ARC® Facilities

Disaster Response & Emergency Management in Healthcare
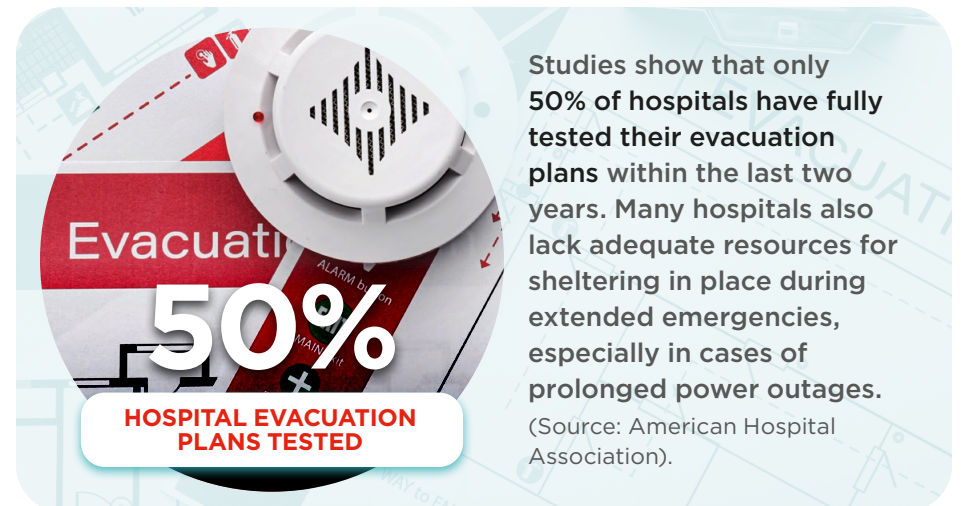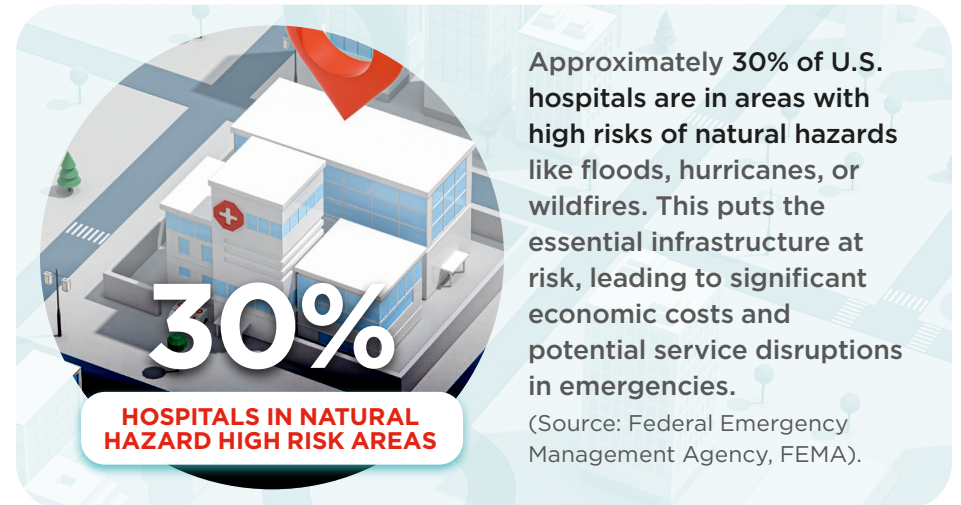
Facilities Team Roles & Responsibilities

For healthcare facilities managers, understanding the difference between disaster response and emergency management is essential to keeping their teams, patients, visitors, and staff safe. While disaster response focuses on immediate actions during a crisis, emergency management looks at the bigger picture, ensuring preparedness, response, and recovery. In hospitals, the stakes are higher – patients on life support or complex evacuation needs require special attention. By grasping these concepts, facilities managers can be more confident in safeguarding their facilities, ensuring smooth operations, and most importantly, protecting those who rely on them during emergencies.

"I would define disaster response as part of emergency management," said Jonathan Westall, Vice President, Ancillary Services, Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Healthcare. **"It is the beginning stages of an ongoing emergency management procedure. Response might be the first actionable step after continuous planning, But the emergency management is the entire life cycle of that event in discussion."**

Were hurricanes as common and destructive decades ago as they are now? It seems like the hurricane season starts earlier and lasts longer – putting healthcare facilities directly in harm's way.

30%
HOSPITALS IN NATURAL HAZARD HIGH RISK AREAS

Approximately **30% of U.S. hospitals are in areas with high risks of natural hazards like floods, hurricanes, or wildfires. This puts the essential infrastructure at risk, leading to significant economic costs and potential service disruptions in emergencies.**
(Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA).

50%
HOSPITAL EVACUATION PLANS TESTED

Studies show that only **50% of hospitals have fully tested their evacuation plans** within the last two years. Many hospitals also lack adequate resources for sheltering in place during extended emergencies, especially in cases of prolonged power outages.
(Source: American Hospital Association).

Access our interactive hurricane checklist here.

Disaster Response:
Immediate Action in the Face of Crisis

In the United States, nearly all acute care hospitals are involved in disaster preparedness programs, largely through the Healthcare Preparedness Program (HPP) funded by the Department of Health and Human Services. This program supports 318 healthcare coalitions across the country, encompassing 91% of acute care hospitals, which collaborate to improve readiness for disaster response. These coalitions coordinate resources, enhance medical surge capacity, and facilitate training exercises for healthcare staff to handle emergencies like natural disasters, pandemics, or mass casualty events.

In addition to HPP, other federal initiatives like the Regional Disaster Health Response System and the National Special Pathogen System work alongside healthcare facilities to ensure the continuity of care during major emergencies. Despite significant achievements, gaps remain in emergency preparedness, particularly in rural hospitals and for specialized medical services

Check the [American Hospital Association](#) and [ASPR](#) (Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response) provide detailed resources about healthcare disaster responsiveness.

Disaster response refers to the immediate actions taken before, during, and after a disaster to save lives, protect property, and address urgent needs. In a healthcare context, this might involve:

Evacuation Procedures:
While traditional office buildings might allow for simple evacuation, healthcare facilities like hospitals often cannot. Many patients are bedridden or rely on life-support systems, making evacuation complex and potentially dangerous.

Life-Support Systems:
Patients dependent on equipment such as ventilators may face life-threatening risks if power is lost. Backup power systems are critical but may only provide short-term solutions, necessitating rapid response to restore power.

Medical Gasses and Equipment:
Hospitals must manage the continuous delivery of medical gases and operation of critical equipment, even in the absence of main power.

Multi-Story Considerations:
Patients on upper floors may be unable to use stairs, making the functionality of elevators crucial. Emergency response plans must account for safe and efficient patient transport in such scenarios.

The primary goal during disaster response is to ensure immediate safety and stability. This includes setting up emergency medical care, securing life-sustaining resources, and stabilizing the environment to prevent further harm.

Learn How ARC Facilities Supports Emergency Readiness [here](#).

Emergency Management:
A Comprehensive, Ongoing Process

Emergency management, on the other hand, is a broader, more comprehensive approach. It involves the entire lifecycle of disaster preparedness, from risk assessment and planning to response, recovery, and mitigation. The focus is on:

Planning and Preparedness:
Creating and maintaining comprehensive emergency operation plans (EOPs) tailored to the specific risks of the healthcare facility. This involves regular training and drills to ensure all personnel are familiar with their roles and responsibilities.

Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP):
Especially in healthcare, operations must continue even in the worst scenarios. Effective COOPs ensure that critical functions remain operational, including patient care and safety, even if the facility's infrastructure is compromised.

Coordination and Communication:
Effective emergency management requires coordination among internal teams, external emergency responders, and sometimes other healthcare facilities. Clear communication channels are essential for implementing a coordinated response.

Recovery and Mitigation:
After the immediate crisis, emergency management focuses on recovery and rebuilding to restore normal operations and mitigate future risks. This can include reviewing the disaster response to improve future preparedness.

"Another noteworthy distinction between disaster response and emergency management lies in the activation of the hospital's Emergency Operation Plan (EOP) and the establishment of the Hospital Command Center (HCC)," added Trenton E. Jackson, Director, Public Safety/Support Services, Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Healthcare.

"Certain emergencies can be swiftly addressed and may not require the initiation of all elements of the EOP. Some emergencies might only necessitate the establishment of an Incident Commander for a short period of time. From my perspective, a disaster response signifies a prolonged hospital response, prompting the activation of most, if not all, EOP requirements and the staffing of all positions in the full Chain of Command within the HCC," he said.

While disaster response is a reactive phase, emergency management is both proactive and reactive. It aims to minimize the impact of potential disasters through thorough preparation and swift, coordinated action when crises occur.

HOSPITAL PREPAREDNESS PROGRAMS FUNDING

50%

Unfortunately, funding for hospital preparedness programs in the U.S. has declined by nearly 50% over the past two decades, even as the frequency and intensity of disasters increase. This gap makes it harder for healthcare facilities to maintain effective disaster preparedness and response programs.
(Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

STAFF AVAILABILITY DURING DISASTERS

20%

During disasters, healthcare facilities can face up to a 20% reduction in staff availability due to factors like transportation issues, personal emergencies, and safety concerns. This shortage severely affects the ability of hospitals to respond effectively to increased patient loads during crises.
(Source: Journal of Emergency Management)

These statistics underscore the need for continued investment in healthcare disaster preparedness, more robust infrastructure planning, and improved resilience strategies.

Dean Stanberry, SFP, CFM, noted the distinction between healthcare facilities and other types of buildings, such as medical office buildings. In hospitals, the risks and consequences are higher due to the vulnerable nature of the occupants. Unlike office buildings, where evacuation might be straightforward, hospitals must often "defend in place," ensuring that patients remain safe without leaving the facility.

This is critical, as highlighted by Mark Jacobus, Prime Power Services, who noted that healthcare facilities cannot simply shut down; they must continue operations under all circumstances.

Emergency management in healthcare settings requires specialized planning and resources to handle the unique challenges these environments present. From maintaining power in operating rooms to ensuring the availability of medical gases, every aspect of a healthcare facility's infrastructure must be designed for resilience and reliability.

Both disaster response and emergency management are integral to healthcare facility safety. Understanding the differences and how they work together allows healthcare providers to better prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. By implementing robust emergency management practices, healthcare facilities can ensure they are not only ready to respond in the immediate aftermath of a disaster but are also building resilience for future challenges. This holistic approach helps protect patients, staff, and the vital services these facilities provide to the community.

The Role of Facilities Management Teams in Emergency Preparedness and Response

Facilities management teams play a crucial role in both disaster response and ongoing emergency management. Their responsibilities extend beyond routine maintenance to ensuring the safety and security of healthcare facilities, staff, patients, and visitors during critical events. Here's how they impact emergency preparedness and response:

Preparedness for Emergencies:

Facilities teams must ensure that all infrastructure, equipment, and systems are ready to handle emergencies such as natural disasters, fires, and active shooter situations. This includes maintaining backup power systems, ensuring life-support equipment functions properly, and making evacuation routes and procedures accessible and operational.

Coordination During Emergencies:

During a crisis, facilities teams are often at the forefront, ensuring that the physical infrastructure supports the emergency response efforts. They must coordinate closely with security, medical staff, and external responders, ensuring all teams have the necessary resources and information to act swiftly.

Ongoing Emergency Management:

Beyond the initial disaster response, facilities teams help manage recovery and ensure the continued safety of the building. Their expertise is critical in mitigating future risks and ensuring the facility remains operational during and after emergencies.

Quick Access to Critical Information:

Facilities teams using technology, like the [ARC Facilities](#) mobile platform, can access vital building information in seconds. This allows teams to retrieve floor plans, equipment locations, and emergency procedures instantly, enabling faster decision-making and more effective emergency responses.

The ability to instantly retrieve floor plans, emergency procedures, equipment locations, and utility shutoffs allows for rapid decision-making and efficient coordination of response efforts which helps in minimizing damage and loss and ensures that emergency personnel can respond more effectively, potentially saving lives. By having all necessary information at their fingertips, healthcare facility managers and emergency teams can better protect their facilities and maintain essential services during critical times.

By integrating modern technology and detailed planning, facilities management teams are key to both proactive emergency preparedness and efficient disaster response in healthcare environments.

A checklist of Roles and Responsibilities for Disaster Response and Emergency Management in Healthcare Facilities should include the following:

Disaster Response Team Roles & Responsibilities

Disaster response in healthcare is the immediate, reactive phase during a crisis. The primary objective is to protect life, secure infrastructure, and ensure continued operations of critical functions.

1. Immediate Actions & Safety Measures

- ✅ Implement evacuation protocols (considering non-ambulatory patients and life-support equipment needs).
- ✅ Monitor and maintain backup power systems, especially for critical life-support machinery.
- ✅ Ensure continuous delivery of medical gases and availability of emergency medical equipment.
- ✅ Prioritize safety checks in areas where patients are unable to use stairs or elevators (multi-story facility concerns).
- ✅ Set up temporary emergency care stations for stabilizing and treating patients in place.

2. Command Center & Incident Management

- ✅ Activate the Hospital Command Center (HCC) and establish a clear Chain of Command.
- ✅ Appoint an Incident Commander and emergency response roles according to the facility's Emergency Operation Plan (EOP).
- ✅ Coordinate with security, medical staff, and external responders for unified response.

3. Communication & Coordination

- ✅ Establish clear communication with all staff, patients, and visitors regarding safety protocols.
- ✅ Use digital platforms for rapid information access (e.g., ARC Facilities platform for floor plans, emergency procedures).
- ✅ Engage with local emergency responders and nearby facilities for coordinated support if necessary.

4. Resource Allocation

- ✅ Ensure adequate resources are available for prolonged power outages or shelter-in-place situations.
- ✅ Assign staff for equipment checks, such as HVAC systems, to maintain air quality and infection control.
- ✅ Monitor supply levels, including fuel for generators, medical supplies, and food/water provisions.

5. Patient and Staff Safety Assurance

- ✅ Track staffing levels, accounting for potential shortages due to transportation issues or personal emergencies.
- ✅ Monitor patient safety measures, especially for vulnerable populations in ICU, NICU, and operating rooms.

Emergency Management Team Roles & Responsibilities

Emergency management takes a proactive, comprehensive approach to disaster readiness, covering planning, response, recovery, and mitigation to ensure continuity of operations and long-term resilience.

1. Preparedness Planning

✅ Develop and regularly update the Emergency Operation Plan (EOP), tailored to facility-specific risks.

✅ Implement regular training and disaster drills for all staff, covering evacuation, shelter-in-place, and incident response.

✅ Maintain and test backup power systems, life-support systems, and other critical infrastructure.

2. Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)

✅ Develop and maintain a COOP to ensure ongoing patient care during emergencies, even when infrastructure is compromised.

✅ Identify essential functions and personnel who must be present or on-call to sustain critical operations.

3. Risk Assessment & Mitigation

✅ Conduct regular risk assessments for potential hazards, including natural disasters, fires, and security threats.

✅ Identify infrastructure weaknesses and address these through regular facility upgrades and improvements.

✅ Engage in preventive maintenance programs for critical systems, such as lighting, to improve overall safety.

In healthcare facilities, effective disaster response and emergency management are critical for protecting patients, staff, and infrastructure during crises. Disaster response provides immediate actions to address urgent needs, while emergency management encompasses the full spectrum of planning, response, recovery, and mitigation. By mastering these processes, facilities managers can better prepare for emergencies and ensure continuity of care, even under extreme circumstances. This integrated approach safeguards lives and strengthens the resilience of healthcare systems against future challenges.

By using an app from ARC Facilities, disaster response and emergency management efforts can be taken to new heights with instant access to building and emergency information via mobile devices.

To learn more about ARC Facilities, visit **www.arcfacilities.com**.

Request a demo to speak with a team member.

Email us at **solutions@arcfacilities.com**

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