

Sheltering-In-Place: Are You Prepared?

Imagine that it is 10:00 a.m. on a bright, sunny morning and you are already knee-deep in work as you sort through your ever-growing stack of paperwork and e-mails. You are a legal administrator, responsible for managing some or all aspects of a law firm, corporation or agency (large or small), and in this role, you are responsible for all the lawyers and staff in your office.

Suddenly, and without warning, you are thrown from your chair as two huge explosions rock your building, and you hear glass breaking from the windows all around you. As you slowly pick yourself up off the floor, you start to hear shouts and screams from your lawyers and staff down the hallway. As you walk unsteadily out of your office and start making your way down the hall, you quickly ask yourself if the business continuity plan for your office that has been collecting dust on the shelf is up-to-date and ready to help you figure out what to do. Should you evacuate everyone from the building? Should you stay inside and wait for help? Are you ready to start making some difficult decisions? Do you have anyone to help you make those decisions?

Does this situation sound realistic or just like the plot of a recent action movie? Sadly, given the world we live in today with bombings, terrorist plots and workplace shootings happening around the globe on a daily basis, situations like this have become all too real. It has become a critical part of every administrator's job to learn what potential risks your office might face and how to mitigate those risks and ensure business continuity for your lawyers and clients in the face of any threat.

TO STAY OR GO?

If the scenario above was happening in your office, would you know whether you should evacuate the building or stay inside and shelter-in-place? The reality in today's world of global threats is that it is much more likely that you will encounter situations in your workplace in which it is much safer for everyone to shelter-in-place in a safe room(s) within your office space rather than evacuate.

There are many situations where sheltering-in-place might be the best and safest move: tornadoes, the minutes following a severe earthquake when exit stairwells may be damaged or blocked, toxic chemical spills, biological agents released in the air, explosions (or dirty bombs) or an active shooter in your office/building.

Would you be prepared to shelter-in-place? Is it part of your overall business continuity plan? Most of us have spent years training for and participating in office/building fire drills and typically have fire wardens assigned to assist in evacuating people from the building at a moment's notice, but sheltering-in-place is still not a part of many business continuity plans. It needs to be!

WHO IS PREPARED?

Do you have a crisis team that knows how to move people to a safe location? Have those shelter-in-place locations been identified? Do your lawyers and staff know where to go? Have you talked to your building management about what their shelter-in-place plans are? Establishing crisis teams in your office and crisis team training are an essential part of any business continuity plan. Regular meetings, training and drills held with your building management, building security and your crisis team members can be vital to saving lives in a situation where sheltering-in-place is the safer course of action. Knowing whether to evacuate or shelter-in-place as the situation is evolving is a critical skill that all crisis team members need to have.

TAKING STEPS

As a first step, it is important to identify shelter-in-place locations in each office (interior offices/workrooms that are away from any glass and with doors that lock, if possible). Second, floor plans identifying exit stairwells and the shelter-in-place locations should be posted on the back of office doors (like you would see in a hotel room), in cubicles and in all conference rooms. Shelter-in-place or "safe" rooms should contain supplies needed if lawyers and staff had to shelter-in-place for a period of time. At a minimum, supplies should include emergency first aid kits, and enough water and food (energy bars will work) for each person for up to three days. The shelter-in-place drill is simple: based on an alarm sounding or a

PA announcement, everyone is asked to proceed to their designated shelter-in-place locations. The drill should be timed (like most evacuation drills) and the goal is simply to ensure that each lawyer and staff knows where to go quickly if a situation calls for sheltering-in-place rather than evacuation.

Establishing crisis teams, training these team members to know whether it is better to evacuate or shelter-in-place based on the situation at hand, and conducting routine drills all are important ways of ensuring the safety of your lawyers and staff. Research from actual disaster situations has shown that more lives were saved because people had the “muscle memory” to know how to react quickly based on a particular situation. Putting these plans in place now will be the first step to ensuring that you are protecting the greatest assets your firm has – your people!