

Severe weather preparation

The Ohio Committee for Severe Weather Awareness considers March 16 – March 22nd as Severe Weather Awareness Week. During this time, Governor Mike DeWine encourages Ohio Businesses to prepare themselves for spring and summer weather hazards, including thunder, lightning, tornadoes and floods. Although we are past that date, I thought I would take this opportunity to remind you of the importance of developing a severe weather preparation plan. This is a great time of year for businesses to look at their Emergency Action Plan (EAP) and review appropriate procedures and responsibilities of employees during potentially hazardous weather events. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s Emergency Action Plan Standard can be found at <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1910/1910.38>.

First and foremost, you can check to see which severe weather hazards may occur in your area by going to <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/74d12934524d4e88a1f7c50c377bec1a> and inputting your address or zip code. You may be surprised at the hazards you uncover. By combining the weather hazards experienced in your area with OSHA’s EAP Standard, you can create the appropriate steps in preparing for each condition. In my area, for example, there is the potential for Flood, Tornadoes, Drought, Thunderstorms/Lighting/Hail Risk and Extreme Heat.

The purpose of an EAP is to facilitate and organize employer and employee actions during workplace emergencies. A well-developed emergency plan and proper employee training should result in fewer and less severe employee injuries and less structural damage to the facility. On the contrary, a poorly prepared plan can lead to a disorganized evacuation or emergency response, and may result in confusion, injury and property damage. OSHA states “An emergency action plan must be in writing, kept in the workplace, and available to employees for review. However, an employer with 10 or fewer employees may communicate the plan orally to employees.” According to OSHA, an EAP should include the items below, at a minimum, as well as, incorporate best management practices to make your program even stronger.

Emergency Procedures

The procedures incorporated into an emergency action plan must be well thought out to identify various scenarios applicable to your facility and include at least the following:

- a. Procedures for reporting a fire or other emergency
- b. Procedures for emergency evacuation, including type of evacuation and exit route assignments
- c. Procedures to be followed by employees who remain to operate critical plant operations before they evacuate
- d. Procedures to account for all employees after evacuation
- e. Procedures to be followed by employees performing rescue or medical duties
- f. The name or job title of every employee who may be contacted by employees who need more information about the plan or an explanation of their duties under the plan

Employee Alarm System

The employer must have and maintain an employee alarm system. The employee alarm system must use a distinctive signal for each purpose and comply with the requirements found under <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1910/1910.165>. Some of the highlights include:

- 1) Alarms must be loud enough so that all employees can hear them above ambient noise or light levels.
- 2) Alarms shall be distinctive and recognizable as a signal to evacuate the work area or perform specific actions detailed in the EAP.

- 3) All employee alarm systems are maintained in operating condition except when undergoing repairs or maintenance.
- 4) Alarm systems that use manually operated devices, such as pull boxes, must be unobstructed, conspicuous and readily accessible.

Training

Once your emergency action plan is complete for fire and severe weather events, it is vital to train employees. Be sure to train employee(s):

- 1) When the plan is first developed or the employee is assigned initially to a job;
- 2) When the employee's responsibilities under the plan change;
- 3) When the plan is changed

Additionally, employers must designate and train employees to assist in the safe and orderly evacuation of other employees, including those with special needs who may require extra assistance during an evacuation.

Training can also include performing mock drills for fire or weather events and is also a great way to test the effectiveness of your plan.

Review Emergency Action Plan

As with any safety program, they should be updated as needed and Emergency Action Plans are no different. If changes within your program occur, be sure to update as needed. This may include changes in roles and responsibilities, new or modified business structures (such as exit routes or doors), new or modified alarm systems and new potential severe weather hazards.

Written safety plans are only as effective as the training

There is plenty of other information on OSHA's website <https://www.osha.gov/emergency-preparedness> and the Ohio Bureau of Workers Compensation <https://info.bwc.ohio.gov/for-employers/safety-services/training-and-resources/disaster-and-pandemic-preparedness>. These two organizations are great resources for additional tips on natural disaster preparedness and business recovery.

If you have further questions regarding Severe Weather and OSHA's Emergency Action Plan or would like more information, please contact Sedgwick's Andy Sawan at 330.819.4728 or andrew.sawan@sedgwick.com.