

Emergency Readiness,
Action, and Continuity Plan

Instructions for the HSC Emergency Plan Template

FAQ

Why do we need an emergency plan?

Clients and staff rely on your organization to provide a safe and secure environment to the best of your ability. When staff know how to respond to an emergency, there is much greater chance that harm can be prevented. If the emergency is a major disaster, your response may significantly impact not only the current safety of staff and clients, but also your ability to serve clients afterwards. Indeed, vulnerable populations are likely to be disproportionately impacted, so the people you serve may need you then more than ever. You will be able to offer services more quickly and effectively after a disaster if you have engaged in a planning process and have produced written emergency plans.

Is this a COOP? What's a COOP?

“COOP” means Continuity of Operations Plan, which is a plan for how your organization will resume providing services if they have been interrupted by some event. In the private sector, a comparable term is “business continuity plan.” In this template, we present a comprehensive (but succinct!) format that enables you not only to plan for continuity of operations after disaster, but also for how you will respond to emergencies and how you will maintain your readiness. For that reason, we refer to it as an Emergency Readiness, Action, and Continuity Plan.

Who should use this template?

The primary target for this template is nonprofit service providers of small to medium size. Some organizations have contractual or regulatory obligations regarding emergency plans, and they should assess carefully whether or not this template will produce a product consistent with requirements.

Who should not use this template?

A very large organization may find this useful, but the process and product will be more complex than described here. This template is not suitable for residential programs or health-care facilities.

Can we do this ourselves or do we need help?

Some organizations will be able to produce a plan simply by using the template and following these instructions.

Many organizations, however, will find it helpful if staff attend training on developing an emergency plan. The Human Services Council provides such training to nonprofit service providers at no cost. New York Disaster Interfaith Services provides training to congregations and faith-based groups. Before seeking out professionals to provide costly training, look into what is available at little to no cost for nonprofits.

In addition to training, there are consultants that can provide help that is tailored specifically to your organization. They can be useful in guiding the planning process and reviewing your plan from a professional perspective. If funds are available, this can be more efficient for an organization whose staff do not have the necessary time to undertake this project or expertise in this area. It is important, though, to understand that a consultant cannot simply create a plan without your organization being engaged in planning. No one knows your organization and your stakeholders better than you do.

Are there other resources that can help us?

You will be able to find templates for planning online, and we suggest you look at some to see if there are things that apply to your organization but are not covered in this template. Some resources that may or may not be helpful are in Appendix A. Some are focused on the private sector or on government, but may have useful information.

What do we do now?

Your next step is to start planning! We suggest below a five-stage process, but you are best able to assess how the principles of planning can best be implemented in your organization.

How to Develop an Emergency Plan

Stage 1. Identify a Planning Team

Determine who will lead the effort. Consider whether Board members or others should be included as well as staff. Include staff in a variety of roles and at different levels of the organization, e.g., senior and line staff, program and support staff, long-time and newer staff, etc. Consider personal qualities that individuals would bring to the work.

Stage 2. Gather information

In addition to reviewing the template and these instructions, team members should share any information they have about other emergency plans, regulations that apply to the organization, and relevant procedures or policies that are already in place.

Stage 3. Draft the plan

Before continuing, the group should identify the organization's "essential mission functions" and "primary business functions". See page 6. The group should then discuss the parts of the plan template and how they apply to the organization. Plan sections can be distributed to individuals or small groups for drafting.

Stage 4. Review, revise, finalize

All team members should review the drafts of all sections and give feedback. Relevant sections of the second draft should be shared with staff outside the team who would be involved in implementation. If the plan relies on any external stakeholders, they should be consulted. When the plan sections have been edited, the plan should be shared with management staff for comment. The final draft should be reviewed and approved by relevant authority, whether that is senior management and/or the Board.

Stage 5. Distribute and educate

When the plan has received final approval, it should be shared with all staff. In addition, it must be presented in meaningful ways, such as all-staff meetings, departmental staff trainings, etc. Always remember that the plan must always remain "open", incorporating new or revised information.

Structure of the Plan

The plan is structured with four parts:

- Readiness
- Emergency Action
- Continuity of Operations
- Maintaining the Plan

Readiness

The purpose of a Readiness Plan is to provide guidance on how your organization can maintain your readiness to deal with emergencies.

Many organizations have “standard operating procedures” which support readiness and can be included in the Readiness Plan, including regular back up of digital files, maintaining contact information (including emergency contacts) for staff, a formal policy on getting help for medical emergencies, a plan to contact all staff in case of emergency, etc. Regulatory agencies may require fire plans, evacuation plans, etc., and these also can be included in the Readiness Plan. Something that many organizations, though, have not considered is that if their staff are not prepared for emergencies, the organization itself can be negatively impacted. It is important, therefore, to provide staff with information and resources on how they and their families can be prepared.

Emergency Action

Emergency Action Plans are short-term plans that detail how the organization handles any sudden threat to health, safety, or property.

Not every emergency is a disaster. An “emergency” is an event (generally unexpected or unpredictable) that threatens life, health, and/or property, such that immediate action is required. A “disaster” is an emergency that disrupts community functions and creates needs for individuals and/or communities, such that human services will be required to address needs. See the section “Basic Concepts” in the template.

The purpose of Emergency Action plans are to

- ensure safety and health of staff, clients, and others
- minimize disruption
- mitigate impact
- reduce confusion and misinformation

Many organizations, even if they do not have a formal emergency plan, have policies and procedures to address emergencies such as injuries, fire, etc. These can be incorporated into the emergency plan.

Continuity of Operations

A Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) documents how the organization will resume essential functions after an emergency or disaster that causes an interruption of the organization’s operations.

The COOP planning process focuses on two key questions:

1. What functions conducted by the organization are essential to fulfilling its mission?
2. What must be done to resume conducting those functions after an interruption of operations?

Maintaining the Plan

A plan is only useful to the extent that staff know how to implement it. It is essential that the plan spell out how the organization will

- Distribute, Maintain, and Update the Plan
- Test, Train, and Exercise the Plan

General Suggestions

Do	Do not	
Plan for the various impacts an event can have on the organization.	Do not plan for specific scenarios.	For example, instead of planning for what to do in a flood, fire, etc., plan for what to do if your normal building was inaccessible for any reason, if you lost electrical power, etc.
Prioritize the important things to plan for.	Do not focus on unlikely scenarios.	It is uncommon for an event to cripple every aspect of your operation. Try to divide the planning process into sections, such as (1) loss of building/workspace, (2) loss of staff and (3) loss of utilities/ networking functions.
Take an “all-hazards” approach.	Do not plan for the last emergency.	While it's important to pay attention to "lessons learned", each incident is different and planning should take a broad perspective
Think “outside the box”.	Do not assume existing structures will not change.	For example, it's important to remember that the normal decision-makers for a department may not be available in an emergency. It can be important to designate alternate decision-makers and ensure they are empowered to take action if necessary.

Helpful Hints

- Use your organization's name where the template uses "the organization". It's important that staff and others identify the plan with your organization specifically.
- Make as much use as possible of your existing procedures, protocols, etc., revising as necessary.
- Use this as an opportunity to update or develop needed protocols.

Checklist

Before finalizing the draft plan, be sure it includes

- Both existing and needed plans and procedures
- Identification of essential mission functions and primary business functions
- Delegations of authority
- Contingencies for management interruptions
- Alternative facilities
- Interoperable communications
- Provision for critical records and databases
- Plans for future tests, training and exercises

Identifying the Organization's Functions

Understanding mission essential functions and primary business functions can be the most rewarding part of developing a plan. Not every service or function must be performed in an emergency. The COOP plan therefore focuses on the critical things that the organization must continue to do with as little interruption as possible.

Mission Essential Functions

"Mission Essential Functions" are the functions that you must perform to achieve your mission. An organization providing mental health services, for example, may have a mission "to help families and individuals identify problems, resolve conflicts and promote optimal functioning in everyday life." The organization might regularly do the following things. Please identify which are likely to be "mission essential"?

1. family therapy
2. refer individuals to social services
3. support neighborhood "Mental Health Week"
4. couple counseling
5. process health insurance reimbursement

6. create new therapy groups
7. meet accreditation standards

Family therapy and couple counseling are almost certainly essential to achieving the organization's mission. Referring people to social services, creating new therapy groups, and supporting "Mental Health Week" are not critical. The organization might determine that meeting accreditation standards is mission essential because without accreditation it could not function. Processing health insurance is not essential to achieving the mission, but it is likely to be a "primary business function".

These questions may help staff identify "mission essential" functions, but none of the questions (individually or in combination) can definitively determine the answer. You are the experts on your organization.

- How much time is spent on this?
- What are the consequences if this does not happen?
- How does it relate to the mission?
- Are there other organizations that can/do fulfill the function?
- How much specialized experience or expertise is required to successfully fulfill the function?

Primary Business Functions

"Primary Business Functions" are necessary in order to support the mission essential functions you have identified.

Processing payroll is something that you must do if you are to retain the staff who fulfill your mission essential functions. Thus, it is a primary business function, and there must be a plan to accomplish it after any disaster impact. Planning the staff holiday party may be important, but it is not a primary business function.

The difference between mission essential functions and primary business functions can also be useful in many other areas of your planning processes.

Functions are not Procedures

Always keep in mind that there may be many ways to perform a function. For example, an organization may have a mission essential function of screening volunteers. You may have a well thought out procedure that is effective and efficient to achieve that. After a disaster, though, there may be a variety of impediments that undermine your ability to follow that procedure. Your online application may not be accessible. Transit problems may make it impossible for candidates to come to your office for an orientation meeting. Remember that your function is to screen volunteers based on your criteria, not to maintain a website or have a meeting. Think about other ways to reach the goal.

A primary business function also is not defined by its usual procedures. Meeting payroll is essential. The particular process that has been in place to get staff information to Human Resources, who provide appropriate payroll data to Information Technology, who transmit the data to the external payroll manager, may in fact be the only way it has ever been done by your organization. Don't expect it necessarily to continue seamlessly after disaster. Plan ahead to address the potential interruptions. If you cannot follow your process after a disaster, you need to get payroll done nonetheless.

Functions are not Programs

Let's consider Acme Human Services. The organization operates three programs to help children who've experienced trauma (Program A), families in crisis (Program B), and reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals (Program C).

Those three categories of service are programs, not functions. To determine what the organization's essential mission functions are, we need to look at what they do to serve clients. For Program A, the organization provides individual counseling and family counseling. For Program B, it provides individual counseling, family counseling, and parent education. For Program C, it provides individual counseling and vocational training. We can show this breakdown in a graph:

Program	Clients	Individual Counseling	Family Counseling	Parenting Education	Vocational Training
Program A	Children experienced trauma	✓	✓		
Program B	Families in crisis	✓	✓	✓	
Program C	Reintegrating formerly incarcerated	✓			✓

The essential functions for Acme are not Programs A, B, and C. The functions the organization does are Individual Counseling, Family Counseling, Parenting Education, and Vocational Training.

Even though the programs may be administered and staffed separately, planning focuses on the functions because a specific strategy to resume operations is most likely to apply to a function, regardless of which program is doing it.

This is not to say that it isn't necessary to include the programs in developing a plan. There are likely to be some details that are specific to an individual program. For example, the staff who are responsible to manage resuming the function after an interruption of service may be assigned to a program, not a function. In that case, the plan will specify program-specific actions.

A Final Word

The mission of the Human Services Council is to strengthen New York's nonprofit human services sector, ensuring New Yorkers from all walks of life, across diverse neighborhoods, cultures, and generations reach their full potential. As one of its initiatives to strengthen the sector, HSC serves as a convener and organizing body for the sector in addressing disaster readiness and resilience. Among its varied activities, HSC

- Conducts research to better understand the disaster-related needs, concerns and perspectives of human services leaders
- Serves as an intermediary between the human services sector and government
- Produces guidance to coordinating disaster work by human services organizations
- Facilitates the Workgroup on Disaster Readiness and Resilience, a body comprised of leaders from human services organizations to address disaster-related policies and programs and engage in joint planning
- Organizes conferences and conducts trainings
- Studies the degree to which the sector is prepared for disasters

Human services organizations play crucial roles in responding to disasters in NYC. In the aftermaths of 9/11 and Superstorm Sandy, dozens of these organizations provided short-term relief in the forms of food, water, shelter and crisis counseling, and they engaged deeply with those affected over the long course of recovery by providing case management services, mental health services and support relating to income, housing, employment and family matters. In numerous other lesser known incidents, human services organizations have similarly served as sources of profound support to New Yorkers.

HSC encourages human services organizations to be prepared both to cope with the impacts of disaster on the organization and to render help to those impacted by disaster.

Appendix A

Planning Resources

http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/em/downloads/pdf/Business_Guide_Final.pdf

<https://www.ready.gov/community-preparedness-toolkit>

<https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/continuity>

<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/emergency-preparedness/information-for-preparedness-professionals.page>

<http://www.dhSES.ny.gov/planning/state/coop.cfm>

https://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/org/ncp/coop/continuity_guidance_circular.pdf

<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/132130>

<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/89512>