



## Time to Dust off Your Disaster Plans!

By Valerie Saiki, CIS Risk Management Consultant

Here are just a few of the grim facts that we now know following the catastrophic earthquake on January 12 in Haiti:

- 200,000 people confirmed dead
- 300,000 people treated for injuries
- 250,000 residences collapsed
- 30,000 commercial buildings collapsed
- All hospitals in the capital city destroyed
- All air, sea and land transports in the capital destroyed
- All communication systems failed including 50 radio stations off the air
- City hall was destroyed
- City officials had no communications or transportation
- Education system “totally collapsed”

The next natural disaster—and there will be one—could easily affect communities in Oregon. In fact, communities in Oregon were reminded of this February 27, when a devastating earthquake in Chile touched off tsunami warnings on the Oregon Coast.

These events are a somber reminders that the time is now for cities to review, retrain and revise their Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP).

### Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP)

A city should develop a COOP to identify essential operations, functions and the staffing needed to operate during an emergency. A well-written COOP will address roles for elected officials and other staff. It will outline a structure for an emergency operations center and identify the “who and how” for maintaining entity payroll for employees.

It is important for cities to start building a list of secondary (the second team) key staff and start training them on emergency planning. Succession planning and training for replacement of key members is necessary in the case of attrition or loss in the actual emergency.

Brad Stein, a management analyst for the city of Lake Oswego, advocates department-specific COOP planning. He says it helps city departments identify essential functions

and materials required to deliver necessary public services following a temporary service disruption. It has helped Lake Oswego identify specific needs and clarify staff roles in the event that COOP be implemented. Stein also thinks that it “strengthens the city’s capacity to provide continuity of government,” which was clearly an issue in the aftermath of January’s disaster in Haiti.

The first step is for leadership staff and elected officials to review the start up and call-out portions of the city’s plan. City staff and first-response team members who are responsible for leading the process to establish emergency operations should also meet to review the plan and make sure it provides clear guidance.

### Low-Cost Preparation

A favorite quote of Oregon Department of Emergency Management Director Ken Murphy’s is, “Today’s preparation will determine tomorrow’s outcomes.” Preparation is the crux of all emergency planning and is a vital step in evaluating each community’s disaster readiness.

Delays and missteps in handling an emergency can be costly. But emergency planning doesn’t need to be expensive or overly time consuming. Cities don’t even have to start from scratch. Murphy suggests looking to other city and county COOP plans for guidance. They can be adopted and revised to meet specific community needs and can jump start the planning process.

Loreen Mills, assistant to the city manager at the city of Tigard, also suggests building on what you already have.

“There are so many demands on our time and we don’t have the staff resources to develop a comprehensive COOP,” she said. “We are taking advantage of all the planning that went into preparing for the H1N1 to build interest within city departments, starting small and building on to our preparedness plans from here.” she says.

Cities can use their newsletters, e-mails and intranets to involve and educate employees and citizens.

### Identify Potential Emergencies

What are the likely types of emergencies that could affect any city, either by region or because of a distinct location?

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This can include factors such as hot dry summers and the potential for nearby wildfire.

Some other questions cities should answer include:

- What is the back-up plan if the local community shelter becomes damaged?
- How would a city deal with ill or injured staff during an emergency?
- Could heavy rains mean that a local river could flood (again) or a dam be breached?
- How does the city prevent sewer plant discharges or respond to sewer back-ups without admitting fault?
- How would city leaders access and keep valuable data safe and secure?

Despite the wide range of potential disasters, many elements of the city's emergency response will be the same.

## Communication Plan

Communicating with employees is essential when anticipating and responding to disasters in Oregon's communities. One quick action that all entities and all departments can take is to update the office, home and cell phone numbers of key incident command personnel.

Cities should have an emergency communication plan as part of a COOP. The plan should be multifaceted in the event that electricity and phone lines go down.

Once that plan is in place, management should help employees plan for emergencies so that they are comfortable reporting to work. This can include helping employees prepare for child/elder care, pet care, emergency supplies of personal medications, emergency food and shelter or even consideration of financial assistance resources or setting up emergency leave banks.

## Emergency Supplies

The basics of survival are fresh water, food, clean air and warmth.

Does the city have an emergency generator and if not, a rechargeable or battery radio that can receive NOAA alerts?

After the basics are in place, cities should consider getting important documents moved, if needed. This could include essential records, financials, software and computer backups, maps and other priority documents in a waterproof portable container.

If re-location is necessary, a city should already have a pre-designated place targeted. Ideally, a contract or memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the owner of a secondary location or facility will already be in place (assuming the city doesn't own an alternate facility that is structurally safe and located in flood/landslide/wildfire free location).

## Deciding to Stay or Go

Cities should plan for two possibilities: shelter-in-place or evacuate.

Disaster conditions can either cause a city to issue an order to "stay in place," or call for an emergency evacuation. Both tactics have merits and are crucial to saving lives and property. But how does the city decide—and who makes the final call?

The decision-making process should be discussed well ahead of time by the city council. This allows the city to decide what circumstances would call for an evacuation of the area. California, for instance, faces this decision nearly every fall, when the Santa Ana winds hit the state's southern coastline. In most instances, community leaders will depend on local or regional emergency managers, fire officials and law enforcement agencies in making the call. The initial discussions should occur ahead of any emergency to establish an Incident Command Structure (IC), which will increase communications, clarify roles and reduce the chances of error or oversight.

## Practice

Cities should conduct drills annually—at least. When a disaster strikes, people will do what they have learned, and they learn best by practicing for emergencies. Murphy observes that many Oregon cities fail to drill regularly, possibly due to budget and staffing constraints. It is essential to practice, however, in order to get it right when a disaster strikes.

## Additional Resources

There are many tools and resources available to help cities prepare for a disaster, including the American Red Cross and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on the national level. Great local resources exist as well, including Oregon Emergency Management, Partners for Disaster Resilience and Resistance, Oregon Emergency Managers Association, the State of Oregon and CIS Risk Management Consultants.

**On the Web:** Visit the following web sites for more information:

- [www.ready.gov/business/index.html](http://www.ready.gov/business/index.html)
- [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- [www.oregon.gov/OMD/OEM](http://www.oregon.gov/OMD/OEM)
- <http://opdr.uoregon.edu>
- [www.cisoregon.org](http://www.cisoregon.org) (NOTE: this is a new CIS web site address)
- [www.oregonemergency.com](http://www.oregonemergency.com)
- [www.oregon.gov/DAS/EISPD/BCP/index.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/DAS/EISPD/BCP/index.shtml) ■

"Alone, we can do so little.  
Together, we can do so much."

- Helen Keller



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