



The Importance of Emergency Preparedness for Non-Emergency Employees

BY MARIA MITCHELL, MS, CSM

When an emergency or disaster event occurs, we know that well trained and qualified fire and police emergency responders will be at the scene. However, whether by happenstance or due to being assigned to recovery efforts, a common denominator at just about any emergency or disaster event will often also include a multitude of other public-sector employees who are not emergency response personnel.

These are workers who may be on the scene because the incident occurred during their shift or who were called in after the incident to assist with the recovery efforts. They may be office workers, custodial staff, bus drivers, public works and sanitation workers, water and sewer employees, teachers, parks employees, facilities and fleet management crews or other workers. In fact, when fire and police departments have stabilized the incident site and recovery assistance is needed, it is the local public-sector (non-emergency responder) employees that are often assigned to assist in the recovery efforts.

In recent years many counties and municipalities have adopted the stance that, after an emergency or disaster event, ALL of their employees will be required to work in one capacity or another as “emergency or disaster recovery workers.” While these broad-brush proclamations by government officials are well-intended to serve the public need, they can pose serious risks to both the workers and the public. Thus, the safety, qualifications, training and personal protective equipment (PPE) for these “on-the-spot deputized emergency response workers” must be carefully and systematically addressed prior to any recovery assignment, in order to protect not only the workers’ safety and health, but that of the community they will be assigned to help recover.


Regardless of the urgency, only workers provided with the proper training, equipment and experience should conduct post disaster recovery activities. Evaluation of the incident site is imperative to identify the hazards and determine the protective measures for workers. The protective measures should include:

- Identifying and communicating the hazards to the workers and providing them with training on the safe work practices to mitigate hazards
- Providing and requiring the use of appropriate personal protective equipment. (The OSHA Disaster Recovery PPE Matrix is a good reference: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3898.pdf>)
- Assuming all power lines are live and all flood waters are contaminated
- Prohibiting untrained or unqualified workers to operate equipment such as: portable generators, chain saws, tall ladders, specialized vehicles/trucks, etc.
- Heeding all safety precautions. Being alert to one's personal safety and the safety of others.
- Being alert to surroundings and taking proper precautions for: weather conditions, ground erosion, wild animals, mosquitos/ticks, moving equipment or vehicles, etc.
- Having on-site safety and health personnel for reporting safety concerns, hazards, or injuries

It's important for administrators and supervisors to consider that workers sent to assist in disaster recovery efforts may be affected by:

- Lack of a clear understanding of the site hazards, safe work practices or PPE
- Lack of adequate communication devices or lack of familiarity with communication devices at the incident site
- Confusion due to number of unfamiliar agencies and workers at site
- Confusion due to conflicting orders received on-site from different agencies
- Worry or distractions about their own family members who may be at home experiencing a power outage, flooding, damaged home, etc.

In the aftermath of a major disaster, protecting all recovery workers, regardless of the nature of their work, is an essential component of a successful and efficient recovery effort. It's important to remember that disaster victims can only be properly cared for if the recovery workers are properly trained and equipped to work safely.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Maria Mitchell is the former Manager of Risk Management & Safety for Miami-Dade County. She has over thirty years of experience promoting safety, health and sustainability in the public and private sector. Her extensive experience provided Miami-Dade County (population 2.7 million) with policies, planning and oversight for safety and health issues for the county's 28,000 employees, 25 departments and extensive public services. Ms. Mitchell holds professional certifications including Certified Safety Manager and Certified Sustainability Manager. She has graduate and undergraduate degrees in Environmental Health Science from the University of Miami and University of Georgia. Ms. Mitchell is an adjunct university professor at Florida International University and Barry University. In March 2017, she ran for public office and was elected as Councilwoman for her hometown City of Miami Springs. She serves on the National Safety Council's Government and Public-Sector Leadership Board. Ms. Mitchell is also Editor of the Florida Occupational Injury and Illness Coalition Journal. In 2014 she initiated a collaboration between CDC NIOSH and Miami-Dade Public Schools to implement a Safety Skills Curriculum program within Miami-Dade Public Schools. Her new project, S-Words Initiatives, promotes the understanding and incorporation of safety, sustainability and stewardship in public and private sector organizations.



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