

## EVACUATION PLAN

# GETTING OUT SAFELY

Four ways to improve your plan already in place

By Karen Evans



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**SCHOOL SAFETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS CONTINUE TO DRIVE PLANNING ACTIVITY ACROSS THE COUNTRY, WHILE SIMILAR PLANS ARE BEING CREATED BY HOSPITALS, GOVERNMENT AND RETAIL LOCATIONS. MANY OF THESE PLANS INCLUDE THE CONCEPT OF A "LOCKDOWN" SITUATION TO THWART AN INTRUDER OR ATTACKER, AND TO PROTECT THE OCCUPANTS FROM HARM.**

What to do after a lockdown has been initiated is an equally important part of the plan. During a lockdown, first responders and authorities on the scene work to confirm and contain the threat, and then to neutralize it. Depending on the specific circumstances, they may take action to evacuate some or all occupants to safety while the threat is still active or when the threat has ended.

How lockdowns and evacuations are handled depends largely on planning and practice. Officials must have a solid plan in place, effectively communicate that plan to teachers, students, first responders and other stakeholders, and conduct drills periodically to ensure that proper procedures are followed in an actual emergency situation.

There is no "one size fits all" protocol for lockdowns and evacuations that works for every school or organization. Each plan must reflect

differences in building layout, proximity to other buildings or residences, the capabilities of local first responders, and much more.

In developing an evacuation plan, there are four key elements leadership can include to improve the plan's effectiveness.

## COLLABORATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

It is vital to consult with local law enforcement officials for advice on crisis planning and to get a firm understanding of their processes for evacuation or clearing a location. These individuals can be a valuable resource for developing an effective plan, as they have been through extensive training specifically for these situations, including best practices for evacuation.

In an emergency situation, police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians and other first responders will be heavily involved, so it's important that organizations' evacuation plans reflect law enforcement policies. This will ensure a smoother and safer process, should that become necessary.

Law enforcement and other responders should be part of emergency drills. While this may seem like an obvious part of the planning process, a General Accountability Office study found that more than a quarter of schools have never practiced their plans with emergency responders.

Without collaboration between organizations, law enforcement and public safety, there is an increased risk for mistakes to be made in an emergency, which could potentially lead to disastrous outcomes.

### SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

By providing first responders with a direct connection to the status system, organizations can provide these individuals with a clear picture of an ongoing situation, including where a threat is located, where occupants are located and the status of those occupants. This enhanced situational awareness will allow responders to properly plan an evacuation that will allow occupants to avoid risk while exiting the building more efficiently.

### PRIVATE TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Communication is essential in any emergency situation, and can determine the success of a response. Building occupants need to be kept up to date on an incident, how it is unfolding and what, if any, action they will need to take. They must know if the situation should change from a lockdown to an evacuation or if an evacuation plan must be altered as quickly as possible.

In many facilities—most notably schools—building-wide communication is handled via intercom. However, in the case of an active shooter or other intruder who is in the building, intercoms are out of the question because any communication would also provide information about procedures and actions to that individual.

A private, two-way communication system can solve this problem. The ability to maintain contact with locked-down areas enables updates and will help with the evacuation process without alerting an intruder.

### BROAD-BASED PREPARATION

An emergency situation can occur at any moment and for a variety of reasons. Developing a plan with only one potential emergency in mind is limited thinking that can cause serious problems. For example, active shooter situations are in many ways the impetus behind implementation of lockdown and evacuation plans. However, there are other serious events that could warrant lockdown and/or evacuation, including weather conditions, circumstances within the community, and more. Failure to consider multiple hazard types can lead to improper response, which can cause a situation to escalate into a deadly event.

For these reasons, it makes sense for an organization to develop tiered lockdown and evacuation levels and clearly communicate specific events or types of events that would trigger each level of response. It is also vital to designate a nearby space where occupants can gather upon leaving the building to ensure everyone is accounted for. When determining this, it's important to make sure a location is large enough to accommodate all building occupants and will also be safe in a range of conditions and hazards.

Organizations that include these four keys in their security plans will be in the best position to work with first responders to evacuate occupants safely during or immediately following a lockdown. Conducting drills periodically will further strengthen lockdown and evacuation plans and procedures, and will increase the effectiveness, efficiency and safety of those plans should a crisis occur. ☺

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