

Blog Post

Avoid Possible Tragedy in the Future by Preparing for Disasters and Emergencies Now

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The series of tornadoes that ripped through parts of the county last month serves as a potent reminder to employers: having a disaster plan and preparedness training is important.

In Illinois, six warehouse workers were killed when the roof collapsed at a distribution center during a tornado and workers from neighboring distribution facilities complained that they were expected to work through tornado warnings, and that they received very little training on what to do. And in Kentucky, eight employees died at a candle factory during a tornado and workers claimed that they were threatened with firing if they left early to avoid the tornado. These recent events are a reminder to employers to ensure that they have a disaster plan and preparedness training in place for their employees.

Employers have a duty to provide a safe workplace for employees, and that includes when there is a natural disaster or other emergency situation. According to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), “a workplace emergency is a situation that threatens workers, customers, or the public; disrupts or shuts down operations; or causes physical or environmental damage. Emergencies may be natural or man-made,

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and may include hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, wildfires, winter weather, chemical spills or releases, disease outbreaks, releases of biological agents, explosions involving nuclear or radiological sources, and many other hazards.”

OSHA provides an [Emergency Preparedness and Response landing page](#) listing specific hazards to prepare for, as well as links to general emergency preparedness and response guidance. There are also specific statutory requirements for certain industries, such as construction and maritime.

State occupational and safety agencies may have additional specific requirements.

Regardless of your industry, the first step is to develop written emergency and disaster preparedness policies and procedures and communicate them to employees. Employers should brainstorm possible emergencies that might occur and what should be done in case of each one. The policy should include identification of potential types of emergency situations, a description of the employer’s emergency notification system, an evacuation plan, a post-evacuation protocol (for example, a designated area to meet in) and shutdown procedures.

Employers should not rely on just having a written policy or plan. To help avoid a situation in which a disaster strikes and employees do not know what to do, employees should receive routine training on emergency preparedness, including drills on different kinds of possible emergencies. Employees also should be notified of who is in charge in case of an emergency, and evacuation wardens who are responsible for moving employees out of an affected area into safety should be identified. Employees should be told to notify their supervisors if they do not feel safe and should be told that they are not risking their jobs by doing so.

It is also important to consider the needs of employees with disabilities when doing emergency planning. For example, employers should ensure that procedures and signage are in place to safely evacuate all employees, including those with disabilities. Employees can be asked to voluntarily self-identify whether they have an impairment that would make assistance necessary in the event of an emergency, and then if they do self-identify, they can be asked what type of assistance they would need.

As the recent events in Illinois and Kentucky demonstrate and as extreme weather events become increasingly common, it is crucial that employers prepare for emergency situations in the workplace. Akerman Labor & Employment attorneys are here to answer any questions you may have about implementing an emergency preparedness plan.

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