Essential disaster planning for veterinary practices

Don’t hope—plan. Emergencies can happen at any time so make sure you and your coworkers are prepared. Is there a plan ready right now to manage a disaster? When is the last time a disaster drill was conducted? Do you have a plan to protect your patients during an emergency or to relocate them after an event? Anticipating potential interruptions, planning your response, and establishing strategies for business continuity will greatly minimize the negative impact to your practice. Even a brief service interruption can mean lost business and chaos. This article covers the basic elements of emergency planning.

What is business continuity planning?

Business continuity planning is a comprehensive managed effort to:

- Prioritize key business processes
- Identify significant threats to normal operations
- Plan mitigation strategies to minimize the disaster's impact on your employees, operations, and patients

An effective business continuity plan provides an organizational response to disasters, and it reduces risk through upfront mitigation and post disaster response, recovery, and restoration.

Why is planning important?

The news is filled with large scale disasters that have impacted populations and destroyed business operations. Smaller disasters and emergency events also have the potential to impact your practice. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 75% of companies without an effective plan fail within three years of a major disaster. Companies that aren't able to resume operations within ten days are not likely to survive, and 50% of them will be out of business within five years.

Seven key elements of business continuity planning

1. Establish a planning committee
   Depending on the size of your practice, the emergency planning team may include key employees such as doctors, practice managers, and supervisors. The planning committee for smaller practices may include all employees.

2. Conduct a business impact analysis
   A business impact analysis (BIA) supports the entire business continuity process. It is a process used to identify, quantify, and qualify the impact of a loss, interruption, or disruption. A BIA identifies mission-critical activities and the time frame within which they must be recovered. Explore all the risks that your practice is exposed to and the possible major disruptions that could occur. And don’t forget about your suppliers. What if your top vendors closed due to a disaster? Could you still operate? Consider the actions needed for your practice to remain operational. Plan alternatives for your critical supplier dependencies. ‘Just in time’ inventory practices may increase the risk that you will not be fully operational in an emergency, so also consider the disaster plans of your critical suppliers.

3. Mitigate risk
   After the BIA, the practice should mitigate risks that threaten the health and safety of people, operations, patients, company assets, or the environment by reducing the risk to an acceptable level. Strategies may include:
- Substitution of less hazardous components
- Preventative maintenance and testing programs
- Building construction
- Security systems
- Installation of fire protection systems
- Minimizing or eliminating single points of dependency
- Vendor readiness and qualification of secondary suppliers
- IT backup strategies and direct response sites
- Pre-purchasing of critical equipment or components for repair
- Splitting critical functions and resources between multiple sites
- Cross-training of personnel

Because every risk cannot be eliminated, develop continuity and recovery strategies that prioritize critical business processes and their dependencies (internal and external).

4. Establish business continuity strategies

Establish strategies for:
- Alternate practices to work at temporarily
- Mutual aid agreements with animal shelters or other veterinary practices to take patients
- Cross-training
- Outsourcing
- Use of secondary suppliers
- Prioritization of customers who need care for their pets
- Referring customers to a pre-identified alternate practice
- Work-at-home strategies
- Mobile offices
- Manual and alternate procedures if computer systems are down

For strategies to be truly embraced, they must be cost effective, lean, and mean.

5. Develop your plan

Record everything in the BIA process and develop a plan for disasters and emergencies. At a minimum, the plan should include:
- Policy, purpose, and scope
- Goals and objectives
- Assumptions
- Key roles and responsibilities
- Business impact analysis (BIA) results
- Risk mitigation plans
- Offsite data and storage requirements
- Business recovery and continuity strategies
- Alternate operating strategies
- Supplier vendor readiness
- Plan activation and universal response
- Communication and notification plan
- Training, drills, and exercises
- Plan maintenance

Add materials to the plan appendix including:
- Important contacts (internal and external)
- Initial notification form
- Action logs and issues tracking forms
6. Implement and train
   Conduct training for employees with key roles and assignments in the business continuity, disaster recovery, and incident response processes.

7. Test the plan
   Testing is the generic term used to describe the critical process of exercising strategies and plans, rehearsing with coworkers, and testing systems (technology infrastructure and administrative) to demonstrate business continuity.

Summary
In conclusion, use these basic elements of emergency planning to prioritize key business processes, identify significant threats to normal operations, and plan mitigation strategies. A business continuity plan is an essential element for every veterinary practice.