

PROTECTING THE PROTECTORS

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, and in the face of the pending arrival of Hurricane Irma, critical employees of key response industries such as emergency services (police, fire, rescue), utility providers, food services, transportation firms, communication companies, and hospitals throughout the region are stretched thin and under considerable stress. Multiple [studies](#) over recent years consistently point to the fact that the operational effectiveness of these critical employees is directly related to their assuredness that their own families are safe. During a crisis, these first responders and critical employees are expected to remain on the job, [sometimes for days straight](#), despite concerns for their own family members. Do your Crisis Management and Emergency Operations Plans account for this crucial element?

Supporting life and families behind the first responder front lines can be a full-time job. There are multiple resources that provide support in everyday situations. [websites](#), [community forums](#), and [social media pages](#). But in a crisis like a natural disaster, families must prepare themselves while the first responder is working double or triple shifts. During Hurricane Katrina, there were multiple [reports](#) that law enforcement officers were overwhelmed, abandoned duty or were [forced to choose](#) between their jobs or family. Many were later [fired](#) as a result. Does your agency provide the tools, training, and support to the rank and file in these situations?

Without advance preparation for themselves and their families prior to a disaster, responders will be hindered in their ability to perform their jobs when it does occur, and instead be concerned about personal and family safety. Advanced planning can lessen the burden on responders, enabling them to devote more of their mental resources to the task of securing the community. Here are some basic steps for updating your Crisis and Emergency Operations Plans to minimize the stress of your first responder employees and their families:

- Invest the time to assist your employees with developing and implementing a [family emergency plan](#). Key elements of a family emergency plan include a well-understood plan of action, a ready-to-grab kit of basic emergency supplies, and a communications plan to stay connected and reunite.
- Identify a key employee or team of employees as the “Lifeguards” whose sole function during the crisis will be to account for and provide support to the first responder families. This will include communication to families, employee and family status updates and coordination of shelter, food, gas and evacuation.
- Conduct training and tabletop exercises before the disaster hits. Agencies in disaster-prone areas like hurricane zones, tornado alley, earthquake regions or high-value terror attack cities should practice family response emergency plans so that they are not implementing it for the first time during a crisis.

- Ensure that your first responders have the proper equipment. Employee stress is decreased when they have personal protective equipment like specialized suits and are trained to use them.
- Many agencies now have peer-based systems in place to help first responders manage stress caused by traumatic events. One system, Critical Incident Stress Management, was developed to help lessen the impact of a traumatic event, facilitate the recovery process, restore the functional ability of individuals and groups, and identify those who would benefit from additional support services. To learn more on this visit <https://www.icisf.org/>

An effective family [emergency plan](#) also includes designating specific rally points, one near the home and a backup further away; a communication plan with localized communication and two-way radios in the event of a power failure; and a fail-safe hub to relay information and status-updates, such as a friend or relative outside the affected area. Families should also discuss contingency and second-order plans such as the location of nearby shelters and trip-wires leading to evacuation.

Without question, first responders will function better with the knowledge that their families are provided for before, during, and after a major event. Training these responders and providing support during a crisis that would take them away from home will be invaluable. To ensure and maximize the effectiveness of first responders and essential employees to effectively focus on emergency operations and critical infrastructure support, they must be assured that their families have a plan and know how to execute. Ensuring this type of employee resilience through training and establishment of protocols is often overlooked, but is a key element of any Crisis Management and Emergency Operations Plan.



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