



Get Them Out Alive!

Evacuation Planning for Routine and Extreme Emergencies in Schools, Colleges and Universities

by Harry Nolan, Ph.D.

Before evacuation planning can begin in an organization, basic planning for routine or normally anticipated events such as fire drills and power outages must be addressed. Beyond these routine events, however, planning must take into account all conceivable disasters, including acts of terrorism, gas leaks, chemical spills, collapses, explosions, bomb threats, tornadoes and even workplace violence. While preventing disasters is a top priority for safety professionals, it's equally important to have a well-developed evacuation plan that can be put into action at a moment's notice.

A college or university is like a small city—or a collection of small cities—with libraries, theaters, classrooms, offices, residences, swimming pools, water systems, restaurants, laboratories and daycare centers. Even schools may have many such facilities. Usually there are a variety of buildings of different ages and in different condition. A statewide university or community college system or a private institution with multiple campuses will have an even more diverse physical plant and a wider array of students.

Improve Crisis Management with an Effective Evacuation Plan

All school buildings should have an effective method of systematic, safe, fast and orderly evacuation by occupants in case of fire or other emergency. Building engineers, security and maintenance people should be given proper training in appropriate responses.

In addition, written communication to all faculty, staff and students should ensure the prompt reporting of emergencies, the response to designated alarms, and the immediate initiation of safety procedures to safeguard life until the arrival of the first responders.

Your evacuation plan should be part of your comprehensive fire-safety plan, which has been reviewed and approved by your local fire department or other emergency responders. It should specify a chain of command, beginning with the campus administration and faculty. Someone trained to carry out an evacuation should also be available after normal business hours when the campus remains partially occupied.

Set Up a Fully-Equipped Emergency Command Station

Designate a safe, convenient location as the command post where the people in charge, will coordinate activities during the emergency. Make sure that emergency telephone numbers for the fire department, police department, emergency medical services, and other first responders are conspicuously displayed at the command post. An up-to-date, readily available list of people on the campus who are physically challenged should include their normal work locations (building, floor, and area). There should also be a list of people who are trained and qualified as paramedics, emergency medical technicians or first-aid providers.

You'll need an information kit for use by the arriving emergency service officers in charge. It should give detailed information about the campus, including an up-to-date, easy-to-read architectural drawing of each building floor and the location of all utilities, equipment and access routes. Additionally, the kit should provide cell phones, firefighter service elevator keys, window-lock keys and keys for access to the building's main utilities.

Organize and Train an Early-Stage Emergency Response Team

The first moments of an emergency can be crucial in preventing a manageable problem from blooming into a large one. When creating a response team, select members based on their past or present experience, their capabilities, job performance and willingness to serve. Look for volunteer firefighters, employees with police experience and people who've been trained by the Navy in shipboard firefighting.

Team members should be assigned to respond to the emergency, to assist in evacuation, provide vital information via radio to the people in-charge, and help contain the emergency or fire, if possible. They also can provide pertinent information and direction to the first responders, such as the exact location and extent of the fire or emergency. They should report back to the command station after the completion of their assignments.

Provide Safety Information and Training

Life-safety information can be provided during semiannual fire drills, in periodic handouts and on the campus intranet site. Make sure both emergency team members and others are trained in detail about what to do and not to do in case of fire.

Team members should be aware of safe and unsafe conditions in their campus. They should verify that self-closing doors are functioning properly and not illegally locked. They should check that exit signs are lighted and in good condition, that proper housekeeping exists, and that aisles, corridors and passageways are clear and unobstructed, ready for immediate use. Additionally, a professional loss-control consultant should inspect every building annually, report any deficiencies and follow up to ensure they're corrected.

All building occupants should be instructed to *always* report directly to their assigned assembly point for a headcount. Even if they're in another area of the building at the time of the evacuation, they must report to their group's location to be accounted for. If a full-building evacuation becomes necessary, no one should be permitted to return to the building until the officer in command of the emergency has informed the facility manager or his or her immediate representative that it is safe to re-enter the building.

High-Rise Buildings

Many campuses today have high-rise buildings, so you may need to hold building evacuation drills to deal with catastrophes that go beyond the normal scope of events considered by the building's fire safety plan. Occupants need to completely understand the differences between "routine" fire evacuation procedures and a non-fire-related, full-building emergency evacuation, and the procedures to be followed for each.

Training in building evacuation must take into account the difference between reacting to an emergency in accordance with the safety plan, and the need occupants will likely feel to evacuate as quickly as possible.

Planning for a full-building evacuation exercise, particularly in multi-tenanted buildings, requires close coordination with building managers and the other tenants. Planners must especially focus on people who cannot walk long distances or navigate stairs because of physical limitations or other disabilities that may require the assistance of fellow employees or students. All occupants must know in advance the location of special assembly areas away from the building.

Communication is crucial. Inform police, fire and emergency medical services of the impending drill and ask them to attend and assist you; also notify all building managers in the area.

You'll need to post appropriate signs both inside and outside of the building to inform visitors and passersby of the drill. During the drill, assign additional staff and security personnel to monitor and expedite occupant flow out and away from the exits, and to monitor various locations in the stairwells for occupants in need of medical or other assistance. Finally, time the evacuation and inform the police and fire departments of the completion and results of the drill.

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