

ARE YOU PREPARED FOR A TYPICAL BUILDING EMERGENCY?



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The list of imaginable disasters for a property manager is long, and devising plans for each eventuality is a mammoth task. As every journey begins with a single step, property managers must choose where to begin.

The answer is a function of probability and costliness

Should a property have a written procedure in the event the National Guard blocks access to your industrial park? Should a property have a writ-

ten procedure for a cloud of radioactive material blown into the neighborhood? Business continuity consultants would correctly advise preparing for these very sorts of things, despite their very low probability. Should a property

have a written procedure for light bulbs that go out? Properties likely do have a handbook procedure for that due to its frequency, but would survive blown bulbs without formal planning. The planning priorities reside in the intersection of reasonable probability and negative impact created by the event.

Tenant life safety will forever be paramount in commercial properties, since there is no impact more negative than human casualty. These efforts may appear superficially to address the immediate needs of on-site employees and visitors, but owners also want dearly to avoid the emotional and financial implications of loss of life.

On the other hand, preserving the "health" of the property itself may be cynically viewed as looking after the interests of faceless, faraway investors. Yet those tenants who emerge physically unscathed from an emergency do sincerely want to return quickly to the workplace where they earn their livelihood. The happy triad of tenants, owners and managers hinges on a healthy and intact commercial building.

Fortunately, while many events could endanger the welfare of tenants, the most common emergencies do not put anyone in harm's way. Far more emergencies arise from damage to the health of the building than threaten the health of those inside the building.

In preparing a workshop for its annual EXPO in March, BOMA Suburban Chicago issued a survey on what property manager's dread. Since water emergencies figured prominently, this article will address such an event — one which squarely meets our planning criteria of probability and impact.

As analogy, consider a wet property as a wounded, bleeding soldier on a battlefield. Just as the soldier will regain full health faster if attended to quickly, the property will suffer less secondary damage the earlier the emergency can be addressed. That speed manifests itself in a well — prepared property, and mitigates greater costs in terms of dollars and inconvenience. What can be done today to allow that battlefield triage to begin as soon as possible?

continued on page 12

Are You PREPARED?

continued from page 11

Know your medics.

It would be irresponsible to hire any other contractor without research, but when the call goes out for a medic, it is too late to practice due diligence. Look for project managers' years of experience, training and certifications, and references.

Show off your homework.

Now that you know your emergency service provider, introduce him/her to your tenants. Continuing the analogy, the drying job will be completed most smoothly with but one medic team serving the soldier/tenants. Contrary to your hiring an elevator or paving contractor for the entire property, each insurance policy within your building could contract a different medic, making your management job more difficult to coordinate.

Map the battlefield.

Even skilled contractors who know what to look for will benefit from having structural information handed to them. The medic will ask questions of the wounded soldier to determine the optimal treatment. Preparing answers for the emergency contractor before the emergency arises will speed their response. How are the tenant spaces configured? Are the floors raised for IT and/or power? What is the flooring material?

Is it gonna hurt?

The patient needs attention, but fears the cure to be as bad as the disease. Your tenants' pain will be in days and dollars, and insurance issues could have been discussed last week. What is covered — and by whom? "Well, it's not my fault, so I'm not paying!" These are rational reactions best addressed in rational times. Get informed now to approve mitigation later.

Get to the point.

The property manager established contact people beforehand, so talk to

the point person, and establish your point person for the restoration contractor. In the first day/night of work, update meetings happen every few hours. The next day, these can drop in frequency based on your wants and needs. Let the medic team tend to the sick building distraction — free, as you and the project manager address your tenants.

If your property budget has insurance, you acknowledge the chance of disaster. A flooded building with a plan is a far lesser emergency than a flooded building with no plan.



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