

Long-Term Care Facility Disaster Preparedness

How prepared is your facility/program for a disaster? This question becomes increasingly important as we encounter more severe weather and storms than in the past and the threat of manmade disasters, such as, active shooters is on the rise. The time to prepare and plan for disasters is now. It is important to perform a risk assessment of your property and identify potential disaster threats in order to develop effective plans. Is your facility/program near an operation that could pose a potential threat? It is vital to assess the businesses near your facilities/programs that could present a danger to your staff and residents/tenants and have a proven plan in place in case disaster strikes.

Many lessons were learned from Hurricane Katrina and preliminary data suggests that evacuation has unintended consequences in terms of mortality, hospitalization, and functional decline. Research performed by Vincent Mor, PhD-Center for Gerontology and Healthcare Research at Brown University in Providence, RI, showed excess mortality and hospitalizations at 30 and 90 days for nursing home residents. These trends have been repeated with subsequent storms Rita, Gustav and Ike. Long-term care facilities have very difficult decisions to make in terms of evacuating residents/tenants or providing “shelter in place”. Are there steps that can be taken to make your buildings and property safer so that residents/tenants do not have to evacuate? Can your HVAC system be configured to restrict outside air from entering your building if the air quality is compromised for some reason, as was the case with the Colorado wild fires in 2013? While the threat of wild fires is not great in Iowa, how many of our rural facilities/programs are located near fields where there could be grass fires or are near places where there could be potential chemical spills? Know what the potential dangers are that surround your facilities/programs so that plans can be developed.

It is suggested that long-term care facilities choose 2 locations to evacuate to, one located close by and one several miles away. It is important to communicate with neighboring facilities/programs to determine if they are equipped to handle a surge of residents/tenants if evacuation is needed. Is there a plan in place to safely transport and track residents/tenants who are evacuated? How will residents/tenants be transported in mass numbers and are there transportation companies on standby to assist with this? How portable are the medical records and supplies that will need to accompany each resident/tenant? How can this be done to minimize the trauma and stress to the residents/tenant? Are residents, tenants, and family members aware of the evacuation plans and do they participate in the drills?

Long-term care facilities need to be actively involved with the Emergency Management Teams at the county level and work with them to develop effective disaster preparedness plans. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is proposing rules to expand requirements related to emergency preparedness which include: Risk assessment, Participation in community and table top drills, management of volunteers, sewage and waste disposal and temperature control during power outages. There are also mobile applications that can assist with disaster planning and one is available through the Red Cross. When it comes to disaster preparedness it is important to write a plan, exercise the plan, revise the plan, re-exercise the plan and identify the best practices. If you would like additional information, please contact the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman.

The mission of the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman is to protect the health, safety, welfare, and rights of individuals residing in long-term care by investigating complaints, seeking resolutions to problems, and providing advocacy with the goal of enhancing quality of life and care.