

# Risk

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# Reporter

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## Planning for disaster

Many facility disaster plans depend heavily on the arrival of outside help. But what happens when bad weather or any other disaster means the cavalry can't ride to your rescue? As we enter the season of floods, tornados and hurricanes, it's critical for your organization to be prepared to manage for at least 72 hours on its own. These suggestions can help.

### Create your plan with buy-in from all critical parties

Develop your plan with representatives from every department: management, maintenance, food service, human resources, nursing and activities/wellness and put it in writing. "Get residents involved too," said Einar Jensen, life safety educator for the South Metro Fire Rescue Authority in the Denver metropolitan area. "You can often tap into great expertise from former school teachers, firefighters and similar."

Have emergency responders review your plan. They'll determine if it meets fire code requirements and recommend improvements.

### Share the plan

Make sure every staff member has a good understanding of the plan and his or her role in implementing it — and practice. "Staff will be key to your success in a disaster," said Darlene Johnson, deputy operations chief/emergency operations center manager for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

"We use our monthly meetings to keep residents updated on our emergency plans," said Barb Scott, director of clinical operations at Legacy Retirement Communities in Lincoln, Nebraska.

### Maintain at least a 72-hour supply of critical items

Stock food and water for residents and staff. Food should be nonperishable and suitable for resident needs. Johnson recommends a three-gallon per-person, per-day water supply; one of those gallons should be for drinking. "The water must be on site — not scheduled for delivery in an emergency," Johnson said.

Have residents work with staff members and their primary care physicians to order extra medication and such items as backup eyeglasses and supplies to manage chronic conditions, such as diabetes and asthma.

Maintain a cache of blankets and sleeping bags (including some for staff members), flashlights and batteries, duct tape, nonelectric can openers, basic tools, first-aid kits, radios, paper supplies (toilet paper, tissue) and hand sanitizer.

Install generators and maintain a fuel supply. "Have an electrician help you determine the generator size needed to run your heat and air,

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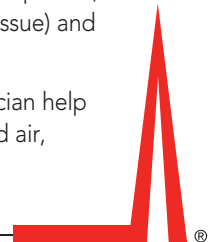
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*Risk Reporter talks with Jerri Beers, executive director at the Sunrise Senior Living in Schaumburg, Illinois*

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critical equipment, the water pump and freezer," Johnson said.

"Some facilities set up an emergency vendor list, but often that's not very practical," Jensen said. "Roads might be blocked, and they'll have no way to get to you. I'd rather see facilities add more storage and maintain supplies on site."

### Require employees to plan ahead too

Have employees maintain a 72-hour store of personal items at your facility. This should include daily medications (secured), toiletries, clothing and supplies to manage chronic conditions, such as diabetes. Encourage them to plan ahead for things like child care in the event a disaster prevents them from leaving. "Employees need to be safe and focused in order to care for your residents effectively," Jensen said.

### Prepare for multiple levels of failure

"There was a case in our area where a hospital's power went out, and its generator failed too," Jensen said. "Assume things won't go as planned and have backups in place. Empower staff and residents to make decisions — to be flexible problem solvers."

### Take a hard look at staffing

"Facilities tend to cut staff drastically at night," Jensen said. "It's cost effective, but in a disaster, you're setting yourself up for failure. When you create your disaster plan, imagine having to operate with a third of your staff at any given moment — because they can't get to you, they're ill, etc. How would you handle this, especially at night?"

Legacy Retirement Communities has a system in place to ensure sufficient staffing when bad weather is imminent; it includes a list of employees' names and contact information. The organization also can convert some of its general living areas into living quarters for staff members if they need to stay on site for a number of days.

### Try to maintain routine if possible

Vulnerable populations can be sensitive to any change. "Studies done after Hurricane Katrina showed the mortality rates for memory care residents increased 30 to 90 days after an evacuation," Jensen said. "Do what you can to balance the need for safety and the need for routine." Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf of Mexico, most notably Louisiana, in 2005.

### Develop a family communication plan

Residents' families will be understandably concerned that their loved ones are safe but answering their worried phone calls pulls staff members away from critical duties. "Once your emergency plan is in place, hold an annual meeting with families and review it with them," Jensen said. "Encourage families to trust you're doing all you can to protect their loved ones in an emergency and not to call. Tell them to assume you're busy managing the crisis and will be in touch as soon as possible."

It also is a good idea to share this information with staff members' families.

Johnson recommends having one person serve as communications manager and having him or her coordinate communications with each resident's family daily if possible. Text messages can be a helpful channel. Scott relies on the news media and social media as additional tools to get the word out about facility status, Scott said.

### Practice evacuating

No one likes to practice building evacuation — especially at night — but it's a must. "Every resident needs to be a part of this," Jensen said.

Fire codes specify how many drills are necessary annually; they're often required at least two times per shift. "Frequent drills are a must, especially with staff turnover," Scott said.

Although some emergency experts think it is better not to tell people the drill is a test, Jensen disagreed. "This is a vulnerable population, and you want to empower them to succeed. You'll find that most people take it seriously, even when they know it isn't real."

Staff members should practice using med sleds and other evacuation devices. Consider assigning "safety shepherds." "These are high-functioning residents who wear a special vest and act as deputy staff," Jensen said. "They encourage people to leave the building and help manage people outside."

### Be prepared to leave

In a worst-case scenario, you must be ready to vacate your facility. Plan ahead for suitable housing, transportation and transfer of critical supplies, support equipment, clothing and records. Facilities with sister properties typically relocate there. Schools, community centers and hotels also are possible housing options. Be aware that things, such as the size of toilets and handicap access, might become issues when you move residents of senior living communities to a school, for example. Standard-issue cots, toileting chairs and walkers might not accommodate obese residents, so plan ahead.

Choose transportation that meets residents' needs — in most cases, school buses won't be a good option. Your facility might need to handle evacuation on its own in the event of a widespread emergency. "Be prepared to help yourselves," Jensen said.

Plan to have your own staff members on hand in the new location — even if it's a sister facility. "The receiving facility isn't likely to have the necessary manpower, plus they won't know the residents," Johnson said.

### Keep shoes handy

"One thing we learned from the Joplin tornado is the importance of shoes," Jensen said, referring to the storm that hit southwest Missouri in 2011 and killed 158 people. "People need to protect their feet in an evacuation. Every resident should have a pair of shoes near (his or her) bed and put them on if the alarm sounds. It seems like a little thing, but it makes a big difference."





## Managing Your Risks

### Shine your light on backup systems

Don't let your organization fall into a false sense of security when it comes to your emergency lighting system.

Preventive maintenance and periodic testing of emergency lighting networks will help ensure that when the power fails, backup systems turn on.

Local building codes stipulate proper design and installation of emergency lighting, but it's up to each senior living center to do its part when it comes to maintaining its emergency backup plans and equipment.

A facility's safety program should include monthly tests to determine if each emergency light performs properly and annual tests to verify battery capacity. An organization also should keep a log that identifies the location of each emergency exit sign or light, dates of inspections, problems observed and dates of repairs.

Eyesight limitations and mobility challenges of senior living community residents can make vacating a building difficult. Evacuation can be made even more challenging — and stressful — when an emergency lighting system malfunctions and compromises the safety and care of everyone.

In addition to turning to your local municipality for codes and standards on emergency lighting, you can consult the National Fire Protection Association. Its codes and standards identify the required illumination levels along a path of egress and the minimum amount of time that emergency lights need to function in the event of a power outage.

Also, it's important to make sure your staff members have ready access to flashlights and replacement batteries.

Don't take the risk of leaving your residents and staff members in the dark if a disaster strikes. Review and assess your plans and systems and keep them in working order.

Edward A. Steele  
Risk Control Manager



# Seasonal Spotlight

## Keep residents from going astray with solid prevention strategies

As winter winds down, the desire to get outside grows for many people. Unfortunately, spring's siren call also could mean increased problems with elopements — occurrences in which residents of senior living communities purposefully leave secured areas or the facility without following policy. There are things you can do, however, to help prevent residents from going astray.

**Assess elopement risk.** Gather a complete elopement history for those with an inclination for walking off. How far did he or she travel? Where did he or she go? Who did he or she seek out? What name will he or she answer to?

"Just because a resident hasn't eloped, doesn't mean they won't," said Sandra Stimson, CEO at the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners.

**Use a tracking system.** Install your own or check with local police to see if you can tap into theirs — Project Lifesaver is a common choice. "Without this, you're completely blind," Stimson said. "These track a resident in minutes — versus hours."

**Maintain an elopement information sheet.** "Keep a recent picture on the resident chart and document what they're wearing daily — including nightclothes," Stimson said. "Limit at-risk residents to two pairs of shoes and take pictures of the treads. Ensure residents have ID at all times."

Stimson also recommends a scent record in the event a search is needed. Have the resident wear a new pair of socks for a day, store in a sealed bag and repeat every three months.

**Do a 1.7-mile analysis.** This is the average distance an eloping person travels before he or she is found, Stimson said. Walk in all directions. Are there bus stops, bodies of water, busy streets or stores? Do your homework. Staff members often are unfamiliar with local terrain.

**Lock all vehicles.** Both heat and cold can kill, and it's easy for a confused resident to get into a car and not be able to get out. Post signs reminding staff members and visitors to lock vehicles.

**Require all residents to sign out anytime they leave the building.** Do this even if they will be on community grounds.

**Monitor outdoor areas.** Assign staff members to walk the grounds and parking lots every hour. Don't assume someone is handling this task — schedule it.

**Check residents at 30-minute intervals.** "Residents often aren't missed until the next meal," Stimson said. "This gives them quite a head start."

▪ More tips can be found at [www.nccdp.org](http://www.nccdp.org).

# Q | A

## A Perspective

*The act of caring for a pet has long been touted for helping seniors reduce stress, increase activity levels and fight feelings of isolation and depression. In addition, pet owners tend to have high self-esteem and low levels of fear<sup>1</sup>, according to a 2011 study. Pets also can decrease agitation and improve nutritional well-being in patients with dementia and Alzheimer's<sup>2</sup>, it said in another study. Sunrise Senior Living communities believe strongly in the benefits of pets and allow some residents to have their own animals. Some Sunrise communities even have community pets. Risk Reporter recently spoke with Jerri Beers, executive director at the Sunrise Senior Living in Schaumburg, Illinois, to learn more.*



**Risk Reporter:** You mentioned that having pets at your facility is part of something bigger. Please explain.

**Jerri Beers:** At Sunrise, we follow the principal of recognizing the importance of caregiving. Each of us has a need to care for and nurture something or someone. It's important for growth and emotional and physical well-being, regardless of our age or health.

**Risk Reporter:** How do facility pets fit into this?

**Beers:** Pets offer many opportunities for nurturing and give residents a sense of purpose. We have dogs in our assisted living environments and cats in memory care. We look for animals with a gentle temperament and train them for this environment. On some level, the house pets are everyone's responsibility, and many of the residents enjoy sitting with them, talking with them and caring for them. We do have someone assigned to make sure the pets are fed, walked and taken for vet visits.

**Risk Reporter:** What about pets that are owned by a resident?

**Beers:** Our residents often give up so much when they move in: their home, their independence and maybe even loved ones. If they can bring their pets, that's one less thing to give up. Residents have to be able to care for their pets on their own — or with the support of a family member — and sign addendums to this effect. Dogs have to be under 30 pounds, and all pets have to be healthy, housebroken and even-tempered, and their health records and shots must be up to date. We make sure residents are able to manage their pets' care. All dogs must be on a leash outside the residents' rooms.

**Risk Reporter:** What tips do you have for facilities that want to add a pet?

**Beers:** Decide what level of commitment is the right fit and the responsibility your staff is willing to take on. Fish can be a good place to start. You can hire someone to set up the aquarium and handle all maintenance. Birds don't require a lot of effort, though they can be noisy. A dog or cat is usually a bigger obligation. Have a trial period to see how the animal does. Bring a trainer in to observe the animal and evaluate the fit. Your facility is open 24/7, and even the most mild-mannered animal will need some downtime. Make sure they have a quiet place to get away from the hubbub. Pets do require work and commitment, but the benefits outweigh the negatives. It's all about adding another layer to our residents' quality of life.



<sup>1</sup><http://psycnet.apa.org/?&fa=main.doiLanding&doi=10.1037/a0024506>

<sup>2</sup><http://wjin.sagepub.com/content/24/6/697.abstract>