Emergency evacuation planning for your workplace

Emergencies and disasters can happen any time and without warning. The more prepared you are for them, the better you'll be able to respond. This will help reduce panic and confusion if you and your workers need to evacuate the workplace in an emergency.

As an employer, this resource will help you plan for emergencies and develop effective procedures for evacuating your workplace.

Requirements for emergency preparedness and response

All employers in B.C. must do a risk assessment to identify hazards in their workplace, and then put controls in place to reduce the risk of injury to workers. Part of this process includes planning for the possibility of evacuation if there is an environmental disaster or other emergency, as well as training all your workers in your evacuation procedures.

Considerations for your evacuation plan

Consider the following as you develop your evacuation plan:

- Determine what potential emergency situations would require you and your workers to evacuate the workplace. Consider any environmental emergencies that might happen in your geographic area, such as flooding, wildfires, avalanches, and tsunamis. Also consider potential emergencies related to nearby infrastructure or industry (e.g., railway derailment, industrial incident).

- Consider specific workplace or location conditions, such as factors that might make evacuation or access to services difficult.

- Review any procedures you already have in place for an emergency. Ensure these procedures include up-to-date plans for evacuation.

- Create a contact list of emergency agencies in your area (e.g., fire department, Emergency Management BC, BC Wildfire Services, local emergency services). Include information about which agency to contact in which situation.

- Identify who would need to be evacuated, and from where. Consider on-site workers, workers in remote locations or performing tasks off-site (e.g., deliveries), clients and customers, visitors, etc.

- Identify what machinery or work processes would need to be shut down, how they would be shut down, and who would be responsible. Pay special attention to materials or work processes in your workplace that could become hazardous if exposed to elements such as fire or flooding.

- Designate primary and secondary evacuation routes. For buildings, set primary and secondary emergency exits. Make sure evacuation routes and emergency exits are always clearly marked with signage, well lit, and unobstructed. Install emergency lighting in case a power outage occurs during an evacuation. Also, make sure evacuation routes won't expose evacuating people to more hazards.

- Post evacuation procedures and maps where workers can see them.

- Designate evacuation wardens who will help others during an evacuation and make sure all workers are accounted for. If your workplace is large or complex, you may also want to assign an overall evacuation coordinator.

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- Review your first aid procedures and make sure your supplies are up to date and easily accessible in an emergency. Include equipment such as emergency communication devices and personal protective equipment (PPE) in your supplies. If it may be difficult to access basic supplies, such as food and water, put together an emergency supply.

- Establish procedures for helping people with disabilities and people who do not speak English.

- Consider how you will gather and maintain important personal information about workers in an emergency (e.g., contact numbers, next-of-kin, medical needs), and how you will access that information remotely if you need to evacuate. Ensure you have measures in place to protect workers' private information.

Assembly areas and accountability

- Identify an assembly location where people can gather, if possible, after a site evacuation. This gives you an opportunity to account for each person to make sure everyone has been evacuated safely. Choose a safe off-site location that all workers can easily find and are familiar with. If your community has a designated emergency shelter, this might be your first choice for assembly location. Designate a backup location in case you can't get to your first choice.

- Consider how workers will get to the assembly location and whether you need to arrange transportation.

- Identify a contact number for all evacuated personnel to call when safely out of the area if they are not going to gather at the assembly area.

- Establish a head-count system (or something similar) for workers at the assembly area. The evacuation coordinator should receive a list of the names and last known locations of any missing workers as soon as possible after arriving at the assembly area.

- Develop procedures for further evacuation in case the incident expands. This may mean sending workers home by usual means or by providing them with transportation to an off-site location.

- If you are not meeting at an assembly location, consider how you will send evacuees to shelter.

Communication, education, and training

- Get input and feedback from your workers as you develop your plan. If you have a joint health and safety committee or a worker health and safety representative, ensure you consult with them.

- Your evacuation plan may be affected by decisions made by emergency management authorities. Have a contact number to enable a change in plans as conditions or options change.

- Communicate your plan with neighbouring workplaces if possible, to enable shared travel out of the area and to minimize potential congestion on roadways. A community-based plan will also enable you to share ideas and resources.

- Educate workers about your evacuation plan. Ensure your evacuation procedures are part of orientating and training new workers. Make sure all your workers know about:

  - The different parts of your evacuation plan

  - The types of emergencies that may happen and what steps to take in different emergencies

  - Communication procedures and how they will know when they need to evacuate

  - Who will be in charge during an emergency

  - The location of emergency equipment and how to use it

  - Where to go in an evacuation

  - Contact information for your evacuation coordinator

- Hold emergency drills at least once a year, and discuss the plan seasonally or when there is an increased potential of an event to ensure that workers know what to do in an emergency. This also allows you to test how effective your evacuation routes and procedures are. Keep records of these drills.

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Know when to evacuate

During an environmental disaster, an evacuation alert or order may be issued by the province, local municipal authorities, or Indigenous governments in consultation with the appropriate ministry or agency. An evacuation alert is a warning to prepare for evacuation on short notice. An evacuation order means that the area must be vacated immediately using routes identified by provincial or local emergency officials.

> EmergencyInfoBC has the most up-to-date information about active emergencies in the province. See emergencyinfobc.gov.bc.ca or @EmergencyInfoBC on Twitter.

Re-entry procedures

Only trained and equipped professionals should re-enter an area after an evacuation — even if it's for rescue efforts. Anyone entering a damaged or contaminated facility without proper training or equipment is at risk of serious injury.

You and your workers can't re-enter an area under an evacuation order unless the order expires, is lifted, or its geographic scope has changed. The only other exception is if you have been issued an evacuation zone entry permit by the same authority that issued the evacuation order, or by a person with delegated emergency power authority.

Support for workers

Your workers are your most valuable asset, so look for ways to support them after an emergency. Services you can consider providing or arranging for workers include:

- Crisis counselling
- Reduced or flexible work hours
- Salary continuation and/or cash advances
- Child care

> Consider ways to help your workers prepare for emergencies at home. Prepared BC has resources for household emergency planning that you can share with your workers.

For more information

Occupational Health and Safety Regulation sections 4.13 to 4.18 and OHS Guideline G4.13(1) describe the requirements for emergency preparedness and response.

Visit the following pages on worksafebc.com for more information and resources:

- Managing risk
- First aid requirements

The B.C. government's Emergency management in B.C. page also has information to support businesses and communities in preparing for and responding to emergencies.

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