A
GUIDE
to setting up a
Continuity of Operations Plan
using the OPEN Template

This guide has been organized by SF CARD based on the OPEN Guidelines created by FEMA, in order to support community and faith based organizations in formulating and implementing a Continuity of Operations plan.

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responding to
disaster

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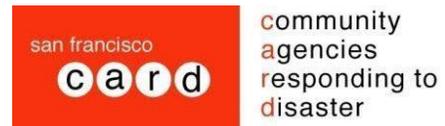
Introduction

Welcome to the specialized world of disaster planning.

- Tip Number One: "The things you use every day are the things you need."
- Tip Number Two: "You are more resilient than you think you are."

These two reminders are on the bottom of every page of this guide. When you feel overwhelmed, when you run into obstacles, when you can't get buy-in to practice all the hard work you will have compiled while using this guide, I hope this will help you keep going.

This Guide is based on FEMA's program called OPEN (Organizations Preparing for Emergency Needs). OPEN provides a great way to organize the important topics to consider in creating a Continuity of Operations Plan. In the **Resources** section are a brief but wide ranging variety of resource guides, like this one, collected from all over the country and through a variety of lenses. Hopefully, what you will discover from all of this is that it's all the same material, and it's all available in the public domain (aka the internet), it's just finding the format and structure that works for your organization.

Throughout this guide, there will be sections called **Putting it All Together**. Putting it all together is suggestions for how to collect data, organize meetings, create documents and schedules. How successfully your organization adopts and practices Continuity of Operations will depend on your organization. Go with the flow you already have, but throughout the guide will be many suggestions for "moving the needle" or "best practices."

The important thing to remember is project management or planning is a process that applies to a wide range of topics, continuity of operations planning included. What works best will be tapping into the pace of project coordination that your organization already finds useful. Do you use "sprints?" Do you coordinate work via monthly meetings? Connecting with existing flow and tapping into existing work, will help create momentum and incorporate "The things you use everyday are the things you need."

Heather Lee
SF CARD, Program Manager

The things you use everyday are the things you need.
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Gathering Data

While it's tempting to start pulling all the data you can find first, and plan to sort it out later, more is not always better. Start by considering your values and let those answers drive what information you need and what the goals of this document are.

Identifying the People You Serve
- Who are you responsible for? Who are you beholden to?
- Who are your clients? Across all programs or ministries?
- Who are your staff? Who are your volunteers? Parishioners?
- Funders? Government Grants? Foundations? Donors?
- How does the general community depend on your organization?
- Do you have tenants in your building?
- Do you belong to a larger organization, such as a national affiliation? Denomination?

Determining Essential Activities
- What services do you provide? Start large? Include not just outward facing services but services for staff as well.
- Do you have a payroll?
- Do you host/convene groups or organizations?
- If you have tenants, what services are they required or intend to provide?
- Do grants or contracts your organization receives require you to operate during a disaster? Is this implicit or explicit?
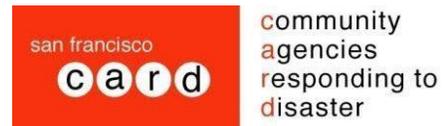
Understand Risks
- What risks could affect your organization?
- Natural disasters? Earthquake, flood, building fire or wildfire, tsunami? Heat, poor air quality, power outage?
- Active Shooter, violent intruder, police action?
- Data breach, cyber ransom?

Pulling it all Together
Form a Continuity of Operations Committee. This should be a committee that crosses stakeholder groups. This committee need not have the authority to direct actions or allocate funding. But they should be able to present information to those who do.

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Gather Information from a broad pool of stakeholders. Getting the input from these three areas, Identify the People you Serve, Determine Essential Activities and Understand Risk will create the motivation and buy-in to incorporate disaster planning and risk management into your organizational culture.

There are several options for gathering this information:
- Create **information gathering sessions**. These can be held with leadership, line staff, clients, vendors, funders and even local government or community members to ask these questions. The more input you gather, the better buy in you will have.
- In conjunction with in person sessions, **surveys** are a great way to get additional information and ultimately, buy in. Anonymous opportunities can bring out information that people won't share aloud. Make sure you have space for written comments so people can share what they think are priorities.

Publish the Results. The results compiled from this research into the organization's values could be a Disaster Mission Statement. The Disaster Mission Statement is a succinct statement of your organization's highest priority during a disaster. Disaster Mission Statements have the potential to become very complicated. However, when done well, they create a beacon for making difficult decisions about what services to continue and which people need to be served during a response. A strong Disaster Mission Statement with strong buy-in from stakeholders will make the next steps, which involve policy changes, financial commitments, and staff training, easier to implement.

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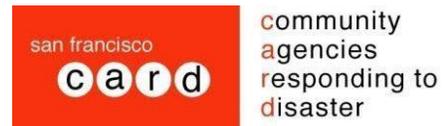
Setting Up Systems

The next set of objectives are the heart of the Continuity of Operations. These four basic questions will repeat with each iteration of the Emergency Plans. Updating and testing these areas are the basis of the following Creating Momentum section. These areas will require specialized information that the project coordinator or committee will need to gather from different areas of the organization.

Create a Communications Plan

Do you have a phone tree?
How will you communicate if phones are down?
Do you have a social media plan?
Have you pre-planned templates for how and what information to share with staff or clients in the event of a wide variety of emergencies?
If your facility is closed, do you have a relationship with another organization to provide space for services? How do you implement that, how do you notify staff and clients?
Signage, phone trees, email, social media posts

Consider the Supply Chain

How will you handle loss of power, such as a PSPS event (Public Safety Power Shutoff initiated by PGE)?
What material items do you offer clients that might be impacted by a disaster (wildfires, earthquakes, pandemics)?
Have you worked with staff on alternate routes and means of transportation in case of long term outages of transit or roads?

Mitigate Risks

Is it possible to update your insurance policy to cover events not listed?
Is your organization able to use more cloud based services in case of loss of facilities?
Does your organization have a reserve in operating funds, or funds dedicated to disaster response?
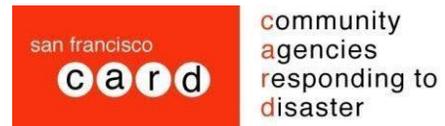
Safeguard Critical Information

How do you protect HIPAA information?
Staff information?
Client data?
Do your staff understand phishing and password security protocols?

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Putting It all Together

Develop a Timeline. Gathering the information for a robust Continuity of Operations Plan takes time. Depending on the size and complexity of your organization, gathering all of the above information could take a month or a year.

You could organize your timeline in several ways.
- **Agency Emergency Plan/Disaster Plan:** Organize the collection of information based on the type of disaster. Collect information necessary for an earthquake, a flood, a power outage, etcetera, utilizing the list of Risks developed in the Gathering Data.
- **Department Responsibility:** This could be organized based on the Incident Command System(ICS) Organizational Chart or it could be based on existing departments.

Determine what Already Exists. Often the information is available in internal documents, there is just no centralized way of locating the information during a disaster response, or if the particular staff person in charge of that information is unavailable. Remember that line staff sometimes know more about the specific details of getting things done than is listed in policy. Don't forget to include them in the gathering of information.

There are two main places to find information:
- Identify the department in charge and **work from existing documentation**. Human Resources develops Employee Handbooks. Accounting maintains policy documents that determine how disaster related expenses are coded and available for reimbursement. Operations obtains insurance policies that determine what activities are covered by the organization's liability. Remember, too, that line staff sometimes know more about the specific details of getting things done. Don't forget to include them in the gathering of information.
- Information is also available **on the web**. Other, similar organizations, may use their website to collate basic information from their plans that can generate ideas for your organization. Organizations will have issued press releases that can lend an idea of language for pre-populated communication templates for media releases and client information sharing.

Organize the Information. Organizing this information can be done in a myriad of ways. This is a planning process, not an end document. The most common and least useful is a red three ring binder behind the Executive's Desk. Other options include Spreadsheets or Webpages, possibly accessible behind a login. Information should be disseminated to the parts of the organization that are mostly likely to use it. **Confidential Information Must be Protected. Do Not Post Private Phone Numbers of Staff Addresses on a Webpage.**

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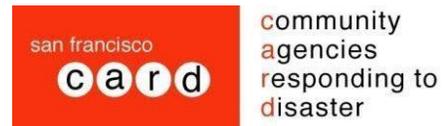
Creating Momentum
(aka, Putting It All Together)

Having determined what risks your organization faces, what services need to be provided to which people, and what systems can be modified or built to accomplish this in response to a myriad of disasters or other adverse events in your organization, it's time to incorporate the lessons learned into the life of the organization.

We respond at our lowest level of training. What this means, practically, is that an awful lot of people know how to evacuate an elementary school but not their homes, offices, or movie theaters.

Formalize Plans

Plans do need to be written down somewhere. Ideally, they are written out in multiple ways, for multiple recipients based on what they need to know. (An evacuation map next to an elevator does not need the insurance company's phone number on it.)

There are two kinds of plans that are sometimes confused.
- **Disaster Action Plan:** A disaster action plan is how to manage a specific risk. For example, a disaster action plan for building fire will include information about how to evacuate the building, where to meet, how to determine if someone is missing, how to interact with first responders, how to turn off utilities, and how to secure the building during repairs. This information might also overlap an earthquake, but going through the exercise of what are the next steps for each potential disaster will create a more robust base for a continuity of operations plan. **One way to think about a disaster action plan is as a response tool.**
- **Continuity of Operations Plan:** A continuity of operations plan is an overarching planning tool for any organization to operate between the start of an incident (emergency) and a return to normal operations. This plan covers all potential risks/disasters in all areas of the organization's operations. **One way to think about a continuity plan is as a recovery tool.**

Cross Train Key Individuals

During the Gathering Data section of your work, you likely discovered areas of programming that will be suspended during a disaster. How can you cross train those staff to work in other areas during a disaster? (If the Sunday School is not meeting

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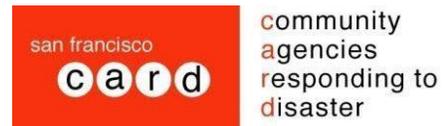
during a disaster response, how can those teachers be trained to work in food distribution (such as getting a food handlers license) in advance of a disaster?)

Some other considerations for training include:
- Creating and teaching a version of the Incident Command System. ICS is a proven way of creating structure in unstructured times. Identifying individuals, outside of their daily duties, to fill Incident roles, and training them, is one of the best ways to cross train individuals.
- When running Tabletop Exercises, excuse the "disaster nerd" or person who is most familiar with the information. This practice gives people permission to step up to challenges in real life situations.

Regularly Test and Update Plans

Along with the spreadsheet that tracks the last time key documents and plans were updated, create a calendar and track when training and exercises happen to test the plans.

The best way to incorporate Disaster Preparedness into your organization is to work within the effective systems already in place, such as existing sorts of meetings - weekly, monthly, "stand up," etcetera.

Putting It all Together

Building habits is hard. With buy-in and perseverance, the habit of Continuity of Operations Planning can be built before a disaster happens.

When it doesn't, a possible place to start is at the end with an **After Action Review** following a disaster.
- An After Action Review gathers those who responded to a disaster to discuss 4 key ideas: What should have happened? What actually happened? What went well and why? What could be improved and how?
- These four questions can create buy-in and build momentum for instituting a Continuity of Operations Plan for your organization that will help it survive the next disaster.

Find the Right Language. Organizations need to incorporate disaster planning in a way that makes sense. Some possible language is:
- Continuous Process Improvement - This is often used in for profit businesses, or Continuous Quality Improvement in the medical field.

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- Liturgical Calendar - Faith communities can coordinate disaster planning into their cyclical religious observations.
- School Calendar - Educational organizations can align with the instructional calendar.

An example of the Continuity of Operations repeating cycle is found in the acronym for POETE. These could each be assigned a 2 month period, for example.
- Plans - Update Plans
- Operations - Review Operations (Essential Services)
- Equipment - Test and Replace Equipment (like water storage and generators)
- Training - Renew training and incorporate new staff.
- Exercise - Do a practice tabletop or evacuation drill.

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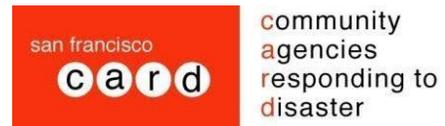
Resources

Definitions

Agency Emergency Plan: See Disaster Action Plan

After Action Review: An After Action Review is a methodology for reviewing an incident, such as the response of your organization to a wildfire, to capture and incorporate lessons learned into future responses. Typically consisting of answering the following four questions: What was expected to happen? What actually happened? What went well and why? What can be improved and why?

Continuity of Operations Plan: A continuity of operations plan is an overarching planning tool for any organization to operate between the start of an incident (emergency) and a return to normal operations. This plan crosses multiple potential risks/disasters and it covers all areas of operations. One way to think about a continuity plan is as a recovery tool.

Continuous Process Improvement: Methodology that creates incremental change based on prior events. Potentially based on Hegel's Dialectical Work (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), the idea is to move from a static org chart of positions to a flow chart of processes that can be assessed for better outcomes. There are a lot of organizations that charge money to do this, but the basic idea is also encompassed for free by an After Action Review.

Disaster Action Plan: A disaster action plan is how to manage a specific risk. For example, a disaster action plan for building fire will include information about how to evacuate the building, where to meet, how to determine if someone is missing, how to interact with first responders, how to turn off utilities, and how to secure the building during repairs. This information might also overlap an earthquake, but going through the exercise of what are the next steps for each potential disaster will create a more robust base for a continuity of operations plan. One way to think about a disaster action plan is as a response tool.

Disaster Mission Statement: A succinct statement of your organization's highest priority during a disaster. Disaster Mission Statements have the potential to become very complicated. However, when done well, they create a beacon for making difficult decisions about what services to continue and which people need to be served during a response.

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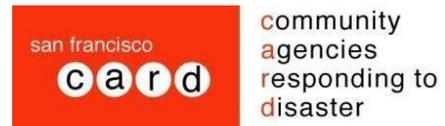
Incident Command System: Methodology for Organizing leadership and responsibility during a disaster. Principle teams include Command Staff (Director, Public Information Officer, Interagency Liaison Officer, Safety Officer), Operations Staff (Assistant Director of Operations, Chiefs, and Supervisors of various Essential Activities - client facing), Logistics Staff (AD of Logistics, Chiefs and Supervisors of various Essential Materials - Consumable and Non-Comsumable necessary items, staff, food, computers, vehicles), Planning Staff (AD Planning, Chiefs and Supervisors of various Essential Tracking - reports, meetings) and Finance Staff (AD Finance, Chiefs and Supervisors of Essential Monies - budgets, reimbursable expense coding, etcetera)

POETE: Emergency management methodology for doing Continuous Process Improvement. This is for testing preparedness activities not for operating during a response. The acronym stands for Plans, Operations, Equipment, Training, Exercise.

Tabletop Exercises: Practice scenarios of potential disasters to allow staff to verbally walk through what they would do in a response.

Links to More Information

FEMA Open Training
https://community.fema.gov/opentraining

Disaster Planning and Continuity of Operations Planning Templates
CalOES - Los Angeles Public Health
https://www.smgov.net/uploadedFiles/Departments/OEM/Video_Archive/Non%20Profits%20Continuity%20and%20Recovery%20Plan.pdf
Tech Soup
https://www.techsoup.org/disaster-planning-and-recovery
NonProfit New York
https://www.nonprofitnewyork.org/disaster-plan/
Vermont Council on Rural Development - Food Bank focus
https://www.vtrural.org/programs/digital-economy/updates/5-business-continuity-tips
San Jose State University Thesis Paper
https://www.njvoad.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Continuity-of-Operations-Guidebook-and-Template-for-Nonprofit-Service-Providers.pdf
Standards for Excellence

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https://standardsforexcellence.org/Portals/2/20%20Administrative%20Policies%20Crisis%20and%20Disaster%20Plan%20Documents%20MD.pdf

Data Safety
Tech Soup Resources
https://www.techsoup.org/support/articles-and-how-tos/your-organizations-backup-strategy
Homeland Security Guide
https://transition.fcc.gov/cyber/cyberplanner.pdf

After Action Reviews
Center for Evidence Based Management
https://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-the-after_action_review.pdf

Continuous Process Improvement
Kai Nexus is a consultant, but this blog post has the most extensive list.
https://blog.kainexus.com/continuous-improvement/11-rapid-continuous-improvement-tools-and-techniques-explained

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