

Personal Emergency Communication Planning

It is a crisp early December day at about 3 pm when you feel the shudder, and increasing rumble like a freight train hitting the side of your office. You hear breaking glass, loud crashes that could be a ceiling structure collapsing. Instinctively you take cover under your desk until the violent earthquake subsides before venturing out into a darkened, lightless environment of dust and debris. You perform the rapid exit from the building taking note to assist or mentally note the location of people requiring assistance. Once outside you check in with your company disaster coordinator. Unfortunately, most work site disaster plans do not cover how you will communicate with your loved ones who may be at school, and across town shopping.

After surviving a disaster, the next natural response is to check on loved ones to make sure that they are okay. Imagine the anxiety raised when you cannot contact your 16 year old who is a bit late returning from a shopping trip even without an emergency to compound stress! Mismanaged communications in times of a disaster may lead people to undertake dangerous search and rescue operations and contribute unnecessarily to elevating stress levels.

The Office of Homeland Security recommends that families prepare emergency plans that include a well understood communication plan. A communication plan should include a central out-of-State contact and phone number because long distance calls many times connect easier than local calls. If using cell phones then an emergency contact number should be stored in a contact labeled as “ICE” or “in case of emergency” because many emergency first responders are trained to look for contact information on cell phones. Also, it is important to be cognizant of the variety of communication mediums at your disposal. For example, if cell phone lines are busy many times text messaging channels of the phone are still available or when the cell phone is busy perhaps an old fashioned phone plugged into the wall may work.

In addition to knowing how to communicate to your long distance emergency contact, it is also important that you share the contact information with your employers, schools, and neighbors so that they may initiate your communication plan when you cannot. You should also take the time to learn emergency procedures that schools and employers will use. Homeland Security has a great deal of information and forms available for constructing your own family communication plan at

<http://www.ready.gov/america/makaplan/>.

http://www.fema.gov/pdf/areyouready/appendix_c.pdf

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