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Getting Your Disaster Recovery Plan Going - Without Destroying Your Budget

It is not something a nonprofit likes to think about, but if a disaster happens you will be many steps ahead by developing a plan today. It seems that every couple of months I am contacting friends around the United States to make sure they have survived the latest flood, fire or even a Minnesota snow storm. Having recently contacted friends in the nonprofit industry following fires in California, I thought I should revisit a plan that I first accessed in 1997 during the flooding in the Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota.

It always amazes me how communities and volunteers pull together during times of disaster. I have witnessed first hand how other nonprofits react to their peers in need. It is not something most of us want to plan for, but it comes in handy when necessary.

The following is a quick information sheet on what to pull together in case of a disaster in your community or association. It is information that I found from the Edwards Disaster Recovery Directory and its editor Steve Lewis.

Many organizations make the recovery process harder for themselves - or even impossible - by not planning ahead for disaster recovery. While they may take steps to try to prevent disasters, they ignore the reality that prevention won't always work.

Creating a disaster recovery plan can seem overwhelming, given the complexity and demands of even the smallest organizations. You may find it helpful to keep the following points in mind as you proceed.

- Remember, a disaster plan is never a fixed, finished document it should be reviewed at least on an annual basis.
- Be systematic in your plan.

RECOVERY TIME PERIODS

Following any disaster, there will be two time periods that must be planned for. First, will be the immediate, disorganized, "limited-operations" time span, which is followed by a period of "makeshift-operations." These two time spans can be quite lengthy until normal operations can be resumed.

Typically, following a physical disaster, the limited-operations time span can extend for up to a week or more, while the makeshift-

operations time span can last for several months until normal operations are restored.

The need to recover in phases is typically very difficult for top management to accept. Often, when asked to prioritize among the organization's services or products, management's first reaction is to consider them all equal. Following that, people are often unrealistic in their estimation of how quickly departments can accomplish their tasks. In one example, the organization had planned to relocate a key department to a an alternate work site four hours away - without realizing that most of the affected people were single parents, who couldn't possibly go there!

THE DISASTER RECOVERY PLANNING PROCESS

Once management has a proper mindset, the objective of the planning process is to systematically sort out the various issues and priorities so that a cost-effective plan can be developed, keeping in perspective the level of loss exposure that the organization is risking. The process itself can be summarized in the following steps:

- Provide top-management guidelines
- Identify serious risks
- Prioritize the operations to be maintained and decide how to maintain them
- Assign the disaster team
- Take a complete inventory
- Know where to get help
- Document the plan
- Review the plan with key employees, test the plan, and train all employees

CONCLUSION

At minimum, you should do the following:

- Designate a second-in-command
- List individual responsibilities ahead of time, and assign specific people to each task
- Protect critical paper records
- Keep copies of all of your forms off site - especially checks and purchase orders
- Set clear priorities among your activities and specify beforehand the longest amount of time you are willing to be "dead in the water" for each of your activities
- Have backup communications, including dial-up to replace "leased-lines" and radios to replace telephones and cell-phones
- Keep a copy of your disaster plan at home

Finally, don't try to go it alone. People throughout your organization may have dealt with disasters before and may have their own ideas about what they'd do in an emergency. Beyond that, your competitors and colleagues at other companies in the region can be resources in the planning process. If you include their input and advice you'll not only benefit from their experience, but also find it easier to gain their cooperation for mutual assistance when the inevitable disasters actually happen!

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