
When to go, when to stay

Evacuate or Shelter-in-Place?

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Most of our Business Continuity plans include evacuation procedures of some sort.

Many are simply "get out and gather in the parking lot." (You may have guessed by the choice of words that I think this approach is somewhat lacking.)

Only a few organizations have "shelter-in-place" options.

I use the term "options" deliberately, because "shelter-in-place" is more than just staying inside a building.

Shelter-in-place demands a safe environment.

HazMat threats

For many planners considering a shelter-in-place option, the risk comes from hazardous materials. If the organization is located along a busy highway, railway, canal or seaway, if it is near a sea or airport, or if it is situated near chemical plants or other operations which emit dangerous gases, the hazmat risk must be considered the primary reason to include a shelter-in-place option.

But there are other reasons. Two near the top of my list are tornados and earthquakes.

Unfortunately, there still are other reasons, such as bombs. The bomb may not be intended for your facility, but if your facility is in close proximity to it . . . Bombs are non-discriminatory.

An occasional correspondent told me of two "shelter-in-place" incidents which occurred with his organization, a large insurance company.

One incident goes back to September 21, 2006 and a "fire down below" event in Philadelphia. (See *Event elsewhere interrupts my operation*, <http://johnnglennmbci.com/PhillyFire.html>.)



Photo by Dane Golden / FEMA News Photo

The fire and related gas buildup caused explosions in the sewer lines beneath the city's streets. The explosions were so powerful that they sent man hole covers flying into the air and shook nearby buildings.

My correspondent's organization has offices in two adjacent high-rise buildings. Each building apparently has independent management; one building was evacuated, the other was not.

The evacuees left the relative safety of the buildings for the dangers of the street and flying "maintenance hole" covers, each weighing more than 100 pounds (55 kilo).

On the other hand, since at the time no one knew what was going on, those who remained in the building could have been killed had the building collapsed. (This seems to make a good case for identifying the danger before making a move; rather like touching a door to see if it is cool before opening it to an area that may be engulfed by fire.)

The second incident happened in another town when someone placed a bomb across the street from my correspondent's facility.

It wasn't much of a bomb - he said the folks in the office reported it looked like a small gasoline can - and it was not intended for this organization, but it was a threat and the people of the office did go to a safe room.

"Safe" rooms

The first consideration of any shelter-in-place option is to determine the safe room specifications.

From what risks is the "safe room" supposed to provide safety?

In most parts of the United States and Canada, the most common threat is a tornado. Tornado-proof rooms have been around for some time and their value is proven.

In California and, actually, many other places in North America, earthquakes are a concern. Perhaps not as high on the probability scale as tornados, but requiring consideration. Earthquake-resistant structures are commonplace in Japan and are gaining acceptance in parts of North America.



Elsewhere, along rivers, railroad tracks, major highways, and near ports of all types, hazardous material accidents are a threat. Locations near chemical plants must be considered at risk for a hazmat accident.

The best time to plan for a safe room - regardless of threat - is before a structure is designed. Unfortunately, Business Continuity planners rarely are invited to express their thoughts at this stage. (Perhaps we should make ourselves available to architects as a "value-added service.")

Creating a "safe room" in a low-rise building - according to the U.S. National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), a building less than 75 feet/25 meters high - as the building is being designed should be a simple and relatively low-cost option. Retro-fitting a safe room into an existing structure is another matter.

I posed the question to architect and facility manager associations and may have generated some thought within those groups, but neither group elected to share with me.

Is it legal?

Can you force someone to stay inside when they want to leave?

What happens if Jane Doe needs to go pick up little Susie at day care while the building is locked down? Or if Frank of Finance needs to take Frank Jr. to hockey practice? Or simply that according to Mabel, "it's time to go home, so I'm going."

Can an employer or employer's agent - a Business Continuity planner, for example - force a person to stay inside when the person may be injured by going outside? How about preventing a person from leaving because in the process of going out, the risk - chemical, human, something we can't foresee - will enter the safe area? For that matter, can someone be obliged to stay with the group during an evacuation?

I am not a lawyer and I don't play one on TV, but I will make one suggestion: if your organization anticipates having a safe room, have policies and procedures in place spelling out - in simple, unambiguous language - what is expected of all personnel AND make certain that all personnel acknowledge that they have read, understood, and accept the policies and procedures.

And hope there are no claustrophobic clients or vendors in the building when the lockdown commences.

Something to consider when creating the policies and procedures to allow or deny a person to endanger themselves and others by leaving the safe room: if people have to stay inside past their normal shift, do they get paid? Can they make personal calls? What about food - will the junk food machines be unlocked and staff allowed to raid them? And, by the way, what about people with special diets?

Nothing's simple.

Evacuating to the parking lot

At the beginning of this exercise I hinted that having people stroll out to the packing lot may not be the best way to design an evacuation plan.

First, there needs to be a buddy system to help assure that everyone exits the facility. There also needs to be "hall monitors" or "fire wardens" who have the authority to "clear the halls" of lingerers. Very Senior Management must sign up for evacuation exercises and join the peons in filing outside. If the boss can stay inside on an inclement day, why not me? Right?

Second, people need to have something between them and the building they just abandoned.

If there is a fire, there could be an explosion. If there is an explosion, there could be flying debris. The evacuees need to put some protection between them and the flying debris (even if it "only" is glass from a broken window).

Congregating in a parking lot adjacent to the evacuated building probably is congregating too close to danger. On the other hand, the cars in the lot might provide some protection from projectiles. Other things sometimes found in/near parking lots also may be helpful - dumpsters are fine, but generators are "iffy" since where you have generators you usually have fuel and that is a hazard on several levels.

Congregating in a parking lot has an additional disadvantage - emergency responders (fire, police) will be coming with their equipment and having the building's occupants blocking the way will prove counter-productive.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has a publication which recommends ways out of a high-rise building (75 feet/25 meters or higher). As with most U.S. government publications, the 2-page Evacuating High-Rise Buildings Fact Sheet is available to download for free from the Internet at http://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_General_Facts/evacuating-highrise-factsheet.pdf/

John Glenn, MBCI, has been helping organizations of all types avoid or mitigate risks to their operations since 1994. Comments about this article, or others at <http://JohnGlennMBCI.com/> may be sent to [Planner @ JohnGlennMBCI.com](mailto:Planner@JohnGlennMBCI.com).

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