about preparing for disaster in real estate management. Welcome to the podcast, Jeff.

Jeff:

Thank you, Erin. It's nice to be here. I'm always happy to help our community get ready for natural disasters and the kind of things that happen at a property. And this is a great opportunity to talk about National Preparedness Month and how we can get ready for those things that are inevitably going to happen.

Erin:

All right, awesome. We appreciate it. All right. National Preparedness Month is observed every September. As we kick off the month, how can property managers use this time to engage tenants, train staff, and evaluate their emergency preparedness plans?

Jeff:

Well, National Preparedness Month, which is September, should be a reminder for all property managers to put it on the calendar every year to pull out their emergency response plans, and test them and see if there's any changes that are needed from last year. Things change all the time at our properties. For instance, a new tenant comes in and they haven't been familiarized with the plan. That's something we should take care of as part of dusting off the plan and making sure that it still works. And it's also a good time to check emergency supplies and things like that. And of course, if you haven't got a plan, you always plan to have a plan, but you just never got there, great time to start. And usually taking that first step is the hardest part, kind of overcoming the inertia of not doing anything, and now we're going to start. And we'll talk a little bit about the various steps involved, but again, September, great time to take that first step, and I think that in terms of starting, the best way in my opinion and my experience to start the process is to for each property that you manage, do a risk assessment, walk the property with your team, whatever that team consists of, and think about as you're walking through the property and as you're doing that risk assessment, what are the four or five most likely scenarios for disasters that might occur at this property, whether it be fire, flood, storm, etc., a power outage. And I think that my recommendation is to, when you gather the team, get everybody to start thinking about brainstorming about this concept of what could actually happen to us. Make it fun, get everyone involved, have a luncheon if that's what you want to do. Don't make it a tedious, kind of a drudgery. This can be a fun process

because it gets everyone started to think about, gee, what if this happened? How would we respond? And I also would recommend engaging tenants in the process, especially your major tenants, if you're managing a commercial property, if you're managing a multifamily residential property, no problem getting some of the tenants involved in that. The tenants need to know, the residents need to know what they're supposed to do in an emergency, and unfortunately, sometimes they get forgotten. And of course our staff needs to be trained to carry out the plan. That includes people that actually work for our company or work for the owner. It can be our contractor personnel, anyone that is going to be at this property when disaster strikes is going to be vital to a successful response.

Erin:

All right, that sounds great. And when they're conducting that risk assessment, what are some of the most common oversights you see property managers make and how can they address them proactively?

Jeff:

Well, it's been my experience in 40 years managing property and managing property managers and so forth, that most property managers know their properties very well. They are the ones who can best determine what are the most likely events that are going to affect this particular property. However, it's also been my experience that most property managers are not experienced in this area of disaster preparedness and response, which is okay. It's not something that we encounter every day, and it's not something that's really part of property manager training, but it should be. So my advice here is don't let your inexperience with the process keep you from engaging in it. If you've never done it, it's time to start and really it shouldn't be daunting, again, it should be a kind of fun process. So having this comprehensive disaster response and recovery plan, that's what we're really doing. Response. In other words, what are we going to do immediately following the disaster and recovery? What are we going to do once the smoke clears and so forth and now it's time to get back to business. So every property, in my opinion, needs to have this customized disaster response and recovery plan customized because every property's different. The tenants are different. The situations are different. Even the layout of the property can have an effect. But property managers I think need to keep in mind that this is not an optional thing. Having these recovery plans and being able to implement them successfully, this is part of our duty as property managers, our clients, our owners are expecting us to have thought about this stuff and be ready for it. So taking that first step right now is best to do when you know there's no fire, there's no floods, you can think clearly. Making a realistic plan is extremely important and doing it in the quiet time is the best way. You mentioned being proactive and so proactivity, being ahead of things is part of a good property manager's role. So it's what careful and competent property managers do. We're proactive. We think ahead and say what could happen and therefore what should I be preparing for? We are expected to be ready for the likely scenarios. Now there's always going to be things kind of pop out of the woodwork that nobody could have foreseen, like a truck driving through the lobby or something. You know, these things do happen, but we want to look at the most likely scenarios. And remember that when you're in the emergency, that's not the time to try to plan or explain to the property owner or your supervisor why you didn't have a plan that you don't want to be there. So I do sometimes see property managers failing to appreciate the of having an emergency response plan that's customized for every property. Listen, property managers are really busy folks. We wear a lot of hats. We play a lot of roles. Sometimes planning for these disasters, including the who, what, where and how, meaning who's going to respond? What will they respond with? Where will they go? How will they do it? For every likely scenario, it's easy to put that off to a future time. But again, once the disaster's upon you, once you're in the middle of it,

it's not planning time. Now you're in react mode and you're having to wing it and you're having to kind of make things up as you go. And it happened to me once and I'll talk a little bit about that, but, another common oversight, Erin, that I see is property managers trying to use what I call an "off-the-shelf plan", something you can find on the Internet, something that your property management company has. It's kind of generic. Those are not going to work for us, although they can maybe sometimes start the process, they can be a starting point. But remember, every property is different and every property will be subject to different scenarios, different likely things that could happen. Fires and floods, those are common to all properties, but depending on where the property is and the tenant mix and so forth, what works at one property may not work at another. So we need to look at these things on a customized, not an off-the-shelf basis. I'll give you an example. Let's say that you manage a busy shopping center in Texas or Oklahoma. Well, your disaster recovery plan should have as part of it response to windstorms and tornadoes, because those things are very prevalent in that part of the country. So I would definitely have in a plan for that property, I would have a response for that. Another example, a multifamily property in South Florida is going to absolutely have a plan that includes a response to a hurricane or a tropical storm. Those things are reality in that part of the country, whereas if we're in California, that wouldn't be something we'd be worried about. And speaking of California, if you're in California or on the West Coast where we have earthquakes, that's where I spent a lot of my professional career, although I'm not there anymore. But there, earthquake planning was very important. We absolutely had to be ready for earthquakes because they're a reality on the West Coast. So whether you're in northern Michigan where you have freezing snow or you're in Texas where you have tornadoes and so forth, think about your property and what it's likely to go through.

Erin:

Absolutely. That makes sense. And I know in the past you've emphasized the need for properties to be self-sufficient for up to 72 hours. What essentials should every emergency supply kit contain, and how do you determine the right amount for a given property?

Jeff:

That's a great question, Erin. I thank you for that. The fact is that I do emphasize in all my classes that I teach, whether it's IREM or other organizations, I do emphasize the need to be self-sufficient at your property for up to 72 hours. In other words, three days. Because if there's an area-wide disaster like a tornado or an earthquake or something of that magnitude, our first responders are going to be extremely stretched. It's unrealistic at that point to expect that you're going to get help from first responders. Even in the first few, a couple of days after the disaster, they're going to be triaged. In other words, they're going to be dealing with death and injury and people trapped and so forth in your building if you're just kind of got a lot of tenant base that can't leave because the property parking lot has been destroyed or the parking structure or what have you. We've got to assume that we're going to have to be on our own for at least 72 hours. And I know it's not pleasant to think about this stuff. I hear from my students all the time, the moans and groans. Oh my gosh, I don't want to spend any time at my property with my tenants, especially not 72 hours worth. I want to go home. But you know what? The fact is that we don't always have that luxury. And three days and nights with your workmates is less than ideal, but our plan has to include that possibility. We have to take that into account, and having the right emergency supplies in the right quantities and in the right locations is extremely important. So having those emergency supplies on hand is so important that I think that you don't wait for Disaster Preparedness Month, do that immediately and fortunately through the power of the Internet you can order pre-made kits for X number of people. Or you can put your own together, go to the dollar store, go to, Costco, whatever it is. But the worst scenario would be to have no supplies or having the wrong ones. Or not have enough for

the people that you've got to take care of. For instance, food, water, you know, medical supplies, sanitary supplies, etc. So we don't want to be there. That would be a very stressful situation and we need to think about what we're going to do vis-a-vis training. For not only our staff but our tenants and what to do with the supplies, for instance, if we do have a disaster and we have people seriously injured. Do we have things like bandages and blood clotting agents and splints and so forth? Is anyone trained in CPR and first aid? These things are readily available. I recommend that property managers do a lunchtime event and bring in The Red Cross or other agencies that do this training, usually for free, and just get a bunch of people certified and trained up, you know, with the CPR dummy and everything. It's again, a fun thing. It can take the stress out of it and most importantly, having that training is extremely important because our first responders just aren't going to be able to get to us right away. Now as to what should be in the kit, well, go on some of our free Website sources like ready.gov. Ready.gov is a federal government website, and amongst other things on that site is a list of basic emergency supplies. It's FEMA's website. There are others, of course, but it's always going to include water, because water is a basic human need, can't go very long without it. Emergency food and usually these are food bars. They're not things that we'd necessarily choose to eat, but they will sustain you for that period of time. Flashlights with fresh batteries is very important. Basic first aid and rescue supplies. Rescue meaning if somebody is trapped under something heavy, a pry bar, you know, a hammer, a crowbar, etc. These things should be in our kits and they should be stationed around the property such that if one area of the property is not accessible, we still can get to some supplies. And finally with regard to supplies, I'd say remember to go through these supplies. If you don't do it in September as part of Disaster Preparedness Month, pick some other time to do it, but you don't want your supplies to be three years old and somebody's raided it and taken out all the food bars or stolen all the tools out of it or what have you. And now you've got a kit that's basically worthless. So just go through those supplies at least once a year, make sure everything's fresh and replenish it and so forth.

Erin:

All right, perfect. Makes sense. And I know just a few moments ago you mentioned the first responders. How do you recommend property managers build effective relationships with first responders? And why is that such a critical part of a disaster plan?

Jeff:

Well, I'm really glad that we're talking about this, because oftentimes property managers, again, we're very busy folks. We forget to reach out to the local fire and police departments as we're putting together our plans. Believe it or not, they want us to include them because it helps them to know where you are, who you are. It helps us to know what services we can reasonably expect to receive, or the opposite, not reasonably expect to receive after a disaster. The time to do that is before everybody's answering the call. Not that police and fire sit around in the station waiting for property managers to walk in and introduce themselves, but you can make appointments and find a reasonable time to get together with these folks, introduce yourself. Maybe them to come to the property and kind of see what you've got going there. Most of us are familiar with these folks showing up when we don't want them to be like when we a fire alarm goes off or you know, if we're doing a fire inspection, etc. Let's make it a less stressful environment. As a matter of fact, one of my fellow expert witnesses and a friend of mine and has actually been on your podcast, David Meit suggests taking homemade chocolate chip cookies to the local firehouse and introduce yourself. It's a great idea. Who doesn't like chocolate chip cookies, right?

Erin: Absolutely.

Jeff:

Right? But no matter what you do, make those first responders a part of your disaster plan when you can. Invite them to your drill exercises. I don't like fire drill as much as evacuation exercise, but that's a little scary to some people, so we call them fire drills. But the fact is that sometimes our tenants take those things a little less seriously than they should. And I've even had some folks say, you know what, I'm on a call, I've got a meeting, close my door, you go, I'll be here. That's not right. So we want everyone to participate. And I have found that some of those reluctant evacuators are much more willing to go when there's a fire marshal standing around with a citation book. So, it also helps us to get participation.

Erin:

All right, that makes sense. And disasters come in many forms, from natural catastrophes to everyday emergencies. How do you help your teams prepare for the less obvious but potentially high impact incidents?

Jeff:

Yeah. So we said that fire and flood are the universal disasters that happen at every property. I've had a lot of both, unfortunately. If you do this long enough, you will. But you're right, there are some things that are less obvious but can have more of an effect. So what IREM recommends is to gather your team, whatever that team consists of, and again, it can be people from your company, contractors, tenant representatives, first responders, and sit around the table. Make a lunch out of it. Make it fun. Again, fun always gets more participation than, okay, we have to do this guys. We have to do it. No, no, no, no. Think through the most likely disasters to befall any given property based on where it is, the tenant mix, the type of use there, and so forth. And consider what the response would be to each one of those scenarios. Who's going to respond? How will they respond? What will the priority situations most likely be? Always health and safety are first, so if somebody's injured, or God forbid, has died as a result of that, we'd have to have a way to respond to that. Not pleasant to think about, but it's all part of the deal. And the idea is not to invent unrealistic, crazy scenarios, although sometimes that can be funny and fun, but really we want to stick to what's most likely. So pick out four or five, I'd say that are the most likely scenarios for that property. And the reason I keep saying for every property is different, they really are. I like to say that properties are like snowflakes. No two are really alike. So if your property is right next to an interstate, you can anticipate a fire or a fiery crash on that interstate that might affect your property, whether it be directly damaging your property or smoke drifting, getting into your air conditioning system or people not being able to be comfortable that there's a fire 100 yards away or whatever it be. So that would be an example of why each property is different. And anything can happen at any time. We know that, but we don't want this process to be an exercise in frustration with people kind of throwing up their hands going, well, that's never going to happen. So why are we even talking about it? If we want folks to take it seriously, it has to be real. Keep it real. Keep it real. And remember that you can't plan for every situation, so focus on the most likely emergencies like fire and flood and then maybe active shooter. Depending on where your weather situation is, those kind of weather events can cause a lot of havoc. And just remember that you're not going to be able to think of everything. If you try to think of every single thing that'll happen, I guarantee you there's things that'll happen that have never happened and will never happen. Now that said, just because something has never happened doesn't mean it's not likely to happen. So again, keep it real. And that's where the brain trust kind of comes in. Somebody says, hey, wait a minute, come on, that's crazy, that's not going to happen. An example would be the flash floods that occurred recently in Texas. Those don't happen every year. They might not even happen every 10 years. But if your property is in a low-lying area and it's prone to flooding, your plan needs to have a flood response.

And it needs to be comprehensive. You know, how do we deal with it right afterwards? How do we get people recovered? You know, how do we do the search and rescue, etc. etc.

Erin:

All right, that all makes sense. And can you walk us through the most valuable lessons you've learned from a real-life disaster scenario you've managed and how it changed your approach going forward?

Jeff:

Yeah, this is a great question. And as I said, if you're in this business long enough, you will experience just about every kind of disaster that you can think of and some you probably couldn't. In 1994, I managed a very large multi-building office project in Southern California in the L.A. Area. We had a major earthquake in 1994 called the Northridge earthquake, and the initial earthquake happened at about 4:00 to 4:30 AM. I was living close enough to it that my wife and I were awakened by the bed just violently shaking, glass breaking. It sounded like a train was going through the house. We had been through earthquakes before, but never anything of that magnitude. I knew that the properties were going to be affected because when I turned on the radio, I found out that the epicenter was very close to my big office complex. So I told the wife, get the broom and the dustpan and I'll see you later. I've got to go because that's what property managers do. We run in when others run out. So I got over to the property and I started directing our response and giving answers because 1000 questions were coming at me. What do we do about this? What do you want to do about that? And I was just winging it. I had no disaster plan. I'll admit I had never planned for it. I didn't think about it. Earthquakes are so common, but we didn't have an earthquake plan. I was there for three days, not because I couldn't leave, but because the property was such a disaster that I just had to stay. And I made hundreds of decisions in those three days, probably a lot of which were questionable, but I did my best without a plan. And I vowed at that time that I would never let that happen again. And that's one of the reasons I'm so adamant and passionate about this subject. So you asked me what are some of the lessons? Well, first of all, I'd say the most valuable lesson is be flexible when you put your plan together. No matter how carefully you plan, no matter how good your brain trust is there, it's more likely than not that unexpected or unplanned things are going to happen. They just are. Even if you plan for the disaster that happened, things will happen that you just couldn't plan. So, be flexible, be prepared to go from Plan A to Plan B, Plan C, etc. Everybody needs a plan. But remember, Plan A is not likely going to be how things turn out. The boxer Mike Tyson famously said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." And I like that. I like that quote because it's absolutely true. When that disaster punches you in the face, your plan may go right out the window, and now you've got to have Plan B, Plan C, etc. So be prepared to improvise. Another lesson is I'd say that having been through a bunch of these types of disasters, the very first thing that you lose, Erin, is communication. You're so used to, as we all are, just reaching in your pocket, grabbing your cell phone and calling your boss or calling your client or calling your chief engineer or your maintenance supervisor. Well, what if that cell phone doesn't work? It happens. Now what's your Plan B for communication? You've got to have one. Some properties have two-way radios. A lot of properties have done away with them because of cell phones. I think that's a bad idea. Two-way radios, as long as you have some power to the base station and the units are charged up, you're going to be able to talk to your folks as needed and get messages transmitted back and forth. So having a backup method of transmitting messages, communicating with others, very, very important. Another lesson is get everyone's buy-in. Get everyone involved in the process of emergency planning: your staff, emergency responders, tenant representatives, people from your company. If we've learned anything, it's that staff and tenants need to understand the plan. They

need to be familiar with it. They need to know what their roles are in the plan. And if you haven't trained on it, if you haven't trotted it out and exercised it every once in a while, you might as well not have a plan at all because no one's going to know what they're supposed to do. You know, our first responders are military. They're constantly training. They're constantly going through exercises because when the real deal happens, it has to be second nature. So the last thing I'd say on this topic is, I often get asked by students, why do they need to have a plan at all? You know, they kind of think, well, nothing's going to happen. Or if it does happen, I'm a property manager, I'm used to winging it. I'm very resourceful and very creative. That's great. But taking the time now, while there's no impending emergency, when things are calm and you can clearly think through the best response for each scenario is being proactive, is fulfilling our responsibility to our clients and our employers and so forth. And remember that when the disaster strikes, the property manager is the incident commander. One of the hats you'll wear, even if it's not a very comfortable one, is the incident commander hat. People will look to you for the answers. What do we do now? How should I handle this? And if you're not comfortable in that role, even though you're a great property manager, you know how to lease, you know how to maintain the property. Tenants love you, the owner loves you. If you're not comfortable taking over a stressful situation and being that incident commander, you may want to rethink your career moves because it is part of the deal and we're the seawall, the property managers, the seawall, the waves are going to crash against you. And you just have to remain calm and stand steadfast and think clearly and say, all right, well, when we thought about this, when we did the plan, we decided that this one would do this and this one would do this and so forth. That's the time when that plan becomes absolutely invaluable.

Erin:

All right, that makes a lot of sense. So kind of equal parts being prepared and being adaptable.

Jeff:

Yes.

Erin:

All right. And what's your advice to property managers who are just starting to develop or revise their disaster emergency plans today? Where should they begin and what should they prioritize?

Jeff:

Well, again, I'd say this shouldn't be a solo operation, right? We property managers tend to kind of take the world on our shoulders and think that we have to do everything. But you have a team, whatever that team consists of, more heads are better than less. More brains are better than less. So let's get everybody thinking creatively together, working through scenarios, and we do what's called a tabletop exercise. So if we're going to decide what to do in a fire, we're not going to set the building on fire to determine how to handle it. We're going to pretend that there's a fire and we might even ring the alarm bells. Let the fire department know in advance that we're going to do a tabletop exercise and put ourselves in that position. So again, put the minds together and start using your team to help you put this thing together. That's really step one. What are the most likely scenarios for this property? Four or five is really all you need. Unlikely situations as well as likely ones. And then think about what's the best way to respond. Who will do what? And I would say that don't forget to continuously, continually revisit this plan. Revise it. Don't be afraid to change it. Don't be afraid to throw the whole darn thing out and start all over if it's not good. It has to be flexible. It has to be a living, breathing, kind of a document, and the best time to start is now, but September again, as we know, is National Preparedness Month. Make that your time to revisit your plan and make sure it still makes sense because a plan that just kind of gets created and then sits

on a shelf or sits on your hard drive if it's electronic until you need it, that plan is probably not going to help you much in a real disaster if no one's looked at it in a long time. So prioritize making the plan a living, breathing document. Keep revisiting it often. Don't hesitate to reach out to your resources, including me and other fellow IREM members. That's one of the beauties of being involved with IREM is you've got years and years of experience in people that have been through this and in my experience, always willing to help you. So make your plan real. Make it valuable, make it flexible, and use your resources to make it better.

Erin:

All right. Awesome. Lots of really great information here today. Thanks so much for joining us, Jeff.

Jeff:

Oh, it's my pleasure, Erin. Please have me back again and we'll talk about fun stuff like making your property safe.

Erin:

Awesome.

Erin:

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