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By Steve Lewis

When it Comes to Emergencies, Be Prepared for the Unexpected

They're called "emergencies" because they are out of the ordinary, and unplanned. However, despite, or perhaps because of their unpredictability, SIORs say it's critical to be well prepared for those crisis days that hopefully will be few and far between.

"Preparation—anticipating the unexpected—it's what we're expected to do and be good at," says **Randall Walker, SIOR**, principal broker for The Industrial Group, LLC, in New Orleans, LA, when asked about the key elements of an emergency plan.

"It's critical to see that there's no natural disruption to our system, data, or clients," adds **Bill Gladstone, SIOR, CCIM**, of Gladstone Group of NAI CIR, Camp Hill, PA. "We have five people plus myself, but I felt it was important enough to have an employee handbook and an emergency plan; though it's not easy to find someone to write it." It's also essential, he notes, to keep your plan updated.

Arlon I. Brown, SIOR, senior vice president for Parsons Commercial Group, Inc., in Framingham, MA, agrees. "The really key element from what we've found is to have your information up to date and accurate," he says.

"We own about 2.5 million square feet in one- and two-story buildings, so the biggest thing is to have an accurate list of contact people," Brown continues. "What we try to do is have excellent tenant relations, so we speak to them about solving their problems in a timely manner. We try to walk through every space once a year and call on people once a quarter to update the [contact] book—that's really the bible if something happens, because you know the key players and can get in touch quickly."

Sean Ford, a partner in Dancor Development Corp. of London, Ontario, says his firm currently insists on tenants, in consultation with Dancor's property management arm, developing both fire evacuation plans and disaster plans. "Plans are developed by tenants and reviewed by Dancor. The tenants need to be the first line on the development side, especially where there are unionized staff who have established health and safety committees where disaster planning is part and parcel of the mandate," he says, noting that the incorporation of disaster planning is a recent addition.

Continued

Contributing SIORs



Arlon Brown, SIOR



Bill Gladstone, SIOR, CCIM



Randall Walker, SIOR

Learning From Experience

In many cases, emergency plans have been either created or updated in the wake of disasters. At Dancor, for example, “The catalyst was the 100-year storm of August 2005 where buildings and parking areas were flooded as a result of an extreme microstorm,” Ford shares. “From that event, steps were taken to educate tenants on what to do when flooding occurs.” Tenants also regularly perform drills and practice sessions. In addition, Dancor uses health and safety consultants who audit its plans annually and provide updates as required.

However, he adds, facilities in his country are not as well prepared as those of “Our American cousins.” At his firm’s facility in Texas, for example, the tenant not only has well prepared disaster plans but is aware of evacuation routes out of the city. “If a similar disaster occurred in Ontario Canada, the majority of clients and tenants would not know where to go or how to leave,” he concedes.

“In 1996 we had a blizzard and I couldn’t get out of the house for three days,” Gladstone recalls. “That’s how we developed our plan – almost by the seat of our pants.” Today, he shares, everyone brings their laptops home each day, and they come together at 8 a.m. to review the plans for the day – including emergency response.

Now, he says, the company is going even further; Gladstone, the other sales professional and the head of operations are all integrating iPads into their equipment. “Utilizing this technology allows us to communicate in the event we lose WiFi and wireless connections – which has happened in the past,” he explains. He also has a backup cable, plus access to NAI’s if that is unavailable for some reason.

This speaks to protection of data. During the blizzard, he recalls, there were power outages caused by flooding, and emails could not be accessed because the server was down. “Now we’re pricing out going to the Cloud, and could be there in two to three months,” says Gladstone. “We’re also going to remote programs. Our database is on a server; we have remote access and I have a copy of the database program on my laptop so I can work off that and when power comes back on line I can sync it up.”

In addition, says Gladstone, everyone in his group just received CPR and AED training from the Red Cross – which is offered at no charge. “What would happen if I was sitting with a client and they choked or had a heart attack?” he poses. He also derived some marketing benefits from the course; he called the local newspaper, and they came over and took pictures of the staff.

The "Mother" of All Disasters

Walker had perhaps the *best* – and the *worst* – teacher for those who want to learn about disasters; he lived through Hurricane Katrina. “Katrina allowed me to see that your personal and business interests are often in direct conflict with one another,” he shares. “It became my clear vision that what we needed to do for business was ‘X’ and my personal life and family were ‘Y.’” If you can’t support yourself your family suffers, he notes, but you also can’t do business if you’re consumed with worries about your family.

“In hindsight, it all goes back to preparation – and what I did and didn’t do,” says Walker. The weekend before Katrina (the storm hit on a Monday), his wife and daughter were up in Tennessee looking at colleges and his son was at a boarding school in Asheville, NC. After making some personal preparations over the weekend including taking care of his boat and Gulf Coast home, he received a call from his daughter who was in tears, saying she had heard New Orleans would be “wiped out.” Meanwhile, his parents, who were in their 80’s, could not evacuate by themselves so he picked them up after gassing up (and witnessing a number of

scuffles), grabbing a bag of clothes and his .45 automatic. “Thirteen hours later we were in Birmingham; it was a nightmare,” he shares.

Today, should disaster strike again, things would be much different. “In any disaster, my family knows they can find me by leaving a message at SIOR,” says Walker. “It’s simple; the association will do anything to help its members, and my family knows this is my point of contact. My second point of contact is my brother, who lives in Dallas, so there are two separate and distinct points of contact in two separate cities.”

As for business, his server is no longer in New Orleans. “It’s been contracted somewhere in the central U.S. in a secure bunker; I feel a lot safer that it’s separate from where disaster is most likely to affect me,” says Walker.

“I had thought my secretary had scanned in my most critical documents, but it was just in progress,” he adds. “That’s all been done now, and I personally verified it. As for data storage, it’s all in my laptop, which obviously goes with me; I really encourage people to do this. I have my business associates, primary and secondary contacts, family, customers, their key personnel – Outlook can do all of that.” In addition, says Walker, you should keep copies with you of all personal documents you might need, such as your passport, birth certificate, and insurance coverage documents.

“If you sense something may be happening, have your ‘evacuation car’ gassed up and do not use it,” Walker advises.

In terms of buildings, he says he has already lined up key contractors and told them “You will pretty much get the bulk of my business, but if a disaster strikes I expect to be your preferred customer.”

These are “handshake” deals, he continues. “I know I will have roofs to replace, and possibly flooded buildings, so I have all my contractors lined up,” he explains. “I have access to many buildings, so I can set them up with a place to operate.”

None of this had been done prior to Katrina, says Walker, whose preparation also now includes a raised up jeep to serve as an emergency vehicle. “Food, water and security are critical,” he notes. “I am personally well armed and carry legal.”

Katrina, he adds, may be different in scope than other disasters, “But this plan can apply to tornados, to floods in the Midwest, to earthquakes -- to a lot of natural disasters,” Walker asserts. “The worst case scenario is a good one to prepare for.” 

