

A blurred photograph of a hospital hallway. In the foreground, a medical professional in blue scrubs is pushing a gurney. In the background, another medical professional is visible. The hallway has large windows on the left and recessed lighting in the ceiling.

# PLANNING DRILLS FOR HEALTHCARE

*EMERGENCY AND INCIDENT  
PREPAREDNESS AND TRAINING*



## Introduction

Emergencies and other critical events can create numerous headaches for hospitals and other healthcare facilities. The same patients you're supposed to be treating and nursing back to good health could be put in danger—in a matter of seconds. The ability to communicate quickly and efficiently so that hospital personnel, patients and others are informed of what is happening is crucial during these events. It is also important to have a plan in place for different types of emergencies. This is where planning drills come in to play. If your hospital runs drills effectively, people will know exactly what to do in an emergency. This can prevent panic and lead to a quicker resolution.

## What is the Most Common Failure During Emergencies and Drills?

In an emergency, failures are unacceptable, especially when you're responsible for the safety of your patients and staff members. It is important to understand that communications are the most common failures in these types of situations. And, if you're unable to communicate, an emergency could end up being much worse than it had to be. This is why drills are crucial; they allow you to see which communication modes fail during a practice event so they can be fixed before a real event occurs.

One communication method that often fails in emergencies are phone systems. Landlines could be tied up with people checking up on patients or trying to find out what is happening. Cell phone batteries can also die in an emergency event, so it is important to have extra chargers on site.

During a drill, you'll want to test all of your communication methods—phone systems, cell phones, radios, computers, pagers, and any other devices—to find out which ones are susceptible to failure in an emergency. Not being able to communicate properly in an emergency could lead to unnecessary harm to patients, staff members and many others.

## Be Prepared to Message 24/7/365

Hospitals and other healthcare facilities have a lot of responsibility in emergencies. Not only do you need to keep employees and key stakeholders safe, but your top priority, of course, are your patients. It is crucial that hospitals are prepared to message 24/7/365 because you never know when an emergency will present itself. In these types of situations, a critical communication system

*Crafting messages in advance helps ensure that hospital staff, patients, and other recipients receive and understand critical notifications, instructions and updates.*

can be beneficial. It can offer the capability to create messages on the fly during an event, as well as send a pre-recorded message when time is of the essence.

Hospitals should strongly consider message mapping when planning for future emergencies. In high stress events, message senders can panic and hesitate, and recipients' reading comprehension can drop to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level. Message mapping helps eliminate these variables, enabling you to create messages that are straightforward, digestible and actionable. This drastically simplifies the notification process in an emergency situation and can help limit potential damage and harm.

### **Continuity of Operating Plans (COOP)**

Continuity of Operations is defined as an effort within individual executive departments and agencies to ensure that Primary Mission Essential Functions (PMEFs) continue to be performed during a wide range of emergencies, including localized acts of nature, accidents and technological or attack-related emergencies.<sup>1</sup>

This type of plan comes with multiple benefits. For example, it provides you the ability to conduct Gap Analysis to identify and document your vulnerabilities. Catastrophic disasters require COOP activation and help guarantee that your facility can continue to provide its vital services during emergencies. A major part of your COOP involves planning drills, as these exercises can be of major benefit to hospital staff and other critical personnel.

### **Designing Your Emergency Planning Drills**

Being unprepared for emergencies can have significant fallout. Holding emergency planning drills periodically throughout the year is a good way to make sure all personnel understand what they need to do in a critical situation.

When designing an emergency planning drill there are numerous factors that need to be considered. Depending on how big the exercise is, you're going to have to determine how many people to invite, the number of meetings that will take place and how frequent these meetings will occur. When designing a drill, you want to make sure you focus on your core capabilities and find out what your objectives are so you can target critical tasks that need to be completed in a real life emergency event.

Next, you'll want an evaluation process in place. The [Exercise Evaluation Guide set up by the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program \(HSEEP\)](#) can be helpful with the design process and creating a good discussion about what needs to be done. It is also important to have the Master Scenario Event List, so that everyone understands what their roles are and what they would do if a real world event takes place.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fema.gov/continuity-operations>

Below are a few examples of drills conducted by Reading Health System in the past that can be beneficial for hospitals and other healthcare facilities.

### **Active Shooter Drill**

Reading Health conducted an Active Shooter exercise in one of the dining areas on the hospital campus. Numerous parties were included, such as local police departments, the county sheriff, SWAT teams, the Red Cross, and more. With all of these people involved in a drill, communication is critical. In this type of situation, a critical communication system allows you to carry out your Emergency Operations Plan, which should include locking down the building, providing situational reports about how many victims there are and any damage to the building, and sending any additional information to responders on the scene. Overall, Reading Health included 80 employees, 30 law enforcement officials, EMS squads and emergency management staff in the drills. Without a critical communication system, it might have been difficult for all these parties to interact quickly and seamlessly in an emergency.

### **Medical Services Radiation Drill**

Another drill Reading Health conducted involved medical services radiation to test the hospital's response capabilities for radiation emergencies. During the drill, a radioactive contaminated patient was transported by an ambulance to the hospital's emergency department. Reading Health activated its Emergency Operations Plan and sent out a notification to administration informing them that a radioactive patient was coming in. The critical communication system was also used to inform administration when the patient arrived and when the drill was completed.

In a radiation emergency, hospitals can be impacted in many ways. For example, not all facilities are equipped to handle such emergencies. It is also important to know how the radioactive event has impacted nearby roads and highways, as there could be congestion with people trying to evacuate the area.

## Measuring Your Successes: After Action Reports (AAR)

After Action Reports should be one of your final steps so you have a record of how the drill progressed. Using this document, you can move into improvement planning, where you'll discuss what needs to be accomplished in order to make your response better so that nothing goes awry when an actual emergency hits.

Running emergency preparedness drills doesn't do you any good if you don't learn from them. AARs can help you evaluate your core capabilities, and provide direction on how you can best prepare for actual emergencies. The following are some core capabilities of your AAR:

- **Situational Assessment** – Deliver information sufficient to inform decision making regarding immediate lifesaving and life-sustaining activities.
- **Operational Communications** – Establish effective interoperable communications.
- **Operation Coordination** – Develop command, control and coordination structures within the affected community. Maintain National Incident Management Systems (NIMS) compliant, control and coordination structures to meet basic human needs, stabilize the incident and transition to recovery. Manage resources through incident response. Develop an Incident Action Plan.
- **Environmental Response/Health and Safety** – Perform site management and control activities. Identify problems. Complete hazard assessment and risk evaluation. Select personal protective clothing and/or equipment. Implement tactics to accomplish operational objectives. Perform decontamination and clean-up.
- **Public Health and Medical Services** – Establish triage and pre-hospital treatment tactical operations. Manage hospital operations in response to a mass casualty incident and public health operations.
- **Public Information and Warnings** – Provide overall management and coordination of emergency public information and warnings. Coordinate development and dissemination of public emergency information.

## **A Critical Communication System Can Help You Overcome Challenges**

Responding to an emergency under pressure adds complexity around being able to ensure you can respond effectively and quickly. Common challenges in the delivery of a message often include making errors under duress, using outdated contact lists, using too many systems or inconsistent processes and having limited access to front-line intelligence. Responders often run into challenges and find themselves questioning, have the right messages been received? Have the right teams been notified? Are messages clear and complete? However, frequent use of a critical communication system will increase your chance of success when a real emergency occurs and conducting realistic drills will condition your response under duress.

Best practices are planned in advance, and the challenges mentioned above can be overcome with a critical communications system in the following ways:

- You will have pre-determined message templates, ready to be sent, for a plethora of possible events that could happen
- You will know the best ways to reach people and have back up methods of reaching them
- You will have the ability to launch a message anytime, anywhere
- Conditioned responses will improve deliverability and confirmation
- With two-way mobile communications, you can really leverage your constituents and employees to better understand what's happening on the ground

Remember that frequent use (non-emergency use, testing, and training) of a system will improve in-crisis statistics and data quality will be higher for systems that are used more frequently. Overall, having familiarity with your notification system will help administrators of the system avoid errors in times of crisis and stress and users will recognize messages and understand the process that will endure. It's not just about sending a message, it's about understanding and managing a system. With this understanding, a critical communication system ensures smart delivery and assured response to help you overcome challenges and connect and confirm with your network confidently.



## About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it's a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

### THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning:** Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you're always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.
- **Assessment:** When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.
- **Response:** In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.
- **Delivery:** Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we're ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

Visit [www.everbridge.com](http://www.everbridge.com) to learn more.