

# EMERGENCY ACTION PLANNING

IAN WADE, DIRECTOR  
ADVENTURE SAFETY INTERNATIONAL

This information was produced for America Outdoors and may not be reproduced without express written permission of America Outdoors.

Contact America Outdoors at [infoacct@americaoutdoors.org](mailto:infoacct@americaoutdoors.org) or 865-558-3595

## Summary

Risk management has a proactive component that seeks to reduce the chance of an accident taking place. However, recognizing that despite everyone's best efforts problems may still occur, risk management also focuses on minimizing the consequences of an accident for the affected organization. This article discusses only the latter aspect and how an Emergency Action Plan can ensure the most appropriate response is made following an accident.

## Case Histories

Last summer in Portland, Oregon two different organizations experienced the death of a participant during their mountaineering programs. In both cases independent investigations raised questions about the manner in which the leader conducted the experience. Yet the outcomes for the two organizations have been radically different.

- One organization has the full support of the victim's parents and is receiving contributions towards a memorial fund in the victim's name. There was a one-day mention of the accident on an inside page of a local newspaper near the accident site. Most potential clients are unaware of the accident and enrollment is unaffected this year.
- The other organization is in the final stages of negotiating a settlement involving payment to the victim's family. They had two days of front-page coverage in the Oregonian and several follow-up stories. The membership of the organization expressed strong concern about lack of response and this has led to a full-scale review of the organization's risk management practices.

The difference between these radically different outcomes, to essentially the same event, lies in the quality of emergency response made by each organization.

What did the first organization do right? Very simply they showed the family that they cared deeply about the tragedy and were going to investigate promptly and thoroughly to determine if mistakes were made and how to correct them. The other organization was encouraged by their insurance company to do no investigation and good relations with the next-of-kin were never achieved. The first organization had a thorough Emergency Action Plan while the second organization was developing theirs during the response to the tragedy.

## Purpose of an Emergency Action Plan

An Emergency Action Plan is a set of pre-selected activities, intended to guide the response to an accident, which has been pre-approved by the managers and other constituents that will be involved.

The Emergency Action Plan does the following:

1. Assign responsibilities for action.
2. Preplans actions to be taken in different potential emergencies.
3. Identifies resources for responding to an emergency.

Each accident has unique characteristics. However many elements of the response can be anticipated and optimal strategies for dealing with them developed.

## Definition of an Emergency

An Emergency may exist in other situations than the fatal accidents described above. The circumstances that might trigger use of an Emergency Action Plan are when any staff, participants, or guests become:

- Lost.
- Seriously, or fatally ill or injured.
- Involved in criminal activity, a natural disaster, or any other situation likely to attract media attention.

Any staff member, participant, or guest should know that an Emergency Action Plan exists and how to activate the plan. Alert status may precede declaration of an Emergency, until confirmation of the need for assistance is obtained.

## Response to an Emergency

Response to any emergency will often involve interaction with county sheriffs, search and rescue teams, and land management agencies. All these agencies use an Incident Command System approach to handling the situation. To communicate effectively with these professionals your organization should understand the basic structure and *terms* used in the Incident Command System.

The Incident Command System uses a team that performs five management functions:

1. *Command*
2. *Planning*
3. *Operations*
4. *Logistics*
5. *Finance*

Early in an incident these functions may be combined under one person, the *Incident Commander*, however different *Section Heads* may be added for any or all of the five functions as the scope of an *Incident* expands. When multiple agencies are involved representatives from each agency will be part of the *Command Team* so the Incident Commander can use their knowledge and capabilities as a *Resource*.

Ideally a senior person from your organization would be part of the Command Team to represent your interests, contribute Resources, and stay abreast of developments. This is more likely to happen if you use an Incident Command System approach internally as it makes it easier to transfer control of the operation to appropriate authorities in a way they will view as professional.

## 1. Assigning Responsibilities for Action

The Emergency Action Plan should identify the people within your organization who can fill the roles required in the Incident Command System. The plan should identify alternates and document how to contact each member who may be needed. Many organizations use a pager to ensure one or more people can be rapidly contacted to assume control of an emergency.

1. The **Command** function is responsible for leadership, decision-making, and oversight of the entire operation. Ideally this person would have management experience, knowledge of Search and Rescue operations, diplomacy skills, and a broad sensitivity to organizations' interests. This is usually the most senior executive.
2. The **Planning** function is responsible for gathering relevant data about the incident and developing strategies for successfully concluding it. The Outdoor Program Director, their Assistant, or a Course Director of the area where the incident occurs will often perform this function.
3. The **Operations** function is responsible for conducting Search and Rescue operations in the field. This may be the Course Director or a Field Staff member.
4. The **Logistics** function supports the Search and Rescue operations with vehicles, food, equipment, and

facilities. The Course Director or a Field Staff member of the area where the incident occurs is the natural choice for this function.

5. The **Finance** function regulates expenses for services used on major incidents. The Business Manager would be a logical choice for this function.

## 2. **Preplanning Actions to Take in an Emergency**

Preplanning what to do if an emergency arises should be a deliberate process that involves many people within the organization. This team approach both helps get the best thinking of the staff into the Emergency Action Plan and helps train key people for their role if needed.

Each organization will be able to identify several scenarios with the highest potential to activate the Emergency Action Plan. Some typical scenarios are listed below and the probable steps to be taken in response. The scenarios must of course be customized when developing an Emergency Action Plan for your organization.

### **Scenario 1 Missing person or group, with or without staff supervision.**

Response      Assess safety of available search staff  
 Gather all pertinent data to assist search  
 Determine urgency  
 Determine Point Last Seen and Direction of Travel  
 Confine the search area  
 Conduct hasty search with immediately available staff  
 Notify agency with jurisdiction for Search and Rescue  
 Add appropriate search resources  
 Execute internal and external communication plan  
 Prepare for incident demobilization

### **Scenario 2 Disabling accident or serious illness.**

Response      Assess safety and capability of available evacuation personnel  
 Gather all pertinent data to assist evacuation  
 Select most expedient evacuation resource and medical support.  
 Notify agency with jurisdiction for Search and Rescue  
 Execute internal and external communication plan  
 Obtain witness reports  
 Determine if the program should continue  
 Evaluate need for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing  
 Prepare for internal and external investigation

### **Scenario 3 Fatal accident or illness, including suicide**

Response      Assess safety of remaining personnel  
 Secure area around fatality site  
 Notify law enforcement agency  
 Execute internal and external communication plan  
 Participate in evacuation  
 Obtain witness reports  
 Determine if program should continue  
 Evaluate need for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing  
 Prepare for internal and external investigation

Other scenarios might be developed such as:

- Runaway participant(s).
- Criminal activity committed by or inflicted on participants or staff.

- Natural disasters that involve or may involve participants.
- Participation in an Emergency involving other parties.

### 3. Identifying Resources for Responding to and Emergency

The pre-planning exercise illuminates the kind of resources that will be required in the event of an emergency. They will typically include groups such as: -

- **Sheriff responsible for search and rescue in each area used.**  
While it would be ideal to meet the sheriff and the key people likely to be managing a search and rescue this may not always be possible. You can at least send a copy of your Press Kit and Emergency Action Plan, invite their comments, and call to follow-up. In the follow-up call find out what kind of Resources they have available e.g. search dogs, trackers, fixed wing and helicopter units, etc. This lets them know you are a professional organization.
- **Land managers of each area used by your organization.**  
Again, if you can't meet them in person at least send them information and give a follow-up call.
- **The Critical Incident Stress Foundation.**  
This organization has trained debriefing teams all over the country and can be reached at 410 750 9600. They can provide an invaluable service to those affected by the stress of the accident.
- **Medical advisers.**  
Specialist physicians may be useful in on-site treatment of some conditions e.g. snakebite, altitude illness or in providing advice on follow-up care.
- **Your insurance representative.**
- **Legal advisers.**  
It is important to get legal advice that represents the long-term interests of your organization not just your insurance company.
- **Public relations professionals.**  
People who specialize in crisis management would be particularly appropriate.

Space prevents a thorough discussion of the roles of all members of the Incident Command Team. More information is available in a longer paper available from the Adventure Safety International. The remainder of the article will discuss the two most difficult tasks following an accident; dealing with the next-of-kin and the media.

### Responding to Next-of-Kin

This is the most crucial of the immediate follow-up procedures after a serious injury or fatal accident and also the most distressing both to contemplate and to do. The most senior staff member of your organization is generally the best person to make this notification. If he or she is not available an alternate must be available such as the Chairman of the Board. In some situations it may be desirable for someone outside your organization to make the initial call but try and avoid having a sheriff or search and rescue person call.

One person should take primary responsibility for ongoing relations with the family, a task that might continue for many months. This family relations coordinator might be a different person than the initial spokesperson.

Each incident will have seemingly unique circumstances, but the following are some general guidelines and suggestions:

1. Sensitivity to the feelings of the family is the foremost consideration. Think through what you will say before you make contact. Have your facts organized and accurate, and be sure to convey whatever personal condolences might be appropriate, without seeming to admit liability. Try to anticipate possible responses and prepare yourself accordingly.

2. Remember that the next-of-kin have a right to all factual information pertaining to a serious accident, but as the initial notification will be received with surprise and shock don't expect to convey all the details until a follow-up call. Make certain they know how to reach you at any time they wish to speak.
3. Promptness is important. Delays will almost certainly lead to suspicions or other bad feelings. Don't delay calling if all the details are not yet known. Once the sheriff or search and rescue radios are talking about a fatality the news media are not far behind.
4. Be conscious of the timing of your call and try to think through where the recipient might be; at work, home, vacation, etc. Consider the value of speaking to all next-of-kin listed as emergency contacts at the same time, perhaps through a conference call. Also think through what to do if you have difficulty contacting next-of-kin, if another family member answers the phone, etc.
5. Conclude the call by asking what support the next-of-kin need immediately from relatives, neighbors, friends, etc. and help procure it if appropriate.
6. Invite family representatives to come to the accident site at your expense if they wish. Offer to make all travel and hotel arrangements for the next-of-kin.
7. Consider having a staff member who has firsthand knowledge of the accident make a follow-up call, coached by a legal counsel.
8. Consider having a representative of your organization visit the family at their home.
9. Arrange for others (Board Chair, other staff who know the family, etc.) to reinforce your communication. Coordinate with the designated family relations coordinator to avoid redundant or conflicting messages being given.

## Responding to the Media

One designated spokesperson should be the only person responsible for communicating with the news media. This should be a senior executive who is comfortable in front of the media but might not be the most senior executive. This allows the spokesman to defer questions they might not be ready to answer to a later statement by the senior executive. Other people in the organization must be aware of the single spokesperson policy and refer all inquiries to this person.

**Media** may include:

1. Print media, primarily local and national newspapers.
2. Radio and TV stations, primarily local.
3. National Wire Services.

### Priority

The priority for contacting different media groups depends on their potential interest in the incident and their past relationship with the School.

1. **High** Priority – Those who will definitely want to cover the story and those who have a positive relationship with the School from previous media contacts.
2. **Lower** Priority – Those who may cover the story but will learn of it from a wire service or other media.

### Timing of Contacting Media

It is usually advisable to notify the media just before the situation will become visible through the involvement of law enforcement or search and rescue authorities. The media can easily learn of an emergency situation, and it is preferable that your organization releases information rather than appearing defensive.

### **Goal of Communication with Media**

The objective is to have a one-day story, avoiding a continuing series of headlines and features dragged out over a period of days or weeks. To this end, provide the news media with as much detail as possible, within the constraints detailed below. Make sure that new information is relayed promptly to the media to allow them to conclude coverage of the incident.

### **Methods of Communication**

Prepare and fax a press release to high priority media. Use a summary structure: open the statement with key facts (who, what, when, where, why), and then add more details. Write the release the way you would like to have it appear in print media so the reporter has little editing to do.

After faxing out the initial press release consider calling media representatives you hope will be sympathetic. Rather than reading a "canned story", the spokesperson should have a written list of key points for reference, and tell the story in their own words. The image projected by the spokesperson of concern and caring may have an important effect on the eventual tone of the story that appears.

Try to avoid press conferences until you are ready with a full factual statement you know is correct.

### **Guidelines for Dealing with the Media**

Any particular incident will have its own characteristics so these guidelines are an aid, rather than a substitute, for thoughtful response during the incident.

The overarching communication goals are to show that the organization

1. Cares deeply about the tragedy.
2. Plans an independent investigation to establish the causes and learn how to prevent future incidents.
3. Is engaged in work of social value that many people regard highly despite the tragedy.

#### • WHAT THE MEDIA WILL WANT TO KNOW

- What happened?
  - Where did it happen?
  - When did it happen?
  - Who many people were involved?
  - Who was involved? Ages and hometowns or states can be given prior to notification of relatives and subsequent release of names. Identify rescuers as well as staff and students.
  - Have their relatives been notified?
  - What emergency response efforts have been made to date? What additional emergency response efforts are planned?
  - Information on conditions in the field, equipment, training, and safety of the group.
  - Background on the School, including the safety training of students.
- Provide accurate and appropriate disclosure of the facts and cooperate equally with the news media.
  - Explain why certain information cannot be released, e.g. Next of Kin have not yet been notified, doctor's orders prevent interview of survivor, etc. Withholding the name of a victim pending notification of Next of Kin is appropriate and will be respected by the media. However, do not deny that the accident itself occurred.
  - Do not speculate. When the answer to a query is not known, say so. Avoid responding with "no comment", which can appear evasive.
  - It is important to impress upon the media any kind of humanitarian, thoughtful acts taken by the School e.g. Chairperson flies to visit the family, organization flies family to the scene, etc.
  - Keep statements brief and simple. Avoid over-explaining. Beware of the sound bites that may be extracted for use from long statements.
  - Communicate care and compassion.

- Do not admit liability.
- It is desirable to let the media know that an independent External Review will be conducted and that the results can be made available to them in due course.
- Provide information on the mission of your organization and any research or testimonial evidence that a valuable service is provided.
- Arrange for monitoring of news reporting. Listen to broadcasts and check newspapers.
- When a reporter prints or broadcasts erroneous information, inform the reporter, not his or her superior, and provide correct information as soon as possible.

## **Conclusion**

Having an Emergency Action Plan may prevent long lasting damage to your organizations' reputation in the event of an accident or other incident. Putting a good plan together involves senior executives doing some careful anticipation of what might go wrong. Communicating in advance with those other groups that they will be involved in an emergency will refine the plan and build professional relationships. These groups will then be more likely to support you if the incident you never want to happen does take place.

## **Acknowledgement**

Many of the ideas in this paper were developed while the author was working with Outward Bound USA and their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.