

Risk Reporter

for Senior Living Communities

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Dynamic plan critical to successful disaster management

It can be tempting to relegate disaster planning to an annual review, but the best programs require regular, ongoing vigilance. As you update your plan, consider the following.

Be prepared for every type of emergency

"You can never plan for every contingency, but the exercise of creating a plan helps you be more flexible and responsive in an actual emergency," said Robin A. Bleier, RN, HCRM, chair of the Florida Health Care Association Disaster Council and owner of RB Health Partners Inc., a long-term care consultant, and Chart Your Own Course Ltd. Co., a provider of geriatric care services, both in Tarpon Springs, Fla.

Work with staff

Consultants can be invaluable, but they don't know the challenges and special needs of your facility, staff and residents.

"You need staff insights and buy-in, and staff must believe management takes this seriously," said Susan Smith, EDd, MSPH, associate professor of safety and health education at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind., as well as the director of the university's Heartland Safety Education Center.

Create resident-specific, worst case plans

"Disaster planning should start on the day of admission," Bleier said.

She recommended writing a plan for each resident that includes:

- Mobility — How far/quickly could they walk without an assistive device?
- Clinical — What do they need for stability: Medication? Pain? Oxygen?
- Psycho/social — What is their emotional state?
- Safety — Can they understand and follow instructions?

Bleier suggested creating a "to-go bag" for each resident that goes with them in an evacuation and includes the following:

- Vital medications — including nonperishable food for diabetics
- Medication administration record
- Physician order sheet

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Risk Reporter talks with Quan Campbell, president of Lifewellness Institute

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- An information sheet that includes their doctor, family contact information and advanced directives
- Any items deemed critical to their health

Reach out to emergency resources

The 125 communities of Atria Senior Living, headquartered in Louisville, Ky., provide their local emergency response team with a copy of their plan and contact information for one staff designee who stays in constant contact with emergency personnel if the plan is implemented.

"Nursing homes are required to provide their plan; assisted living facilities are not. If they contact us, we are happy to visit, review their plan, address gaps and roll it into our larger plan," said J.W. Sneed, Lt. Col. USMC (ret), deputy mayor for public safety and director of the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (NOHSEP).

Practice your plan

"Your plan can look thorough, but until you execute it, you have no idea if it will be successful," Sneed said. "Maybe residents are hard to maneuver onto a bus, or you need unexpected help with loading. We have uncovered these problems by exercising the plan."

Atria facilities hold monthly disaster drills. "Anyone who's in the building participates," said Sheela Stevens, senior vice president and chief quality officer for Atria Senior Living. "Drill insights make the plan more effective, and we communicate significant changes to local authorities."

Stress test your plan for your most vulnerable time: the night shift. "Do a walk-through at 3:00 a.m.," Bleier said. "Have your administrator there and evaluate what it would take to get people out, knowing they'd be groggy and disoriented and that your staffing levels are likely much lower."

Verify transportation resources

"We found that 85 percent of district nursing homes were relying on the same transportation source. Ask very specific questions about the number and types of vehicles available and who else they're promised to," Sneed said.

Back-up transportation options could include buses from a school district, a church or the National Guard, or even a sister facility's vehicles. Plan multiple evacuation routes.

Have back-up communication

Bad weather can destroy or overload cell towers. Smith suggested buying a ham radio and requiring that key staff know how to use it.

Evacuation vs. sheltering in place

"Neither choice is risk-free; evaluate which is likely to be more risky in a given emergency," Smith said. "Vertical evacuation — moving up rather than out — was common before Katrina, but the resultant tragedies pointed out the potential flaws."

"Each of our communities has a list of considerations that are non-negotiable for evacuating," Stevens said. "Then, if the need arises, it's a proactive, informed decision."

If you shelter in place, know which spots in your building are safest for the type of event and have a communication mechanism, so you know when it's okay to leave.

Have a safe place to move residents

Sister facilities are a logical choice. Independent locations should create reciprocal arrangements with a facility that has a similar resident population. Have two options — one that's close by for a localized disaster, such as a fire, and one that's farther away for a regional disaster. Choose a space that is ADA-compliant.

Facilitate adequate staffing

"At the point of hire, make it clear that your facility is open 24/7 and that staff will be expected to remain at or return to the facility during an emergency," Bleier said.

Encourage staff to develop their own emergency plan and, if necessary, allow them to bring family members to the facility.

Evaluate whether off-duty staff can get to your facility. If staff rely on public transportation, you might need to provide rides in a widespread emergency.

Maintain emergency supplies

Keep a 7-10 day supply of food, medication and water. Other must-have items: flashlights and batteries, blankets — lightweight space blankets are good — and a weather radio.

Keep families in the loop

"When the decision is made to evacuate, all families are contacted immediately," Stevens said. "They are free to make arrangements to pick up and care for their loved ones, but most realize loved ones will receive the best care possible if they stay with us because we know their routines, have nurses on hand and have faced evacuation situations before."

Atria maintains a 24/7 hurricane hotline that is updated several times a day during a disaster or potential evacuation. Family members can also leave a message.

"In an emergency situation, there is a high probability that you won't have the success you hope for," Bleier said.

"You've made the commitment to care for a vulnerable population, and you need to do everything you can to protect them."

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- **Resource:** The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has extensive emergency resources for health facilities: <http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/hf/emergencyplanning/alr/Toolkit/index.html>.



Managing Your Risks

Inspect your facility after a storm

High winds, driving rain and hail can cause serious damage to your property. After each storm passes through, inspect your building's exterior. Look for:

- Asphalt shingles blown off or lifted up and damaged by high winds. Missing or damaged shingles leave a roof susceptible to water leakage, which can expose interior ceilings and walls to water damage and provide an opportunity for mold to develop.
- Shingles and flat roof membranes damaged by hail. Hail can leave divots or areas on a shingle where protective granules and backing do not provide full protection. This can reduce the useful life of the roof and contribute to leaks.
- Hail damage to windows and skylights. Cracked and damaged glass or plastic panes and surrounding seals can lead to water leakage problems.
- Fallen or damaged tree limbs rubbing against roof shingles and membranes. Limbs can cause wear and tear on shingles and can poke holes in roofing materials, leading to water leakage problems.
- Fallen or damaged tree limbs leaning against electrical service entrance wires. Call your electrical service provider to have professionals take care of this dangerous condition.
- Gutters and downspouts clogged by small branches and leaves. An accumulation of debris can cause the drainage system to back up and overflow at the eaves. This can allow water to leak into the basement instead of being routed away from the building.

For more on what to look for during a self-inspection of your buildings and grounds, visit www.churchmutual.com and order or download our *Self-Inspection Safety Checklist for Senior Living Communities* at no cost.

Edward A. Steele
Risk Control Manager



Seasonal Spotlight

Outdoor activities a welcome change

As days get longer and temperatures warmer, add outdoor activities to your facility calendar. Merret Mann, who holds a master's degree in gerontology and is an elder care correspondent for A Place for Mom, the Seattle-based firm that's the country's largest referral source for long-term care services, shared some ideas and tips for safe summertime fun.



Volunteer opportunities

"Everyone likes to feel that they're part of the community," Mann said, "and summers are filled with outdoor events that need volunteers for success."

Good resources for local volunteer opportunities are <http://www.volunteermatch.org> and <http://www.seniorcorps.gov>.

Birding

"Birding is a great activity, because people of all ages and abilities can do it," Mann said.

Residents can add a walk into their birdwatching experience; those who are less mobile can watch from a bench or chair. <http://seniors.lovetoknow.com/Birdwatching>

Nature trails

Many national parks have upgraded their trails for use with wheelchairs, walkers and other assistive devices. For a list, please visit: <http://usparks.about.com/od/trailspathsdayhikes/tp/Top-Trails-For-Disabled-Visitors.htm>.

Gardening

Raised beds and planters indulge residents' green thumbs. Flowers are always nice, and residents might enjoy supplying your dining room with fresh veggies!

Kids and animals

Invite residents' grandchildren or a local class to spend an hour doing puzzles, playing games or blowing bubbles outside or have a visit with a well-mannered — and properly vaccinated and monitored — pet.

Outdoor meals or snacks

If seating, space and resident acuity allow, have an outdoor barbecue. Otherwise, serve a snack outside or host an ice cream social.

Keep comfort in mind

Hold outdoor activities early or late in the day when temperatures are less extreme. Apply sunscreen, have residents wear hats and position them in the shade when possible. Provide regular hydration — make sure there are accessible bathrooms — and check in with residents to make sure they're tolerating the outdoors. Build in frequent breaks and look for signs of physical distress.

Q | A

A Perspective

With health care costs continually on the rise, more organizations are investigating wellness programs. Research links them to reduced absenteeism and lower health care costs and workers' compensation claims, but employee buy-in can be tricky and it's not always easy to show a clear link between wellness programs and return on investment (ROI). Quan Campbell, MBA, RCEP, MS, ATC, president of Lifewellness Institute, a corporate wellness consulting firm in San Diego, Calif., shared her thoughts.



Risk Reporter: What do you mean by a "wellness program"?

Quan Campbell: Ideally, it's a big picture program that includes fitness, diet and stress management — anything that helps with work/life balance.

Risk Reporter: What's the process of developing a wellness program?

Quan Campbell: Start with a health risk appraisal (HRA), which pinpoints problem areas. To avoid issues with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), use a third-party resource and ask for information in the aggregate, not for individuals. Insurance companies often conduct HRAs — and many do it free — but employees might be reluctant to share information about their personal habits with their insurance company.

Use the HRA to come up with goals — common ones include weight loss, more exercise and better use of insurance resources.

Risk Reporter: What should an assisted living facility program include?

Quan Campbell: I'd focus on core fitness, proper body mechanics and ergonomics education. Also emphasize stress management. Employees in a caregiver role have a demanding job and might not be good at managing stress. Nutrition is critical. If employees work long hours and have a limited paycheck, it can be tempting to rely on fast food and vending machines.

Risk Reporter: What are some things you've had success with?

Quan Campbell: Competitions are popular, and there are many fun off-the-shelf programs, such as pedometer and Biggest Loser programs. Be interactive — don't build your program around handouts — and only offer information backed by science. Food is a huge issue. Don't have pizza lunch meetings — have salad. Healthy recipe contests and facility gardens can involve staff and residents.

Risk Reporter: How often should you re-evaluate your program?

Quan Campbell: Revisit it every six months, and if it's not working, take a different approach. Sometimes, participation is enough of a goal. Research shows that three to four interactions per employee per year is the "magic number." Once an employee engages that many times, education starts to kick in.

Risk Reporter: Any cautions?

Quan Campbell: Make programs fair and available to employees on all shifts. Management should be active participants and support a culture of wellness. Don't put too much emphasis on incentives. You want employees to buy into wellness at a deeper level and to adopt better habits because of the difference it makes in their health.

Last, look past the ROI. There's no guarantee of specific financial results, and you won't see results quickly. It can take years to gain widespread benefits, and many will be intangibles like improved morale.