WHAT'S INSIDE

They represent significant time and resource investments, but also are essential to maintaining the ability of an organization to continue to deliver mission-critical services during a crisis.

Pandemic Shows That Continuity-Of-Operations Plans Are Essential for Public Safety Agencies

Critical-infrastructure agencies responsible for providing mission-critical, lifesaving services to their communities need to do so without fail, regardless of the circumstances. Events such as hurricanes, pandemics and wildfires can have a profound impact on operations and staffing. And while it is virtually impossible to prevent them, or predict when they will occur, such events can be quickly and effectively mitigated if a continuity-of-operations plan (COOP) and disaster-recovery (DR) plan are in place. The stark truth is that, sooner or later, a natural or manmade event is going to wreak havoc with an agency's operations. In some cases those operations will come to a screeching halt—if the agency doesn't have continuity-of-operations and disaster-recovery plans in place.

A COOP's purpose is exactly what one would envision. It's a living, breathing document that considers all aspects of operations—including technology and staff—as well as the strategies and tactics that will enable the agency to continue providing its mission-critical services. A DR plan is a vital element of a COOP that addresses the agency's information technology (IT) assets and is intended to keep them secure and operational.

At the end of May 2020, as this whitepaper was being developed, the global pandemic borne of the COVID-19 coronavirus was commanding the rapt attention of government officials—including those who manage emergency communications centers

(ECCs) and emergency operations centers (EOCs)—for very good reason. But there are many other significant events—e.g., wildfires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, hazardous materials spills—that happen on a fairly regular basis and can compromise a public safety agency's ability to function effectively, which in turn diminishes its ability to provide essential services to the citizenry—sometimes profoundly.

Such events typically occur with little or no warning—which is why well-conceived, tested and practiced COOPs and DR plans are so vitally important.

Why COOPs Are Necessary

A lot of services that citizens take for granted can disappear very quickly when a major disaster hits. Here are a few examples:

- The 911 center that serves the area might become uninhabitable, inaccessible or inoperable, or a pandemic can result in a shortage of essential staff, such as telecommunicators. When a 911 center stops operating while emergency call volumes typically are increasing, citizens are unable to receive the emergency response they desperately need.

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- Fire apparatus and police vehicles might be damaged by wind, debris or flooding and no longer can be used to support emergency response operations.
- When water-filtration and -treatment facilities are compromised, citizens might not be able to access potable water and sewage backups might occur, creating significant public-health problems.
- When trash-collection trucks are unable to roll, or cannot navigate streets blocked by debris or flood water, garbage could pile up on curbs and in alleys for weeks, creating another public-health problem.
- If the municipality provides electrical, telephone, cable TV or internet services, any compromise of those networks will keep citizens in the dark—literally and figuratively—for a prolonged period of time, placing them at greater risk.

All of these scenarios represent tremendous dilemmas for public safety agencies. While it is virtually impossible to prevent them, or even predict when they will occur, all can be more quickly and effectively mitigated if a COOP is in place.

How to Create a COOP

Because no two jurisdictions are the same—in terms of resources, capabilities, socioeconomics, geography, topology and other differentiating factors—a cookie-cutter approach to developing a COOP is not advised—rather, it should be customized based on the organization's specific needs and circumstances.

A very good place to start when creating a COOP is the local emergency management agency (EMA), which has contemplated all of the human-induced and natural disasters that could disrupt operations. The EMA also works closely with county, state and federal government entities to conduct ongoing threat assessments, which are essential to keeping emergency response plans—and COOPs—current.

The following identifies a COOP's most important elements:

Mission-Essential Functions. It is critical to define the functions that together enable the agency to perform its overarching mission(s) that cannot be compromised for any reason, for any length of time. For an ECC, it would be handling 911 calls and dispatching the appropriate emergency response resources. For a law enforcement agency, it would be apprehending criminals and preventing crimes from occurring. For a fire department, it would be fire suppression, fire prevention, and conducting rescue operations. For an emergency medical services (EMS) agency, it would be basic and advanced life support and transport of victims to hospitals and trauma centers.

Mission-Essential Personnel. It is equally critical to define the everyday roles and responsibilities of all agency positions, from the bottom of the organizational chart to the top. The people in these positions are responsible for performing the agency's mission-essential functions. Important questions must be asked about each position. For example, what do they do that supports the function(s)? What tasks are essential to service delivery? What relationships exist between the position and other positions in the agency? If their position goes unfilled, what would be the short-term and long-term impacts on the organization's mission?

Delegation of Authority/Succession Plan. Things move fast during a crisis, and roles often need to change out of necessity. Responsibilities will need to be assigned to specific individuals filling essential positions. For example, who is going to speak to the media? Who is going to liaison with third-party contractors to restore vital communications that were rendered inoperable? How will payroll be processed, and emergency supplies procured? Who will decide when it is safe to reenter a facility that was uninhabitable in the immediate aftermath of the crisis? These responsibilities might need to be fulfilled by people other than those who fulfill them every day. Further, thought must be given to how a person who is incapacitated by the crisis will be replaced, or their responsibilities delegated, at least for the short term. These are not decisions that should be made on the fly.

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Continuity Strategies. Every agency has intergovernmental agreements and memoranda of understanding with neighboring agencies and vendors. A common agreement defines the mutual-aid assistance that would be provided by agencies to each other during a major emergency incident or disaster. Other agreements define devolution procedures, i.e., when operations have to be moved to another facility. It is important too to find out whether the agency's vendors have their own business continuity plans—the agency must know that its vendors can be counted on during a crisis. Strategies must be developed concerning the agency's mission-critical data, e.g., the data used to locate 911 callers. Is the data secure? Where is it stored—in a geo-diverse system or in the cloud? Can it be accessed easily yet securely, and by whom? Other strategies need to be developed for restoring critical infrastructure quickly and effectively. All of this and much more needs to be memorialized in a COOP.

Internal/External Communications. Strategies must be developed for communicating with external and external stakeholders, government officials, the media and the public during a crisis. Also, warning and alerting procedures need to be identified. Mitigation of a crisis hinges on effective communications.

Training and Testing. Once the COOP is created, it must be tested to identify any gaps that might exist, and all staff members should be trained on use of the plan. Such plans do absolutely no good if no one knows how to act on their elements, or worse, have no idea what is in them. Discussion-based exercises, such as a tabletop exercise, are excellent for this purpose and should be conducted at least annually. Also beneficial are operational exercises—for instance, if you're going to relocate a 911 center's operations to a backup facility, it's an excellent idea to try it before needing to do it for real.

Update, Update, Update. Again, a COOP is a living breathing document—or should be. During every major emergency, disaster and crisis, critical lessons are learned that should be used to evolve the plan. If that doesn't happen, it is inevitable that the COOP one day will be ineffective just when it is needed most. After-action reports are a time-tested effective way to identify the lessons. The COOP should be updated after every activation and should be reviewed at least annually, though biannually would be better. If the plan changes appreciably, it should be tested, and staff members should be trained on any new elements.

Conclusion

Without question, COOPs represent a significant investment of time and resources. But they are essential to maintaining operations that provide critical services, which is especially important during crises. No public safety official wants to stand at a podium and answer the following question from the media or the public: why weren't we ready? Having a COOP at your fingertips is the best way to avoid that question.

COOP DEVELOPMENT KEY TASKS

► Identify mission-essential functions

► Identify mission-essential positions, and define their roles, responsibilities and work tasks

► Develop a staff-succession plan and delegation-of-authority policies

► Identify and assess systems and equipment needed to conduct each mission-essential task

► Conduct a risk-and-vulnerability assessment to identify hazards and threats that could impact the organization

► Develop and adopt crisis-communications procedures

► Identify and obtain necessary interlocal agreements (ILA), mutual-aid agreements, and memoranda of understanding (MOU)

► Test the plans via tabletop and operational exercises

► Develop after-action reports after each plan activation

About Mission Critical Partners

Mission Critical Partners is a professional services and network and IT support firm that helps clients enhance and evolve their public safety systems and operations through extensive experience, knowledge and resources. By providing insight and support every step of the way, we help our clients to transform their mission critical operations, maximize the value of their investments, and ensure optimal performance and success.

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