

Shelter-in-place

By Tim Govenor

Before you begin

If your organization has a shelter-in-place strategy or procedure as part of your emergency-planning manual, obtain a copy and review it. If you have not considered a shelter-in-place procedure, review this topic for discussion with your organization's leaders.



Background

The war on terrorism may potentially cause chemical or biological agents to be released. This possibility, along with accidental releases, are making employers examine the best responses possible for chemical or biological-agent incidents.

Everyone has a tendency to believe incidents like this will happen elsewhere but not close to their homes or businesses. In reality, these incidents may happen anywhere and at any time. When they do occur, a organization's state of preparedness may make a difference in your employees' survival or their death(s).

Discussion

If emergency authorities recommend sheltering-in-place, ask the group members if they know what steps to take. Encourage this training discussion.

What is shelter-in-place?

Shelter-in-place means selecting a room or rooms within your work facility with as few doors and windows as possible. Your employees will then take refuge in these room(s). The intent is to make a few rooms as safe as possible and to isolate these room(s) from the outside environment.

Rooms with water source(s) are best. Avoid rooms with mechanical-ventilation equipment or basement rooms. The rooms should be large enough to accommodate affected employees and visitors that are usually present.

For shelter-in-place, turn off the building's ventilation system. Once employees are in the room, isolate the room from the outside environment. Use plastic sheeting and duct tape to seal doors, ventilation grills or diffusers, windows, electrical outlets and communication jacks.

What should you do if you are at a work site outside a building?

Go to the nearest building with shelter-in-place capability. If your activities take you away from your office, this may not be your home office.

What do you do if you are in a vehicle?

A vehicle is not the best place to stay because it is not as air tight as a building. If you can, leave your car/truck and seek shelter in a building.

If you cannot leave, take these precautions:

- Stay in your vehicle;
- Turn the engine off;
- Close the windows and vents;
- If possible, seal the vents with duct tape;
- Tune into emergency radio broadcasts for updates and instructions;
- Follow police or emergency personnel's instructions.

What should you do if you are inside a work-site building?

Go to your employer's designated shelter-in-place rooms. Await instructions from safety or emergency personnel.

How much time do you have to respond to a shelter-in-place order?

Immediately react and seek the nearest shelter.

How long will it be necessary to stay in a shelter-in-place?

This may depend on the situation. Most scenarios require several hours. Follow the instructions from emergency personnel. They have the information necessary to determine when it is safe to leave the shelter.

What supplies and equipment do you need in a designated shelter?

Suggested supplies include water (one gallon per employee), a first-aid kit, flashlights, battery-operated radio, batteries, telephone, ready-to-eat foods, duct tape and scissors, towels, plastic sheeting and garbage bags.

Is there a standard alarm sound that indicates shelter-in-place?

This is determined by your work site. Do not confuse this sound with a fire or evacuation alarm. Whatever the method, you need to train your employees to recognize the shelter-in-place notification system.

Conclusion

Please review your organization's shelter-in-place policies and procedures with your employees. Pre-planning helps most businesses have effective and potentially life-saving shelter-in-place procedures.

Action items

- Create, review or revise your organization's shelter-in-place policy.
- Plan shelter-in-place drills for your employees.
- Procure and inventory the necessary items for a designated shelter-in-place room.
- Encourage employees to create shelter-in-place rooms in their homes.

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BWC strives to improve the *Safety Leader's Discussion Guide*. Your feedback can help. Please send your information via e-mail to Safety@ohiobwc.com.

References

Publication

- Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Chemical Emergencies Fact Sheet, *Chemical Agents: Facts about Sheltering in Place*

Web sites

- Evacuation Plans and Procedures eTool: Shelter-in-Place (Occupational Safety and Health Administration): www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/shelterinplace.html
- Fact Sheet on Shelter-in-Place (American Red Cross): www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/Preparedness/shelterinplace.pdf
- Make a Plan: School and Workplace (Dept. of Homeland Security): www.ready.gov/america/makeaplan/work_school.html