

Coping with a Natural Disaster

By Toni Talbot, SPHR

Q *uestion: In light of the recent natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, flooding in the Northeast, etc., I wonder what would happen if such a disaster took place in my community.*

How would it impact my practice? Is there anything I should do that would help me prepare for a disaster to get my practice back up and operating?

Answer: An advantage of living in Michigan is we don't have to deal with disasters on the scale of, say, a hurricane. But we do have other disasters, like tornados, fire, floods, ice storms, and blizzards. So it's wise to take the time to create and maintain a plan for recovering from such disasters if they should occur.

Since I am a human resources professional, I am going to deal with the H.R. aspect of the recovery plan in this article. With that in mind, it's important to realize that communication is very important to a good recovery plan. You want to be able to keep your staff informed. You also want to know how they may have been personally impacted by the disaster. The plan should include a means of maintaining your staff's current contact information at your home or a secondary location. Your plan should also consider more than one option for communication, such as e-mail, posting information on Web sites, or use of cellular phones.

You should designate a contact person for your staff. This may be you, it may be your office manager, it may be your accountant — it's up to you to decide. The key here is that people need to know who to call for information. Consider establishing a phone tree that spreads the responsibility for disseminating the information. Remember to establish a clear message in advance. You may not have all the necessary information, but you need to provide your staff with the information you have and provide reassurance for the future of your practice.

The plan needs to include the steps necessary to get your practice operating and your employees back to work. You do not want your employees looking for another job! If you're unable to open your office right away,

your staff can and should apply for unemployment compensation. You want your staff available to come to work for you when you're back in business. Remember, if they have no income, they're going to look elsewhere for employment.

At the same time, don't forget to show your compassion and concern for your employees' well-being. Make them feel you care.

Your recovery plan needs to consider all the variables, such as establishing alternative locations, accessing computer systems, and bringing back employees, each with specific responsibilities such as clean up, contacting patients, working with suppliers, handling computer issues, etc.

The plan should also address communication with patients. Inform them of what has occurred and what will be happening with the practice. You may not know all the details, but you should develop some type of reassurance that you'll be able to see them very soon and will keep them informed of the progress. If patients think you're out of business, they'll find another dentist!

Test the plan to make sure it will work. A brief run-down of the plan should provide you with the ability to discover holes or problems and address them in a non-crisis mode. Make sure you review the plan every year.

Taking the time to establish and maintain a good disaster recovery plan is often a low priority . . . until you need it. This is your business, your income, your lifestyle that is at risk here. You need to make it a priority for you, your employees and your patients. ♦



Toni Talbot is president of Human Resource Management Services. Send questions for publication to Staff Matters, MDA Journal, 230 N. Washington Square, Suite 208, Lansing, MI 48933.

More information on disaster management is available on www.smilemichigan.com, in the MDA Insurance area.