

BACKGROUND | NOVEMBER 2014

Emergency Preparedness Guidance for Apartment Firms

The business community faces numerous potential threats relating to catastrophic events. Advance planning can help mitigate workplace and property disruptions and preserve business continuity. This Backgrounder offers an outline of key components that apartment owners and managers should consider for inclusion in their emergency preparedness plans. While it has a special focus on disasters involving disease-related situations, the primary components are relevant for a wide range of possible disaster situations, such as natural disasters, fires and terrorist attacks.

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Overview

NMHC recognizes the broad array of company types, sizes and property characteristics prevents a one-size-fits-all approach to planning. This “sample outline” is not to be interpreted as legal guidance, but instead as a starting point for a company-specific plan. We encourage firms to seek expert consultation in the development of a plan to ensure comprehensive coverage, and to be mindful of the latest recommendations from government officials and public health authorities.

Firms are also encouraged to join NMHC's Emergency Preparedness Listserv (see www.nmhc.org/Listservices/). NMHC will use this email exchange group to notify members of new developments and new resources of value to apartment operators. It is also a discussion forum for member firms to discuss their preparedness planning and developments in their markets.

CORE ELEMENTS OF A PLAN

1. **PLAN**
2. **PREPARE**
3. **RESPOND**
4. **RECOVER**

PLAN

Create a multi-disciplinary crisis team, which should include senior-level staff from the following areas:

- Corporate Suite
- Risk Management
- Human Resources
- Legal
- Information Technology
- Operations

Team members must:

- Be educated about the threat. Have decision-making authority. Be authorized to dedicate resources to the effort
- Understand the role of federal, state and local government (i.e. review state plans and establish relationships)
- Assess implications of pandemics to business continuity including:
 - Building operations
 - Workforce stabilization and employee considerations
 - Resident needs
 - Protection of revenue streams and asset management
 - Business/service disruptions
- Seek expert advice on plan development

PREPARE

Considerations must be given to the following company operation areas:

- A. COMMUNICATIONS
- B. OPERATIONS-RESOURCE MANAGEMENT-INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
- C. HUMAN RESOURCES
- D. RISK MANAGEMENT-LEGAL

COMMUNICATIONS

Operational Points:

- Appoint spokesperson(s) for corporate offices and individual apartment communities
- Anticipate media inquiries, staff communications and resident concerns - underscoring the need to prepare a company message and communications protocol
- Maintain current contact lists including phone numbers (land and mobile) and email for all residents, employees, suppliers, contractors, etc.
- Develop an emergency contact plan, including alternative platforms for communications with residents and employees to disseminate critical information where there are disruptions to typical lines of communication (i.e. websites, hotlines, etc.)

The Who, What, Where, When ...of Communications

- **Who:** Identify recipients of communications (i.e. employees, residents, contractors, suppliers, public)
- **What:** Determine the type and content of messages that will be communicated
- **Where:** Corporate office vs. resident community vs. public
- **When:** Identify trigger points for dissemination (i.e. notice by public health authorities, confirmation of resident or employee illness, etc.)

Examples of communications to employees and residents:

- Educational information about pandemic prevention practices (i.e. recommended hygiene/health practices, social distancing, etc.)
- Changes in employment policies (i.e. telecommuting policy, sick leave, etc.)
- Changes in operations and maintenance policies (i.e. changes/closure of amenity space, transition to an emergency-only maintenance policy, etc.)

OPERATIONS - RESOURCE MANAGEMENT - INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The following elements should be considered in your plan:

INFECTON CONTROL

Protocols for transmission control, isolation, property-wide cleaning standards and adjustments to cleaning schedules and specific decontamination needs for office, public and resident-controlled spaces

- Identify public health and other relevant contacts/resources and develop communication plan accordingly
- Develop and implement a process for communicating recommended health and hygiene information to residents and employees
- Implementation of new operations or employment policies in response to shifting needs and official recommendations

IDENTIFICATION OF CRITICAL FUNCTIONS

Determine which services and functions to continue, discontinue or modify:

- *Leasing office activities:* Assess transition to on-line leasing and other office services
- *Rent Collection:* Establish online payment, drop-off boxes and other alternatives to in- person payment
- *Operations:* Service calls, trash collection, security needs, cleaning and maintenance
- *Community areas and amenities:* Assess closure/curtailment of fitness centers, pools, community rooms, business centers, etc.
- *Moving:* Examine move-in/move-out procedures

SUPPLIES

- Assess the warehousing of supplies such as: cleaning supplies, emergency supplies like batteries and flashlights, personal protective equipment like latex gloves and antibacterial solutions
- Develop policy on distributions and use, and anticipate security issues
- Consider changes to cleaning and maintenance standards

ANTICIPATE SUPPLY/SERVICE DISRUPTIONS

- *Trash removal:* Contract for services ahead of time; seek alternative contractors
- *Power outages:* Secure alternative source (i.e. generators)
- *Transportation shutdown:* Know the implications for essential on-site staff; consider use of model units
- *Information Technology:* Plan backup systems and schedule use to minimize drain on system
- *Internet failure:* Backup critical records, files and contact information
- *Community services:* Understand emergency plans of business and community services partners

HUMAN RESOURCES

- Develop leave policies that consider telecommuting, staggered schedules and liberal leave
- Plan for staff absenteeism (i.e. consider cross-training employees, identify critical functions, etc.)
- Develop/evaluate succession plans
- Test critical function continuity and telecommuting plans

RISK MANAGEMENT - LEGAL

Pandemic events raise a host of legal issues that should be analyzed in advance to reduce company liability, including resident/employee illness, employee exposure to illness, property damage/crime, fulfillment of contractual obligations, changes to property operations and procedures and workplace policies. As a result, the following considerations must be made:

- Determine how much risk to assume on behalf of residents (i.e. direct residents to information sources vs. being the source of information, distribute supplies vs. advising residents to prepare themselves)
- Review employment policies; clearly articulate and distribute any changes to leave, telecommuting or other workplace policies; policies should contemplate:
 - Sick leave for family care
 - Exposure-related voluntary isolation or mandatory quarantine
 - Employee responsibilities and leave in situations where it is difficult to get to work (i.e. public transportation closures, etc.)
 - Return to work protocols following an illness or exposure
- Be sure that any disclosures about the health of staff or residents are made in accordance with privacy laws and other legal requirements

- Ensure that changes in employee responsibilities adhere to training protocols, licensing/certification requirements and other regulatory needs
- Anticipate changes to property access policies, including public health officials, food and water deliveries, etc.
- Anticipate changes in legal, regulatory and on-site conditions requiring new workplace and operational procedures
- Pay special attention to new or other emergency -related conditions that impact fair housing, discrimination, disability, privacy and other employment laws

RESPOND

Trigger Events:

- Identify when to institute various planning elements as identified above
- Maintain flexibility to adjust to a rapidly changing landscape and unanticipated events

RECOVERY

- Determine human and financial impact on company and property operations
- Assess available government support (i.e. FEMA, Red Cross)
- Develop communication strategies for:
 - Employees
 - Residents
 - Investors/partners
 - Suppliers
 - Media
- Insurance Evaluation: Document property damage, business interruption, employee impacts, etc.
- Human Resources: Implement a return-to-work policy for employees
 - Consider employee assistance programs/counseling programs
 - Evaluate re-opening of common areas and services
 - Evaluate effectiveness of plan and modify as needed