

# EMERGENCY PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS FOR HISTORIC THEATRES

## IS YOUR THEATRE PREPARED FOR A NATURAL OR MAN-MADE DISASTER? HAVE YOU DEVELOPED A COMPREHENSIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT OR PREPAREDNESS PLAN?

With the summer issue of *INLEAGUE*, LHAAT included a copy of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's, *Every Business Should Have a Plan*. The publication outlines commonsense measures business owners and managers can use to insure their organizations are well-prepared to survive and recover from all kinds of emergencies, like hurricanes, tornados, floods, fires, terrorist attacks, and bomb threats.

Since the events of 9/11/01 and the increasing occurrence of severe weather phenomena, national attention has focused on the importance for all citizens to anticipate and be prepared for all types of unexpected hazards. Likewise for businesses, regardless of size, it is critical to have an emergency management plan in place before an unexpected emergency or crisis occurs.

Because the structures are older and they have one-of-a-kind features, historic theatres often have higher than normal building damage, not to mention business interruption, from natural disasters, as evidenced during the many major hurricanes of the past few years. Because large groups of people assemble in their buildings, theatre operators and staff potentially face increased responsibilities and risks should emergencies occur while the theatre is occupied.

### WHAT IS AN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PLAN?

An Emergency Preparedness Plan insures the readiness of a business to respond to an emergency in a systematic, timely and effective manner. Too often, businesses wait until

an incident occurs before they plan their reaction. In this article, we will suggest basic steps for creating a plan to help your theatre manage emergency situations, to insure your patrons and employees are safe, your building is secure, and your theatre can continue to operate as a business. As the old adage goes, "The best defense is a good offense." Having a plan in place provides your theatre with systematic responses to execute during a crisis or emergency and helps to minimize confusion and time delays and account for all persons in the building in a safe manner.

An emergency plan must be a working document, to be reviewed, audited, tested, updated and disseminated regularly. Your plan should not be developed in a vacuum; it is important to communicate and get input from local emergency services personnel, such as city, county or state police, sheriff's office, and fire department. As you will see, communication is the key element of preparedness, from preparation through execution of your plan.

When creating your plan, first identify the types of crises and emergencies that might occur, such as:

- Fire
- Bomb threat
- Chemical spills
- Earthquakes
- Severe weather
- Utility outages
- Medical emergencies
- Workplace violence or terrorism.

Assess your organization's risks and vulnerabilities by conducting regular safety and security needs assessments. Determine the likelihood of each type of incident occurring. Work with your local insurance agent to conduct a risk assessment of your entire facility (see more about insuring your theatre against severe weather losses on page 7).

Are there different levels (severity, possible outcomes) of each type of incident that may occur? If so, document them clearly, giving them color "codes" if so desired.

### ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Identify who within your organization has primary responsibility and control when an emergency situation occurs. Who has the authority to declare an incident an emergency? Who, in order of priority, will take over this authority should the primary person be unavailable or unable to make the decision? A command list might look like this:

- Executive Director
- Security Supervisor
- Technical Director
- House Manager

Keep in mind, who will manage the day-to-day operations of the theatre should the primary person be unable to serve?

Clearly state the priorities of your theatre's response to an emergency, such as:

- Safety and wellbeing of our artists and audience.
- Safety and wellbeing of our employees.
- Securing the facility and restoring operations.
- Providing information to the

media, clients (renters, artists) and customers (audience).

Assess your staff's skills first then create a "Safety Team," assigning specific responsibility areas to staff positions, including a line of succession for all key positions. For example:

- Crisis Coordinator: Executive Director; Security Supervisor (designated backup)
- Facilities Coordinators: Security Supervisor; Security Personnel (designated backup)
- Technical Director; Stagehand (designated backup)
- House Manager; Assistant House Manager (designated backup)
- Media Coordinator: Marketing Director; Development Assistant (designated backup)
- Telephone Information and Referral Coordinator: Box Office Manager; Assistant Box Office Manager (designated backup)

Outline the general duties and specific responsibilities of each member of the Safety Team, i.e., what each team member should do in an emergency situation:

- How to prepare in advance.
- What to do immediately following an emergency.
- What to do next, after the immediate crisis has passed.
- What follow up action is required.
- Frequently asked questions to anticipate.

Then develop a list of general procedures for all members of your staff to know and follow in the event of an emergency.

Examples include:

- Know where the nearest evacuation plan is and how to read it.
- Know where the nearest emergency exits are at all times.
- Respond quickly, but do not panic.
- Walk. Do not run.
- Report possible emergencies to your supervisor immediately. Do not take matters into your own hands.
- An announcement from the theatre PA system or your supervisor will notify you when an evacuation is necessary.
- Do not rely on rumor, innuendo or second hand news, no matter how certain your “source” appears.
- In an emergency, you are responsible for immediately moving to your assigned post.
- If you do not have an assigned post, proceed to the nearest exit safety door.
- Use common sense.
- After exiting the building, proceed to the designated “Assembly Place.”
- Make sure you are accounted for so others do not have to look for you.
- Provide physical assistance to others who may require it.

**TYPES OF INCIDENTS**

Define each type of emergency and outline the specific steps that should be taken in response to the incident. If your theatre is located in an area that is prone to severe hurricanes or tornados, make sure each employee receives additional information each year about handling these types of events. Several agencies have emergency preparedness guidelines and checklists available through their websites, including:

- The Red Cross—  
www.redcross.org
- FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency)—  
www.fema.org
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security—  
www.ready.gov.

Making these resources readily available for your staff will make them more prepared should a natural disaster occur, and protect them, not only as employees of your theatre, but as members of your community.

**DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

Maintaining communication with critical information sources, first responders, civil authorities and facilities personnel is the most important step in effective emergency management. In your plan, it is imperative that you identify all resources that should be contacted during a critical situation, including (direct numbers for): local police/sheriff’s office, Fire Marshall, water department, and local hospitals and medical centers.

Don’t forget to include information for all vendors, outside service providers and other third parties that provide key utilities or services that may be compromised during an emergency. The sooner you make contact with your vendors, the sooner you will be able to continue or resume operating your theatre. Include the following vendors/utilities:

- Sprinkler systems
- Fire & burglar alarms
- Gas & electric company
- Phone company
- Computer/IT network support
- Internet provider
- Insurance carrier
- Attorney
- Janitorial services

Don’t forget to list critical vendor account numbers that may need to be referenced to service or repair the above. Include a list of names, titles and contact phone numbers, mobile and home, for each member of the Safety Team. On the same list, it is wise to include the locations of things like the gas, electrical and water mains within the building.

Finally, identify an “Assembly Place,” a location where you can temporarily set up an alternate command center, where staff can relocate and you can resume communications and decide upon further actions to be taken.

**STAFF TRAINING AND ONGOING COMMUNICATION**

Identify who will be responsible for creating the plan and its continued evaluation and periodic update. Who has overall responsibility for employee awareness, staff training and conducting drills? In addition to their specific responsibilities for responding to an emergency, all members of the Safety Team should be made aware of their responsibilities for maintaining an ongoing dialogue with staff in their departments to raise employees’ safety awareness. Conducting regular training sessions will help increase emergency preparedness. Safety Team leaders should demonstrate how to use fire extinguishers and conduct fire and other severe weather preparedness drills.

**ORGANIZING YOUR PLAN**

Make sure your plan is easy to understand and user-friendly. It should be comprehensive but not complicated, well organized but not overwhelming.

List the most critical information (emergency contacts, account numbers, etc.) at the

beginning of the plan. Having this information at the front will make it easier to find and easier to update with any new or changed phone numbers, staff names, or vendor information. A detailed table of contents will make it easier to navigate when a specific type of event occurs.

Your plan should include layouts of each floor of the theatre, showing:

- Evacuation plans
- Exit and emergency light fixture locations
- Emergency exits, fire extinguishers and fire hose locations.

Include a blank incident report form and guidelines for dealing with bomb or other threats. Provide all employees with a printed copy of the plan, and post copies in several central staff locations throughout the theatre. Create quick-reference guides, such as wallet-sized cards, with the most critical information, so it’s always at hand.

Finally, don’t try to reinvent the wheel! Talk with neighboring businesses; ask your fellow LHAAT member theatres; review emergency preparedness plans from similar venues. But remember to make your plan unique to your theatre, to the specific risks and threats your theatre might face, and to the capabilities of your staff.

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