

# 16 Human Resources Steps to Prepare Before a Crisis Hits

**Top planning tips from TAC's Human Resources Consultants to help counties better manage their human resources during an emergency.**

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## **1. Identify essential personnel.**

All employees should understand who or which positions are considered essential during an emergency or disaster. Essential personnel are typically those individuals required to report to work regardless of conditions, such as emergency manager, sheriff, sheriff's deputies, jailers, dispatchers, health care personnel, road and bridge personnel, public safety workers and maintenance staff. Other elected officials may also be essential during an emergency. Other essential employees may be human resources, payroll, accounting and other operational employees. The commissioners court should approve a policy that clearly explains what will occur during emergencies in the event of a county closure.

## **2. Consider alternative work schedules.**

In times of emergencies, counties may need to consider alternative work schedules, including part-time, job-sharing or new schedules that will permit nontraditional work hours.

### **3. Establish alternative worksites and telecommuting arrangements.**

Establishing temporary worksites or virtual office environments through telecommuting may be viable options when worksites have to be closed, relocated or staffed in innovative ways due to emergencies.

### **4. Provide alternative transportation services.**

During disasters, counties may need to provide unique transportation services so that employees can reach the worksite.

### **5. Identify emergency responders.**

Some employees may be members of the National Guard or volunteer responders who may be called up for duty by the governor or president. Job protections are in place for these employees, and some state laws may be in place to address unique situations.

### **6. Prepare to complete your payroll during a crisis.**

A major issue for counties during disasters is providing for employees' pay. Counties must consider ways to deliver paychecks to employees. Alternative sites and computers may need to be considered. You may also need to have supplies available, as well as check-stock for checks to be printed.

### **7. Set a policy for hazard pay under FEMA.**

Counties may consider offering essential personnel differential pay when working conditions are extreme due to emergencies or disasters. A county policy should be in place identifying who will receive additional or differing compensation.

### **8. Understand pay requirements for non-exempt employees.**

Nonexempt employees are paid for work performed. They may earn overtime compensation as increased demands are placed on them to cover for other employees during a crisis. If employees work from home or do other work away from the county premises, they must be compensated.

### **9. Understand pay requirements for exempt employees.**

Exempt employees must be paid their salary for an entire week if they work any portion of a workweek, even if the location is closed for part of the week because of an emergency or natural disaster. If the facility is closed for a full workweek and the exempt employee performs no work that week, the employer has no obligation to pay the employee. If the county decides to pay exempt essential employees additional compensation, such as overtime, a policy must be in place.

## **0. Decide your leave policy during an emergency.**

How your county provides leave benefits for employees during emergencies is a common issue. Allowing for flexibility in paid time off use is common. Your policy should dictate what days will be paid, what days will require use of vacation, compensatory time or other available leave benefits.

### **1. Determine how to handle Family and Medical Leave issues.**

Counties covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) may encounter employees who need time off from work due to health conditions related to emergency and disaster situations. Your county must ensure that your employees are aware of their FMLA rights and have access to county policies and related forms for using FMLA-protected leave.

### **2. Decide how to deal with technology issues.**

How will your county maintain its financial and other critical data during emergencies? Will technology be accessible during emergency situations? What should happen if the facility is destroyed and with it the data needed for business operations? These are some of the critical technology issues that must be addressed for emergency planning as well as business continuity and recovery.

### **3. Write policies for each type of emergency you prepare for.**

You may need to develop policies for terrorism, epidemics, natural disasters (fire, flood, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes etc.) and workplace violence issues.

### **4. If your county has an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP), notify them of an impending emergency.**

EAP's can assist employees that are in need of counseling or other services. You should notify them so that they may be able to prepare for the possibility of additional calls. If you do not have an EAP, you might consider one.

**5. Consider placing your policies online and determine how you will communicate with employees.**

You may need to have your policies online and available for your employees to review. Many of your employees may evacuate out of the area and should have a way to access policies and notifications on the county website. You need to communicate to all employees through postings, orientations, text messages, emails or payroll stuffers how they can stay informed. You might consider ways to account for employees by setting up crisis-hotline numbers or text messaging.

**6. Test your plan before the crisis occurs.**

Work with your emergency management director to plan and execute practice drills to test readiness for establishing HR business continuity in a crisis.

Members of the TAC Risk Management Pool (TAC RMP) have access to Human Resources Consultants who can provide additional employment-related advice on the topics covered in this article, as well as on-site training, human resources policy manual reviews and more. For additional information, contact TAC RMP at (800) 456-5974.