

Training for emergencies

Your emergency action plan is designed to save lives in the event of a fire or other disaster. However, you need to do far more than simply post maps of evacuation routes. Every employee needs to understand your evacuation plan, alarm systems, reporting procedures, and types of potential emergencies. They should be aware of any special hazards such as flammable materials, toxic chemicals, or water-reactive substances.

Employees should know the following, at minimum:

- At least two exits from every room/area;
- The sound/signaling method of the evacuation or other alarms;
- Who to contact in an emergency;
- How to escape in the dark if necessary;
- Where the fire/evacuation alarms are located and how to use them; and
- How to report damaged or malfunction safety systems and back-up systems.

Training should address the following:

- Individual roles and responsibilities;
- Threats, hazards, and protective actions;
- Notification, warning, and communication procedures;
- Emergency response procedures;
- Evacuation, shelter, and accountability procedures;
- Location and use of common emergency equipment; and
- Emergency shutdown procedures.

You may need to provide additional training (e.g., first aid procedures, fire extinguisher use) depending on the responsibilities for designated employees.

Conduct training at least annually and when employees are hired or when their jobs change. Provide additional training when new equipment, materials or processes are introduced, when the layout or design of the facility changes, when procedures have been updated or revised, or when exercises show that employee performance is inadequate. Conduct drills at random intervals, and include outside police and fire authorities.

If you rent, lease, or share office space, coordinate and practice evacuation and other emergency plans with other businesses in your building, if possible.

Setting up a training exercise

If you have employees who are designated to assist with evacuation, conduct drills where certain employees act as 'problem' employees. For purposes of the drill, have one employee refuse to evacuate while complaining that the emergency "isn't that bad." Other 'problem' situations might include:

- An injured person who can not walk,
- Someone who lost his or her glasses and can not see well enough to evacuate,
- An evacuation route is blocked, forcing employees to follow an alternate route (have a member of the response team direct employees away from the primary route).

How your evacuation assistants deal with these situations can indicate how they will react during an emergency. For example, if an employee lost her glasses, do the assistants help her evacuate, or do they start looking for her glasses? If the primary evacuation route is blocked, do the other routes interfere with emergency response (e.g., pass near a fire hose or other emergency equipment)?

Preparing to overcome the unexpected could save lives during an emergency.