Working Without Technology: How Hospitals and Healthcare Organizations Can Manage Communication Failure

Communication is critical when a healthcare organization is responding to an incident. But what happens when you are unable to communicate? The following recommendations are steps that a healthcare organization and/or facility can take to alleviate issues associated with a breakdown in traditional forms of communication:

Take a Multi-tiered Approach to Information Sharing
- Establish detailed contact lists with multiple methods of contacting each one of your staff members. This should include office, home, and mobile phone numbers, email, instant messenger, social media, and any other form of communication your staff may use. Due to staff turnover and organizational changes, review and update these lists periodically to ensure all information is timely and accurate.
- In the event of a total breakdown in all forms of communication, designate preset meeting places and evacuation destinations so that people are able to congregate in the absence of sending out a notification.
- Use answering machines and facility web pages to post information if direct communication isn't feasible. Remind your staff that when cell service goes down, text messaging is often still available.
- Prior to an incident, educate and familiarize staff with social media channels they may use on personal devices should facility communication systems fail.

Provide Your Staff with Emergency Communication Devices
- Keep battery operated 800 MHz radios, hand crank radios, mobile phones, and car chargers on hand at strategically placed locations throughout your facility in case of power outages.
- Encourage staff to use non-cordless phones in case the power goes out as these do not need electricity to operate.

Plan Ahead
- Work with your entire staff to devise detailed emergency response and business continuity plans prior to any incident. These plans should include detailed roles and responsibilities and a list of essential positions that must be filled in the event of an emergency. Once plans have been developed, train your staff to make sure they are familiar with every aspect of emergency response.
- Tailor your organization's plans for the needs of your individual facility. Emphasize the hazards most likely to impact your community (i.e. hurricanes in Florida, earthquakes in California, etc.).
- In case of fuel scarcity and communication failures, organize staff car-pooling plans, or develop a plan to assist employees getting to work.

- Perform a thorough analysis of your workforce to determine information that may impact work availability during an emergency such as having dependents at home, medical/disability conditions, and other considerations. Incorporate this information into your planning.

Know Your Local Partners
- Before an incident occurs, establish links with your local emergency managers, responders, and public health officials in pre-emergency planning and drills. Ask them how they communicate. Ask what they might need from you, and tell them what you may need from them. These are the individuals you will turn to for backup power generators and other resources in times of need.
- Collaborate with community partners to participate in comprehensive exercise scenarios involving all relevant players to allow for a synchronized approach. Identify and test communication redundancies. Work with them to design scenarios that best test your organizations' gaps and capabilities. The better you know your partners' emergency response protocols, the easier it will be for you to anticipate their actions when communication breaks down.
- Coordinate with all state, local, and regional emergency operation centers (EOC) prior to an incident to ensure advance readiness in communication-related emergencies.
- Identify potential impacts of disruptions to the medical supply chain/fuel supply with both public health officials and your staff. Additionally, establish communication redundancies with partners you rely on for fuel and medical supplies.

Empower Decision-Makers at Every Level
- Have a well-defined chain of command in your emergency response plan that empowers subordinates in the event their leadership is unable to communicate their decision on important matters.
- To ensure your staff's decisions are well-informed, your organization's leadership should properly educate the entire staff on their decision-making process before an incident occurs and continue to use existing lines of communication to share updates and guidance throughout an incident.