

Creating a Culture of Preparedness

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Abstract

The culture of preparedness is about maintaining a constant state of readiness, which involves a series of planning steps to ensure individuals, families, and businesses are ready for all types of disasters that may impact the community. Some of those steps including developing plans, creating disaster kits, conducting drills and exercises, volunteering and completing training, and updating plans and kits as situations change.

Native Delawareans will unabashedly admit that they stock up on bread, milk, and gas whenever snow or hurricanes are in the forecast. Lines form at gas stations and grocery store shelves empty quickly. When hurricanes and winter storms are forecasted, there is time for citizens to take necessary steps and purchase items to protect their family. However, since some disasters occur without warning, it is best to maintain a level of readiness at all times – thereby helping support and create a culture of preparedness.

When people are asked how prepared they are for disaster, their responses vary. Some believe that as long as they have heat and a full refrigerator, they will be okay. Others are unsure or may not prioritize preparedness. Here are some guiding questions to help you assess your personal level of preparedness:

- How prepared are you for each disaster that may impact your area?
- Are you prepared differently for disasters that may affect where you live and where you work?
- Are you prepared for events that come without any warning, such as tornadoes, flash floods, and earthquakes?

Every Delawarean should think about these things, but the average citizen may not. According to Jeffrey Schlegelmilch, Director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness,¹ “Nearly two-thirds (65%) of households do not have adequate plans for a disaster or have no plans at all, compared to 77% without adequate plans in 2003.”

Preparedness is not a one-time, all-hazards investment for eternity. It requires constant maintenance. At an emergency management conference several years ago, an emergency manager told the audience, “You cannot buy preparedness; you can only rent it.” Preparedness is part of a cycle of constantly reassessing hazards, updating plans and kits.

In the spring of 2019, in recognition of the importance of creating a culture of preparedness, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released its strategic plan, which identified creating a culture of preparedness as one of its primary goals. According to FEMA², “The most successful way to achieve disaster resiliency is through preparedness, including mitigation. Building a Culture of Preparedness within our communities and our governments will support a

National effort to be ready for the worst disasters – at the individual, family, community, state, local, tribal, territorial, and Federal levels.”

“Strategic Goal 1 promotes the idea that everyone should be prepared when disaster strikes. To be prepared, however, we must all understand our local and community risks, reflect the diversity of those we serve, and foster partnerships that allow us to connect with a diverse Nation. People who are prepared will be able to act quickly and decisively in the face of disasters, thereby preventing death and injuries, minimizing loss of property, and allowing for a more rapid and efficient recovery.”²

Preparedness planning occurs on several fronts and is applicable among families, in workplaces, and for business continuity. First, create a disaster plan if one is absent, and update existing plans. Helpful disaster plan templates for families can be found at <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/make-a-plan.html>. Disaster plan templates for businesses are available at www.ready.gov/business/implementation/emergency.

Next, exercise preparedness plans and test all listed tasks with formal and informal drills. When was the last time a fire drill was held at home or at work? Identify training needs among staff. Do this annually when the clocks are moved forward or back for Daylight Savings Time. One occurs prior to the winter storm season and the other occurs in the spring prior to summer thunderstorms and hurricane season. Teach adult household members and business leaders how to activate the disaster plan.

Once plans and emergency supply kits are created, they must be regularly updated. Adjust plans when family or business members are added or depart, or when their individual needs change, such as developing difficulty walking or if they have cognitive needs. Keep emergency contact information current for all household or business members. Since perishable kit items will eventually expire, consume items before their expiration date and replace those items with fresh stock.

Personal and Family Preparedness

Every household should have a disaster plan and emergency supply kit for rapid evacuation, or when families need to shelter-in-place at the residence. Disaster plans must include provisions for childcare, pets, and those for whom we provide assistive care, such as a parent, an older friend or neighbor, or one who has access and functional needs.³ Disaster plans should also identify two evacuation locations: one locally, such as a neighbor’s house; and an out of-state location. Include updated contact information for both sites within the “go bag”.

An emergency kit should contain enough food and supplies to maintain the health and safety of all household residents for at least three days.³ It should also include paper products, a flashlight and batteries, important documents, and a list of other essential items. (See related articles.)

In addition to keeping an emergency supply kit in the house, those who are required to respond to disasters and anyone who works outside the home should keep a “go bag” in the car or office. The “go bag” should be an easily carried bag, such as book bag, that is packed with a change of clothes, some bottled drinking water and non-perishable snacks, a cell phone charger, and back-up medications, if applicable. Those who work lengthy work shifts during a winter storm or

hurricane will appreciate a properly packed “go bag.” “Go bags” can also fortify non-first responders who are stuck at the office because travel is not advised or when an unforeseen disaster occurs, such as flooding or a dangerous uprising.

The FEMA National Response Framework, the nation’s all hazard plan, defines the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government including the community. The National Response Framework states, “Although not formally part of emergency management operations, individuals, families, and households play an important role in emergency preparedness and response.” The National Response Framework further recommends: “Individuals, families, and households should also prepare emergency supply kits and emergency plans, so they can take care of themselves and their neighbors until assistance arrives.” Finally, the National Response Framework mentions the importance of volunteering, thereby creating more resilience when communities are able to help their families and their neighbors through Community Emergency Response Teams, the American Red Cross, and Medical Reserve Corps.”⁴ There are numerous opportunities to volunteer in the community with the Medical Reserve Corp, Red Cross and other community organizations. This is discussed in much detail in other sections of this edition. Volunteers gain valuable preparedness training and can be called upon to assist as part of a response effort or, if directly impacted, volunteers can assist their own families and communities until help arrives.

Preparedness for Health Care Workers

The role of health care workers in a disaster is largely dictated by one’s current position and place of work. Most employees who work at a health care facility already have an active role in the operation of that facility, as specified in its disaster plan. Staff with unassigned clinical or disaster response roles often become part of the health care facility’s emergency response team since their workplace would not be open during a public health emergency or disaster. Such staff can consider volunteering for relief and recovery organizations listed within this edition of the DJPH. Organizations, facilities, and businesses that provide critical tasks or services may be required to have emergency plans in place and to test them regularly.

Business Preparedness

Business owners should have disaster plans in place that address the hazards that may affect their facilities, their employees, and their customers.⁵ Retired Lieutenant General Russel Honoré, who led the military response and recovery during Hurricane Katrina, is a big proponent of preparedness.

"Being prepared starts at work because you cannot run your business without your employees," Retired Lt. General Honoré said. “....American businesses ought to wage an active campaign because a culture of preparedness cannot be created without the private sector's help.” Ready.gov/business contains a wealth of information that business owners and staff can use to begin developing business disaster and continuity plans. This will be addressed in much more detail in the Business Continuity article contained in this preparedness issue.

Creating a culture of preparedness is much more than creating an emergency supply kit and disaster plan to protect families and businesses. It means examining and preparing for all types of hazards to homes, business, and communities. Establishing a Culture of Preparedness also represents practicing the plan with formal and informal drills and exercises, and ensuring that adult family and business members are able to activate the plan. Finally, a culture of Preparedness includes regular updates to family, business, and organizational emergency plans and emergency contact information for the ultimate protection of families and businesses.

References

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